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UCLA's 'Carousel' proves that audiences crave good old-fashioned entertainment.

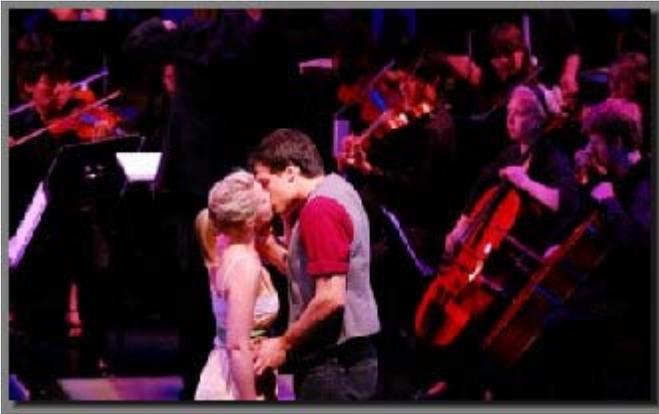


Photo by Chris McCoy. From the Daily Bruin website.

**RODGERS & HAMMERSTEIN
CAROUSEL
OPERA UCLA
MAY 21, 2009**

By Carol Jean Delmar
OperaOnline.us

Those young artists in the UCLA Department of Music did it again. Who needs Broadway. Just go to UCLA's Schoenberg Hall whenever Opera UCLA announces an upcoming production, and you'll leave the theater knowing that LA's Got Talent. And I mean: Big Talent!

Two performances of Rodgers and Hammerstein's "Carousel" didn't seem like enough, but in these tough economic times, university budgets are being trimmed and student productions are less elaborate and limited -- to the dismay of faithful UCLA audiences who have followed the growth of students like Douglas Carpenter (Billy Bigelow).

Many young people have talent, but few of them have star quality, or as one famous mezzo once described a certain opera singer to me: “She just has ‘IT’.” In this case, the singer is Carpenter.

“IT” is hard to define. Lots of people have great voices, but many cannot act. Maybe their stage presence is lacking, or maybe they can act but they can’t sing. Some can act, sing and move well, but they still don’t have “IT”. “IT” is indefinable. Those that have it radiate an onstage charisma that renders them unique.

In the case of Doug Carpenter, that quality is evident when he performs musical theater. I’ve been told that he exudes a similar magic when performing opera, but I have only seen him in three musical productions, none of which were opera. He is tall and handsome with a solid build, has an exceptional voice, and he sings, acts, and moves with proficiency. He plays carousel barker Billy Bigelow as a tough guy -- reluctant to reveal his loving feelings for the adorable millworker he becomes infatuated with, Julie Jordan. The “If I Loved You” duet never fails to charm audiences because we all delight in observing young love blossom. In this semi-staged concert version with an onstage orchestra, what was lacking was the ability for us in the audience to believe that the two were really in love, even if they were supposed to be hiding their true feelings from each other. In the 1956 movie with Gordon MacRae and Shirley Jones, that love was always evident even when the two were pretending otherwise. In UCLA’s concert performance, it was as if a wall had been placed between the two lovers. I wondered how Julie ever became pregnant.

Later when Billy sang his “Soliloquy,” it just didn’t seem like he was about to become a father. Carpenter sang with major charisma and strength, so I do not want my criticisms to be misinterpreted. I mean them as coaching suggestions since I know that all of these young talents are totally capable of following through. What was missing for me was the soon-to-be father’s joy and exuberance when thinking about the prospect of having a son. Then when he suddenly realized that this son could turn out to be a daughter, the contrast in tone quality and attitude wasn’t readily visible. There has to be a change in color and a delicacy to the latter part of the song, followed by a surge of desperate determination. The determination was there, but not the delicacy preceding it. We have to see that this tough guy is really a flesh-and-blood human being with emotions and vulnerabilities. Carpenter has a sexy statuesque charismatic appeal. What he still needs to develop is the ability to express emotion and warmth in concert with his charisma. We finally got a taste of that combination at the end of the last act when Billy returned from heaven and admitted to Julie that he loved her. For just those few moments then, I had tears in my eyes.

As for Julie Jordan, Joanna Foote was cast perfectly. She’s adorable, blond, petite, fresh, and she can sing. But again, the one thing that I wanted to feel more of was “warmth.” I know she loved Billy, but there was just this invisible wall between them. Maybe director Peter Kazaras wanted it that way.

A number of people commented to me how wonderful they thought Emily Lezin’s Carrie

Pipperidge was. She looked lovely, sang well, and exuded an energy that projected well into the hall. What was missing again was the “charm.” There are times to hit the notes squarely when singing “Mr. Snow,” and there are times to think of phrasing, pianissimos, legátos, and ritardádos. There should be a contrast between the first part of the song and the second. Carrie should be effervescent in the first part, but dreamy-eyed in the second as she sings, “When I marry Mister Snow . . .” The first part can be “cute,” but we need to feel the warmth in the second. Instead of giving all the notes all they’re worth, there should be a stylistic line when Carrie sings the second part. She’s telling a story: “He’ll carry me ‘cross the threshold, and I’ll be as meek as a lamb. Then he’ll set me on my feet, and I’ll say kinda sweet, ‘Well, Mister Snow, here I am.’ ” I wanted to feel her meekness, flirtatiousness, even a bit of her shyness. I wanted to feel her sweetness. The Carrie in the 1956 movie, Barbara Ruick, may not have had the substantial voice that Ms. Lezin has, but she captured Carrie’s essence.

“Well, Mister Snow, here I am,” Carrie sings.

Ms. Lezin blurted the phrase out to be cute. Ruick gave us a much more subdued, charming, almost spoken utterance that evoked a completely different feeling. Again, this is about warmth, charm, musicianship, and maybe a bit of age and sophistication. The young artists need to relax, slow down and feel.

Dory Schultz presented us with an accurate characterization of the upstanding fisherman Enoch Snow. Brian Vu was an effective Jigger Craigin, who entices Billy into a day of crime that leads to his startling demise. Tracy Cox (Nettie Fowler) displayed a promising show of vocal sound and agility when singing “You’ll Never Walk Alone.” And Alene Aroustamian was a fine Mrs. Mullin.

The UCLA Philharmonia under the baton of Scott Dunn was vibrant. At times, though, the music sounded metronomical, making it difficult for the singers to move out of the parameters of a set predetermined tempo. More give and take between the orchestration and vocals would have enhanced this performance. Dunn’s sensitivity to singers was evident though. The orchestra’s colors were fine-tuned, and the singers’ voices projected well without amplification.

Again, my criticisms were meant to serve only as coaching suggestions. Young artists are taught early on to make their performances their own. All in all, I loved this “Carousel.” Why, oh why, aren’t there more musicals like this one being produced today? The talent is there. I guess we just have to pray for revivals.

Based on Ferenc Molnár’s play, “Liliom”

Conductor: Scott Dunn

Stage Director: Peter Kazaras

Music Director, UCLA Opera Studio: Rakefet Hak