

# THE EAST HAMPTON STAR

## Get Ready to Rumble

By Regina Weinreich

(07/17/2007) The adrenaline rush at the Bay Street Theatre is as immediate as watching a smackdown on “WrestleMania” in its production of the musical cum tournament, “Turandot: Rumble for the Ring.”

The show features a center stage arena, overhead screens for riveting close-ups, a barking M.C., a pair of comic commentators, and mini-skirt-clad blondes cavorting about and exhorting the crowd. This is an event for sports fans, rock fanatics, multitaskers, the A.D.D. generation, and, yes, lovers of traditional musical theater.



David Rodgers

Bryce Ryness plays El Mysterio Jr. in “Turandot: The Rumble for the Ring” at the Bay Street Theatre in Sag Harbor.

From the start-up sing-along of “The Star-Spangled Banner” to the fight finale, few theater pieces, let alone opera-based, legend-inspired remakes, have worked so hard at engaging an audience and succeeded so well. This is no show for snoozers.

Riffing on traditional myths, courtly love conventions, wrestling idioms, and operatic excesses, the show’s creators, Diane Paulus, director, and Randy Weiner, composer and lyricist, have created a smart vehicle for send-ups of all sorts.

The plot takes Turandot to the mat. A grand promotion for the Professional Rock Opera Wrestling League is in full sway. Already, a dozen losers have lost their heads. Smitten from the bleachers is El Mysterio Jr. (Bryce Ryness), a young, lean, and hungry puppy (much like Owen Wilson in “Wedding Crashers”), who seems an unlikely contender against the unbeatable bulldog duo, Infernal Machine.

From her entrance on a riser, the hot-bitch ice princess, Turandot (Teal Wicks), appears in a blast of fire and bedazzles El Mysterio into performing feats of valor for her hand.

The music is opera melody standards set to a rock beat with new lyrics; a strategy that sounds corny until you hear it performed with brio by the excellent five-piece band.

The ensemble features some wonderful voices, notably those of the Emperor (Mark Jacoby) and the M.C. (Manoel Felciano), who both perform the song “Welcome Ladies and Welcome Gents” to the signature tune from Bizet’s “Carmen.”

Ryness and Wicks are a perfect complement; he impassioned in “Perfect Beauty” and “No One Would Ever Believe” (scored to Puccini’s “Tosca”), and she resolute in “My Heart is Ice” and “My Heart Just Stopped” (to Catalani’s “La Wally”).

The evening’s showstopper was Jo played by Uzo Aduba, who sings her heart out in “There is a Sweet Little Bird” (to “Tosca”). The selection became the play’s moral center and agent of transformation. Jo is El Mysterio’s adopted sister, which is revealed as a bit of backstory by El Mysterio Sr. (a fine Michael Lanning).

Cruel Turandot does Jo in as only a rocker can, by playing her electric guitar at an excruciating decibel. She asks Jo, “What gives you strength to suffer so?” It’s an ambiguous act of grace, and one quibble I have is that the moment should have been clearer, as this scene is critical to the story and the emotional arc of the characters.

Especially gratifying is the one-on-one scenes between Turandot and El Mysterio. Rick Sordelet, who choreographed the fight scenes, brought a dynamic physicality to the show’s theme of love conquering flesh.

With a nod to wrestling as heavily orchestrated entertainment, the play utilizes every device: chairs to the head, agile bodies leaping off ropes, and slo-mo recaps.

What works at first as slapstick becomes cleverly layered throughout the show with a veritable kitchen sink of puns, double entendres, and wordplay literally deployed into the ring, sometimes silly and often challenging. Which is to say, no one, least of all the audience, sits idle.

“Rumble for the Ring” is a fun event. Don’t miss it.