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Photo: Robert Millard

LA Opera's 'Merry Widow' delivers with an all-American flavor.

**FRANZ LEHÁR
THE MERRY WIDOW
LOS ANGELES OPERA
APRIL 28, 2007**

By: Carol Jean Delmar
OperaOnline.us

The high point of Los Angeles Opera's opening night production of "The Merry Widow" on April 28 was the third act ballet at Maxim's. Viennese waltzes, kicks and pirouettes were choreographed to perfection by Peggy Hickey and executed with equal precision by a dance ensemble second-to-none. The supreme dancer of them all, however, was soloist Jonathan Sharp, whose every glance, leap and turn showed us how the entire body of a dancer must be engaged in order to complete a dynamic action.

Thierry Bosquet's lavish costumes coupled with Michael Yeargan's tasteful sets enabled

Lotfi Mansouri's San Francisco Opera production to snap, crackle and pop.

As for the basics of the plot: Baron Zeta, the Pontevedrian ambassador to Paris, wants to ensure that the millions inherited by recent widow Anna Glawari remain in the Pontevedrian state. Her marriage to the very suave but elusive bachelor, Count Danilo, would accomplish that end. There is one minor glitch, however. Danilo doesn't want to marry Anna. He refuses to be like the other men who are after her money, even though the two were lovers when she had none.

At the same time, Valencienne, the baron's wife, is flirting her way into a compromising situation with a suitor, Camille de Rosillon, then works diligently to prove that she remains a respectable wife.

The characters talk, dance and sing their way through three hours of playful exchanges and waltzes until Anna finally catches her man -- the perfect ending to a frothy Viennese operetta.

First performed at the Theater an der Wien in 1905, Czech-Hungarian composer Franz Lehár set "The Merry Widow," which was adapted from a play by Henri Meilhac, in Paris rather than Vienna or anywhere else in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, to give the librettists the leeway to expose the societal practices of the day without censorship at home. Paris was the epitome of high society during the fin de siècle, and the score, with a libretto by Viktor Léon and Leo Stein, reflects that sophistication. The operetta is most often performed in German, but because of its abundance of dialogue, it is usually sung in English in the United States.

In Los Angeles Opera's current production, we heard English dialogue laced with French, Viennese and Balkan accents. But the principals spoke in a very all-American way. Susan Graham (Anna) was born in New Mexico and raised in Texas, and Rod Gilfry (Danilo) was born near Los Angeles in Covina.

His Danilo was debonnaire, everything one might expect the character to be. His cross-over abilities were evident in his voice, use of dialogue and body movement. His baritone tones floated over the orchestra. He oozed with charm during the spoken dialogue, and his dancing revealed a singing-dancing-actor who would probably be just as comfortable on Broadway as he is in an opera house, in this case, the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion.

Susan Graham's lush velvety mezzo was especially expressive during the "Vilja" song when she incorporated some gorgeous soaring pianissimos to remind the audience that Anna requires a classically-trained voice from a singer who can reach highs, lows and speak dialogue in between. Her tall, statuesque body in gowns of red and black-and-white revealed more of a Dolly Levi character ("Hello, Dolly!") than an Anna Glawari, but of course there are similarities. Her Anna was sung and danced with grace and sophistication, but her speaking voice had an earthy quality which seemed foreign for the role at first, but grew on us and made her seem real.

In the secondary roles, Jason Graae, as Njegus, was the best all-round performer – a real crowd-pleaser who knows how to bring on the smiles.

Eric Cutler’s character, Camille de Rosillon, could have been more well-defined, but Cutler’s ringing high tones made up for his lack of acting experience. Elizabeth Norberg-Schulz (Valencienne) seemed somewhat insecure in dialogue and voice. Her voice didn’t project over the orchestra and she swallowed some of her words, which were barely audible at times even though there was amplification.

Jake Gardner (Baron Zeta), Malcolm MacKenzie (Cascada) and Greg Fedderly (Raoul de St. Brioche) -- all known for their operatic prowess – rounded off a fine ensemble cast, which also included Jamie Offenbach, Rena Harms, Jay Brian Winnick, Elizabeth Brackenbury, Brian Calì, Carol Swarbrick, Tami Tappan Damiano and Mark Capri.

The orchestra, under the direction of Sebastian Lang-Lessing, provided fine accompaniment for the goings on onstage, but at times, the orchestration seemed to progress with leaden steps. Yet who could resist the Maxim’s tune, “Girls, Girls, Girls” or the gorgeous “Lippen Shweigen” waltz? Not me! The final fireworks brought on a standing ovation.

Conductor, Sebastian Lang-Lessing
Director, Lotfi Mansouri
Choreographer, Peggy Hickey
Set Designer, Michael Yeargan
Costume Designer, Thierry Bosquet
Lighting Designer Mary Louise Geiger
Concertmaster, Stuart Canin
Chorus Master, William Vendice
English version by Christopher Hassall