

Westmont College Music and Theatre Arts Department - **Die Fledermaus** on March 2 and 4 2018

## Director John Blondell's cheeky production of the classic Johann Strauss operetta at the New Vic in downtown Santa Barbara was both innovative and hilarious

**W**estmont College Theatre Arts Chair John Blondell has been producing innovative plays at the college's sylvan campus in Santa Barbara since 1988. Co-founder and director of the award-winning international theatre ensemble Lit Moon

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OPERA REVIEW

Theatre Company, which is also based in Santa Barbara, Blondell has enjoyed additional opportunity to shift the interpretive sands under preconceived notions about dozens of traditional classics like *Peer Gynt*, *Hamlet*, *Through the Looking Glass*, and *Tartuffe*, to name but a handful of over 80 productions he has directed over the years with that professional company in cities around the globe. He has garnered a raft of awards as a result of his innovative re-thinking of the same old same old. Bottom line, Blondell is no lightweight. His approach to the standard theatre repertory is sometimes controversial, always fresh.

Last year, the Music and Theatre Arts Departments at Westmont teamed to present the college's first fully staged opera on campus. This year, Dr. Blondell and Adams Chair of Music and Worship Dr. Michael Shasberger, kicked things up a couple notches, asking for and receiving the blessing of Santa Barbara's Ensemble Theatre Company to mount Johann Strauss II's operetta *Die Fledermaus* (The Bat) at Ensemble's New Vic Theater in the heart of downtown.

A perfect war horse for Blondell to tweak, *Fledermaus* has been going strong since its debut

in Vienna in 1874. Traditionally performed throughout the world to ring in the New Year on account of its famously opulent ballroom scene, the operetta is chock-o-block with silly plot twists, misidentifications, disguises, practical jokes, pitiable pratfalls, and implausible resolutions. What saves *Fledermaus*, rather like Leonard



Soprano Michelle Vera (Adele, Rosalinde's chambermaid)  
photos by Brad Elliott

Berstein's *Candide*, are Strauss' immortal waltz tunes and hummable arias, which have levitated audiences above the schlock for just under 150 years.

Snatching innovation from the jaws of orthodoxy, Blondell set his *Fledermaus* in modern dress. Nothing fancy, just here-and-now attire - what one might see on a college campus. The ballroom scene, rather than posh, has been transformed into a Halloween party - clever. And to make sure his audience would not miss the singular importance of tune over

tumult, he has placed the orchestra in a starring role on stage. Sometimes Westmont's scrappy little band, under Shasberger's tight musical leadership, was down-stage (overture and first act). Another scene change found it house right, then up-stage.

Breaking the tradition of lavish costumes and nineteenth century Viennese glitz - a budget buster - Blondell has swept away baubles and bling to focus instead on black box simplicity. Lighting and technical director Jonathan Hicks has followed suit. Likewise, Yuri Okahana's scenography.

Director Blondell, not surprisingly, adopted his famously eccentric Lit Moon aesthetic to this production of *Fledermaus*, pairing mostly discreet comedic touches and fascinating character eccentricities with off-the-wall visual accents. Choreographer Victoria Finlayson, for example, gave the ballroom scene a touch of oddment by having the guests dance alone, no partnering. The chambermaid Adele (soprano Michelle Vera), displayed an occasional nervous tick, literally convulsing from time to time, particularly in her opening scene - go figure.

Alfred, the singing teacher (tenor Jon Lindsley), modeled perhaps on Gilbert and Sullivan's Reginald Bunthorne, sported turf green fingernails. Frank, the prison governor (baritone Micah Anthony), was appropriately black-nailed - something about dungeons?

Chairs became harbingers on the bare, Our Town-inspired meta-theatrical set; rearranged, stacked, counted, danced on and around. All manner of magic act props livened the action and brought color to the chaos. Mad Hatter and garbage lid hats, *Walpurgisnacht* and bordello costumes descended from the loft on a hanging rack for the party scene which opened Act II, replacing traditional tailcoats and gowns with goofy irreverence as the guests dressed on stage for the occasion.

A Viewmaster and sunglasses somehow gave credence to one aria; the pants role character, Count Orlovsky (mezzo-soprano Elena White), sported a magic marker moustache; puppet animals cavorted; a handshake shtick made pithy homage to Laurel and Hardy; the focused thus hilarious poker face of Eisenstein's wife Rosalinde (soprano Anna Telfer); provided a bountiful cornucopia of delight that conspired to produce ripples, then tidal waves of audience laughter and delight on opening night.

The young Westmont College cast tackled some of the most difficult vocal music of the nineteenth century



Tenor/baritone Kenny Galindo (Gabriel von Eisenstein)

with heroic energy and spirited aplomb. Soprano Michelle Vera (chambermaid), was consistently splendid, both as actor and singer. Likewise, mezzo-soprano Elena White in the pants role of Orlovsky, a Russian Prince. Tenor/baritone Kenny Galindo (Gabriel von Eisenstein), tackled Strauss' wide-ranging and often treacherous tessitura with courageous pluck, while soprano Anna Telfer (Rosalinde) grew more confident vocally as the evening progressed. Baritone John Butler's Dr. Falke was notable for clean musical stylings and Tenor Jon Lindsley's sweet warblings and gender neutral affectations - the G & S Bunthorne homage - reached the edge, but never went over the cliff of parody. Baritone Micah Anthony (Frank, the prison Governor), contributed his pleasing voice to the vocal menu as well.

The supporting cast - tenor Sean McElrath (Blind, an attorney); Logan Foltz in the speaking role of Yvan, the Prince's Valet; soprano Jessica Lingua (Ida, Adele's sister); Merckx Dascomb (Frogg, the jailer); Nina Fox (a jailer); and a bevy of well trained chorus members - helped create an entertainment that became curiousest and curiousest as the evening progressed. Herr Strauss would have been well pleased.



Daniel Kepl has been writing music, theatre, and dance reviews since he was a teenager. His professional expertise is as an orchestra conductor. He will lead the Emeriti Philharmonic tour of Portugal August 15-26 2018.

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