

Comic opera, bad toupee and all

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By Bryan Rourke

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PROVIDENCE — Don Pasquale is ridiculous. That's good. That's the goal. And in achieving it, Opera Providence, which opens its show tonight at the Columbus Theatre, takes a large comic leap forward in its comeback.

Actually, the company never left; but the orchestra did. Now, four years later, it's back, and although not big, it's big enough to add polish and panache to a colorful and playful production.

Part of that playfulness is found in the farcical story and in the inflections of the four principal voices, which are generally strong. But more so, the playfulness is found in the show's numerous, truly funny antics.

Formal, stuffy, incomprehensible opera with horned divas this is not. It's more like comical, musical theater where people have a tendency to hold their notes.

Accessibility isn't an issue. Gaetano Donizetti's Italian opera is sung in English. But even if it wasn't, much of the humor is universal.

Take the toupee for instance.

The title character, Don Pasquale, played impressively and masterfully in yesterday's dress rehearsal by bass-baritone T. Steven Smith of Providence, wears an obviously fake hair piece in order to look younger and to woo a woman, Norina. She's played by soprano Emily Hindrichs, whose voice is strong and sometimes soaring, with clarity and delicacy.

Both their voices are big, and well trained. But where each really excels in this production, which plays down showboat singing and plays up character development, is in their acting.

Some of it revolves around the toupee. It flops forward when Smith bows to greet Hindrichs. It nearly falls off when he faints at her feet. And it just sits there on his head like roadkill when Hindrichs runs her fingers through his so-called hair.

But enough about a prop, people make this show.

Smith's very big, not just in talent, but in stature, which he uses to great effect. He tries buttoning his jacket, but surrenders to his stomach. On one occasion when he sings, which is full, deep and resonant, he says, "I am still very lively," which is followed by a brief and sad two-step dance that ends in injury.

Hindrichs has many humorous moments. The best may be when she indirectly mocks traditional opera, changing her dress behind a screen and holding a note the entire time.

Here's the story. Pasquale is old and unmarried. His live-in nephew Ernesto, played by tenor Joseph Holmes, whose voice is fine but needs amplification, is young and in love with Norina, of whom Pasquale does not approve, and would never allow to marry, at least without being unwittingly tricked.

That's the job of Pasquale's friend Malatesta, played by baritone Anton Belov, whose smooth and sonorous voice and debonair manner make him something of a master of ceremonies. He tricks Pasquale into wanting to marry his fictitious sister, who's actually Norina, who hides herself through a veil and a suddenly modest manner of moving and speaking, although she can't always keep that in check.

We hear her sing, "He's such an idiot," "He gives me indigestion," and "You're too fat."

The amusement is in hearing such a beautiful voice say such ugly things. But Pasquale can't hear it; he's in love, and just wants to make sure he doesn't marry a weirdo.

"Are you a fan of opera?" he says.

"I've never seen one, nor do I intend to."

"That's my feeling exactly."

This is opera that makes fun of opera, and is truly fun.

When Belov is belting out a solo, the story and characters don't stop for him.

In the background, there's Pasquale using his bathrobe belt, practicing his plan to strangle his wife. This is after his Norina drained Pasquale's bank account with purchases as part of Malatesta's master plan to make Pasquale want nothing to do with her; and, in fact, dislike her so much that he'd wish his nephew Ernesto would take her away from him.

The plan works. And in this production, it works in the cozy and quaint 810-seat space of the Columbus Theatre. Lynn Torgove, the stage director, uses a garden backdrop painted by Laura McPherson and a living room as the primary sets, which look good and work well. In addition, she adds some nice props, some with a local flair. When Ernesto is being kicked out of Pasquale's house, he dons a Red Sox cap and packs his suitcase with a Brown University sweater, and a teddy bear.

Timothy Steele, the music director, has, for budgetary reasons, scaled down the usual 30-member orchestra for this opera to 11. And in the small theater, that works well, too. There is richness and fullness to its sound, although on occasion the volume could go up just a bit. But that's quibbling.

From the selection of the opera, the singers, the musicians and all the other people involved in Don Pasquale, Opera Providence returns to full-scale opera, and to those who thought it wouldn't: Ha, ha!

Opera Providence's production of Don Pasquale is today at 8 p.m. and tomorrow at 3 p.m. at the Columbus Theatre, 270 Broadway, Providence. For tickets, \$15 to \$51, call (401) 331-6060 or visit www.arttixri.com.

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