



OperaOnline.us

Worldwide reviews for a worldwide audience



Massimo Giordano and Maija Kovalevska.

Photo: Robert Millard.

Los Angeles Opera's 'La Bohème' – Not one for the history books.

**GIACOMO PUCCINI
LA BOHÈME
LOS ANGELES OPERA
DECEMBER 1, 2007**

By: Carol Jean Delmar
OperaOnline.us

It is hard to believe that the first audience of “La Bohème” in 1896 gave the opera a lukewarm reception, for it has since become one of the most popular and most performed operas in the repertoire, which is indeed why it was the perfect choice for Los Angeles Opera to present during the holiday season, not to mention the fact that the story begins on a snowy Christmas Eve in a garret in Paris.

Much like the characters in the opera -- young artists struggling to pay the rent while remaining faithful to their art – the singers in this revival production are also at the commencement of their careers. They bring a freshness and enthusiasm to the stage that

only young performers are capable of displaying.

First-place 2006 Operalia winner soprano Maija Kovalevska sang her heart out as Mimi, the tragic heroine who shares her dreams of love with the poet, Rodolfo, only to find them shattered as she succumbs to a premature death from consumption. Her vocal timbre was rich and pleasing, and her voice was even from bottom to top.

Likewise, tenor Massimo Giordano (Rodolfo) displayed inspiring ringing tones and a *joie de vivre* on stage. His final cries of “Mimi” were filled with anguish and pain, enough to make the woman sitting next to me pull out a handkerchief, although she was sucking lozenges throughout the evening and was perhaps simply suffering from a cold.

Yet although these two central figures sang with ardor and energy, there was still a lack of chemistry between them -- that certain connection which makes this verismo opera such a heart-rending composition, both for the singers and audience. Unlike my neighbor, I remained somewhat unmoved and detached from the action.

The other young singers had a similar effect on me. The voices of Luca Salsi as Marcello, Oren Gradus as Colline, and Brian Leerhuber as Schaunard, were promising, but I somehow felt as if I were watching a production that was being performed by the best students in a conservatory or young artist program. Salsi and Gradus clearly needed more coaching, both vocally and as actors, even though their voices were at times elegant and melodic, especially in the case of Gradus’s farewell to his overcoat in the aria “Vecchia zimarra.”

Laquita Mitchell’s Musetta was also appealing, but somehow lacked the spark required of the role. Her Café Momus scene didn’t cause a sensation. Her waltz was far from inspiring, although well-sung. She was a more reserved Musetta than most. There wasn’t enough contrast between her character and Mimi.

The singers were all going through the motions, continually aware of the conductor and audience, and their passivity and lack of connection with each other left me passive in my involvement as well. This is Puccini folks! Where was the pathos? Where was the Angela Gheorghiu in this Mimi? If you can’t cry to this one, you deserve your money back.

I greatly respect Plácido Domingo for his steadfast desire to nurture new talent. And in “La Bohème,” young beautiful singers fit the bill. But I suppose that when I go to see an opera performed by a topnotch company that asks top prices for tickets, I expect professionalism, which brings me to the set.

Although aesthetically pleasing to the eye, the set was tired, and the pauses between set changes were as long as short intermissions, leaving the audience members time to converse. Some singers could even be heard vocalizing behind the curtain.

It would have been preferable for Mimi to have been placed inside on a bed when she died, rather than outside, but then the stairway to the bedroom would have been too

difficult for her to surmount, no doubt. The upstairs-downstairs layout only served to alienate the characters so that their closeness was further disrupted. And I just don't care much for automobiles on stage. They always seem out-of-place because of their relative size as compared to the set.

Under the direction of Hartmut Haenchen, the orchestra played amply, but without charisma.

All in all, it was a well-sung "Bohème," but not one that moved the soul.

Libretto, Giuseppe Giacosa and Luigi Illica

Conductor, Hartmut Haenchen

Production, Herbert Ross

Director, Stanley M. Garner

Set Designer, Gerard Howland

Costume Designer, Peter J. Hall

Lighting Designer, Brian Gale

Choreographer, Peggy Hickey

Concert Master, Stuart Canin

Associate Conductor-Chorus Master, Grant Gershon

Artistic Director, LA Children's Chorus, Anne Tomlinson