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GIACOMO PUCCINI
IL TRITTICO
LOS ANGELES OPERA
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LA Opera's 'Il Trittico' -- A Stupendous Evening!

By: Carol Jean Delmar
OperaOnline.us

A few years ago, LA Opera performed a production of Leoncavallo's "Pagliacci," and I felt slighted. At the price of tickets these days, I wanted a "Cavalleria Rusticana" or an "Il Tabarro" as well. And on Sept. 6, LA Opera gave me my money's worth. The company's "Il Trittico" -- "Il Tabarro," "Suor Angelica" and "Gianni Schicchi" -- was stupendous.

'SUOR ANGELICA' (Text by Giovacchino Forzano)

The most memorable part of the evening for me was "Suor Angelica" -- the story of a young girl whose family places her in an Italian convent for giving birth to an illegitimate child. Years later, her aunt visits her and tells her that the child has died. Overwhelmed, Angelica drinks poison, realizes that she has created a mortal sin, begs the Virgin Mary for forgiveness -- and that's when it happened: I cried. Mind you, I don't usually cry at live opera. Those moments are usually reserved for the privacy of my living room. But this "Suor Angelica" moved me.

It didn't hurt that Sondra Radvanovsky (Angelica) was in splendid voice. Her vocal timbre is luscious, and she utilized it to weave a ladder of golden tones not unlike the magical locks that brought Rapunzel to her fairy-tale prince. Radvanovsky's "Senza mamma, bimbo, tu sei morto" was heartrending. She colored her tones and awe-inspiring runs with so much love for her lost son that I detected a tear rolling down my cheek as the Virgin Mary descended and Angelica's son came to lead his dear mother to heaven. The scene was beautiful because director William Friedkin had the expertise to bring the inside of Radvanovsky's soul and character to life so that we in the audience could feel her suffering and then subsequent redemption. Mezzo-soprano Larissa Diadkova brought a richness of tone and maturity to the stage as her aunt, and Ronnita Nicole Miller's full-bodied creamy sound makes her one of this season's young artists to watch. The set is lovely and mood setting: the church, arches, columns, gate and rock garden. Everything seemed real. There is a feeling of truth to this production.

'GIANNI SCHICCHI' (Text by Giovacchino Forzano)

After "Suor Angelica," "Gianni Schicchi" was the comic relief. We were all waiting for director Woody Allen to take a bow at the end, but he was nowhere to be seen. He is responsible for making this "Gianni Schicchi" truly unique. He knew exactly how to make the audience laugh by giving the singers business and blocking that kept us forever watching in fear that we would miss something. And much as in "Suor Angelica," these singers proved that they could act and move and sing, all at the same time.

It all began with a movie screen that flashed opening credits including the names of Giuseppe Prosciutto and Luigi Impetigo. We all laughed. Everything was in black and white.

Then Santo Loquasto's set was revealed. It was so intricate with such masterful craftsmanship, all in silvery gray: buildings, leveled spaces, spiraling staircases, laundry on clotheslines, and a singular bed just off center. This wasn't Puccini's 1299 Florence. It was a hilariously wonderful 1950s tenement.

As for the story: The wealthy Buoso Donati has died and left most of his estate to a monastery. Rinuccio wants to marry Lauretta and is promised by Donati's family that when they receive their deceased relative's money, he can. Lauretta is Gianni Schicchi's daughter. Her father is summoned to help. He pretends to be a dying Donati, dictates a new will to a notary and claims most of the inheritance for himself. Rinuccio and Lauretta find happiness nevertheless, and Schicchi tells the audience that he will no doubt end up in hell one day unless his actions are considered "extenuating circumstances." In the Woody Allen version, Donati's cousin Zita returns and kills him. Not exactly what Puccini had intended for this comedy, but then, who are "we" to pass judgment on Woody Allen?

As Schicchi, Thomas Allen was marvelous. His singing was solid and he created a total character. So funny when he changed out of his pinstriped suit into his night attire before climbing into bed. His chest was visible through his undershirt.

Laura Tatulescu (Lauretta) has a lovely voice, but she has made it a practice to pull out knives – in this production, anyway. I don't think anyone has ever sung an "O mio babbino caro" quite like hers. Much tougher and more streetwise than any Lauretta in history, I'm not sure the aria really worked, but she sure gave Allen's interpretation her all. Saimir Pirgu (Rinuccio) made a vocally and physically attractive mate for her, and Jill Grove's Zita was robust.

Woody Allen really did think of everything. In the finale, we were looking upward as Rinuccio and Lauretta were singing their duet on a balcony, and downward at the same time as Gianni Schicchi was combing his hair and dressing. The stage was abuzz every minute. I even think I spied a heavysset Sarah Palin up there. Probably a coincidence, but who knows?

Yes, Woody Allen is a genius. We've all known that for years, but he has proven it once again. Oh, Mr. Allen, would you please direct Bryn Terfel in Verdi's "Falstaff"? Just a suggestion.

'IL TABARRO' (Text by Giuseppe Adami)

I don't want anyone to think that this production of "Il Tabarro" is a dud. It isn't. It's just that after I'd seen "Suor Angelica" and "Gianni Schicchi," I'd kind of forgotten about "Il Tabarro" since it had been first on the lineup. I loved the beginning. The barge wasn't just tied to a quay on the Seine. Luigi drove it in.

Michele, a barge captain, is married to Giorgetta, who is having an affair with a stevedore named Luigi. Wracked with jealousy, Michele kills him and covers him up with a "tabarro," or cloak. When Michele removes the cloak for his wife to see, her screams and the lighting focused on her make this onstage moment one of anguish and despair, very hard to forget.

Baritone Mark Delavan (Michele), bass-baritone John Del Carlo (Talpa), and tenor Salvatore Licitra (Luigi) were strong. Delavan's presence was commanding. Licitra was passionate and resonant. And although Anja Kampe (Giorgetta) seemed competent, there were a few moments when it appeared that she might have forgotten the text. She quickly recovered though. After all, it was opening night. But when reflecting on the principal performers, Kampe just wasn't a standout, and she should have been.

James Conlon led the orchestra with conviction. Grant Gershon showed his choral mastery with the sisters in "Suor Angelica."

But this night truly belonged to the directors, for without Woody Allen and William Friedkin, the uniqueness of this triptych would have been nonexistent. They have proved that singers are indeed able to act when given the proper direction. They have proved that opera can be the ultimate theatrical experience. Nothing moves the soul like music.

Many directors often believe that they have to use gimmicks and create the bizarre in

order to spark the audience's attention. Friedkin and Allen have showed that creativity within the confines of professionalism and good taste can prevail. Bravissimo to the directors! And a bravissimo to Plácido Domingo for bringing them to Los Angeles Opera.

Conductor: James Conlon

Directors: Woody Allen and William Friedkin

Set Designer: Santo Loquasto

Lighting Designer: Mark Jonathan

Associate Conductor-Chorus Master: Grant Gershon

Costume Designers: Sam Fleming and Santo Loquasto