

Seattle Opera's deft Bohemian rhapsody

Puccini's evergreen masterpiece receives a solid and sincere production, with some moments of sure directorial power and memorable visuals.

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Saturday evening, May 5, you could see a remarkable, and heartening, concentration of youthful audience members — more than typical — wending their way into McCaw Hall: not just people in their 20s, but teenagers, too. They were part of the teeming crowd on hand for the opening night of *La Bohème*.

Puccini's evergreen masterpiece is, after all, commonly held to offer an ideal entrée into opera — the perfect vehicle for those just beginning their exploration. Its familiar reflection of young love and hope may be the key to *Bohème's* long-reigning popularity. But an even more basic reason, for many, is simple gratitude toward an opera that was the first to win a place in their hearts. (I wonder how many of the newcomers trying out Puccini will end up taking in the touring production of *Rent* concurrently playing at the Paramount. Will experiencing Puccini in high relief against the backdrop of *Rent's* absurdly overrated score enhance their appreciation?)

Of course, *La Bohème* also means healthy box office. The opera's entire run, with extra performances added on to the standard eight, is predictably close to sold out. For this go-around, Seattle Opera is using Pier Luigi Pizzi's well-known sets made a while back for Lyric Opera of Chicago. The garret of the first and last acts reverberates with cold, hollow space and intentionally drab colors, amplified by the variations in grey of Martin Pakledinaz's costumes. Large mansard windows slant overhead, but their accumulated grime and dust obscure the glorious promise of the Parisian skyline. Yet more shades of grey take the stage for the bleak third act. No innocent white here, but heavy, threatening skies and oppressive snow blanketing the tomblike walls of the city gates — all finely nuanced by Thomas C. Hase's lighting. Added into the mix are an unusual number of artists making their Seattle Opera debuts (Note: This review covers only the opening night "gold" cast.)

The flip side to *Bohème's* popularity is the danger of merely going through the motions. True, Puccini's ingenious construction is pretty much foolproof, but even a hint of listlessness or waning conviction from the performers becomes immediately transparent.

No worries on that account from the pit. Puccini's intricate scoring involves a lot more than floating lyricism — it's harder to negotiate than seems to be the case on the surface. Vjekoslav Sutej (who impressed me last fall with his deftly phrased *Faust* for Portland Opera) is a classic singers' conductor, breathing with the characters on stage, but is also alive to Puccini's most poignant instrumental combinations and inspires the orchestra to some of its most-spirited playing this season. His tempi can be a bit unusual but they have dramatic logic.

Despite some isolated moments of weakness, Seattle Opera's production is solidly grounded and sincere. Gimmicks and fussiness are absent, allowing Puccini to work his sure magic, unencumbered. The closest thing to a "concept" here is the fast-forwarding by a half-century from the libretto's 1830s setting to roughly the time of the composer's own youth. This allows for one of the production's most memorable visuals: the Toulouse-Lautrec-

inspired nightlife phantasmagoria and crowd scenes in and around Café Momus in the second act (just to make sure we've got the time right, a newly constructed Statue of Liberty looms in the background). Paris itself is a central character in the opera, though a figure marching by on stilts who hands out tricolor flags brings to mind Bastille Day more than Christmas Eve.

The second act also epitomizes a director's challenges in this opera: the bustle and pace are cinematic, with constant crosscuts between foreground and background. Similarly, Puccini's extraordinary dramaturgical pacing around the opera's most intimate moments, in the outer acts, requires an ability to shift gears abruptly. Scherzo-like mischief has to stop on a dime and give way to powerful emotions, which are just as suddenly repressed. Stage director Jose Maria Condemi is sensitive and alert to Puccinian detail (for once Schaunard's interrupted anecdote about the parrot and his newfound wealth held its own amid the Bohemians' comic first-act counterpoint).

All the more surprising, then, that some of the more pivotal moments fail to register: Musetta's sugar-daddy Alcindoro (Tony Dillon, who makes more of an impact doubling as the conned-out landlord Benoit) fades into the background in the midst of Musetta's outrages, while her repeated rapprochements with Marcello sizzle with sexually credible urgency. Especially problematic is the inertness of Rodolfo's initial encounter with Mimì; by contrast, the tension between the two in their third-act standoff is exquisitely realized in this staging. And in a brilliant harmonization of all the production elements, the sense of living spring in the final act becomes palpable: rather than grey gloom, the palette is brighter, and we finally see Paris clearly through the open windows. The effect is of course to highlight Mimì's sickness, which becomes heart wrenching as Rodolfo gently goes to close the windows, as if it were winter again.

One of those making a debut in this production is Australian tenor Rosario La Spina. A former bricklayer who decided on a singing career following a workplace injury, La Spina plays an immensely likeable Rodolfo, so sweet it's hard to believe Mimì could be frightened by his jealousy. His voice is bright, powerful, and warmly lyrical, with thrilling, full top notes. It's less controlled in softer passages: stretches of line got lost during transitions of volume. With a greater mastery of breathing, La Spina clearly has the voice for a remarkable career ahead of him.

A focus of much attention is Nuccia Focile's Mimì. Focile, who had to cancel her appearances in Seattle Opera's previous *Bohème* in 1998, is on board for the title role in the upcoming new production of *Iphigenia in Tauris*. The Sicilian soprano made a touching company debut as Tatyana in the 2003 *Eugene Onegin*, and she is again compelling in her portrayal of a fragility free of saccharine clichés. Her Mimì is a naïve girl with simple dreams, but she giggles knowingly when Rodolfo suggests they might end up back in the garret after joining his friends at the café below.

After some stress in her upper register in the first act, Focile's natural vocal warmth emerged, and her admirably varied phrasing gave depth to Mimì. Focile is wonderful at shading a note into a delicate pianissimo, while her full-on emotional appeal for help as she encounters Marcello in act three sounds from the depths. The most touching moment of this *Bohème* isn't Mimì's death - which has become inevitable - but her reluctant decision to part with Rodolfo in the third act, where we sympathize with the characters' illusion that they still have control over their lives.

Philip Cutlip (who played the hunky Maurice in Jake Heggie's disappointing *The End of the Affair*) is a passionate Marcello, ready to fly off the handle, if lacking a bit in vocal heft. His gritty realism plays effectively off best-buddy Rodolfo's romantic dreaminess. And his chemistry with Karen Driscoll's feisty Musetta at times nearly steals the show from the other lovers. Driscoll beautifully characterizes her transition from self-centered party girl (first appearing in a dress of vibrant marigold, a sudden splash of color on the scenic canvas) to worried friend in the final act.

Deyan Vatchkov - sporting an unkempt beard and general demeanor of Dostoevskian squalor - suggests an air of mystery with his philosopher Colline. The unjaded outpouring of his lyrical, even sweet-toned coat aria takes you by surprise. A recent Seattle Opera Young Artist graduate, Jeremy Kelly, gives the musician Schaunard a bit of attitude that calls Jack Black to mind. Condemi directs the Bohemians as an ensemble well-acquainted with each other's tics and habits to a powerful payoff: in the final tableau, as they become lost in their separate stances of helplessness, we see the true repercussions of Mimi's death not as the end of one love story but a collective sorrow.

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