

# Magic of Michelangelo lies in its music

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Michelangelo, Rhode Island composer Enrico Garzilli's coming-of-age musical about art's great hero, comes to the Providence Performing Arts Center tonight and tomorrow. But based on last night's dress rehearsal Garzilli has a hit on his hands.

Just don't go expecting a big Broadway-style show with elaborate sets and lavish costumes. This is a production from Opera Providence, which has been struggling to get back on its financial feet. And for them to have even staged something in a hall so grand and expensive as PPAC is quite a coup.

So the sets are a little stark, towering scaffolding that serves as a pulpit for the fanatical Savonarola, and to lift Michelangelo up to the Sistine ceiling. Two screens flanking the stage flash examples of the artist's painting and sculpture.

As for the plot, there are no unexpected twists, just a pretty straightforward telling of the artist's younger years, his battles with his father, his time in the Medici palace and work on some of his most famous creations.

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Otherwise the magic of Michelangelo, seen in its world premiere, lies in Garzilli's gorgeous music, in his natural gift for spinning out soaring tunes and lighting up the stage. When Michelangelo yearns to be an artist, not the banker his father wants, his muse appears in the form of soprano Jane Shivick to sing perhaps the finest song of the show, the touching "Deep in Your Heart."

But there are a handful of other songs that stand out, such as the lovely "Pie Jesu" Shivick sings in the second act, and Michelangelo's dramatic "Conquer the Night," when he is attacked by doubts and demons.

The musical opens with the aged Michelangelo near death. His close friend Tommaso Cavalieri tells his story in a flashback. Michelangelo roams the hills outside his home in Florence, discovering faces in the rocks that dot the landscape. He wants desperately to become an artist but his father, Frank Ward, sings it's better to "Become a Banker," and

parades before him all the lowly jobs he might end up with if he doesn't aspire to a life of commerce.

But when he is apprenticed to a sculptor's studio, he is taunted by jealous fellow students, who at one point beat him. He ends up being taken under the wing of Lorenzo de Medici and falls in love with his daughter Contessina, who is promised to someone else.

When at 22 he sculpts the Pieta we hear Shivick sing the "Pie Jesu," as two actors pose freeze-frame in the shape of the famed statute. We also see him sketching the model for his colossal David, but there are no blocks of stone on the stage, no sculptor's studio. That is all left to the imagination, like so much in this production.

The most dramatic moments come with the rise of Savonarola, who preaches that art is decadent, and has books and paintings burned in the streets. Slides of fire are shown on the screens and some inventive lighting suggests flames licking the scrim that conceals the orchestra from the rest of the action.

In an interesting move, two-dozen members of the Rhode Island Philharmonic are laced mid-stage behind the cast of singers and in front of a chorus that sings a jazzy Alleluia.

As for the cast, a booming Anton Belov, donning a black robe, is terrific as the evil Savonarola, sounding like the kind of commanding, charismatic figure that can whip up a crowd. And Kara Lund makes a sweet Contessina.

But it is Jason McStoots' warm unforced tenor that stands out as the adult Michelangelo. McStoots is a natural, a believable actor and a first-rate singer.

Michelangelo takes place tonight and tomorrow night at 8 at the Providence Performing Arts Center on Weybosset Street.

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