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

Westmont 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 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 repertoire 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 Dr. 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 Orlofsky (mezzo-soprano Elena White), sported a magic marker moustache; puppet animals cavorted; a hand-shake shlick 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 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 Orlofsky, 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 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 McErlath (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 curiouser and curiouser as the evening progressed. Herr Strauss would have been well pleased.

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

OPERA REVIEW

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