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Lauren McNeese & James Creswell. Photo: Robert Millard.

On LA Opera's 'Don Giovanni': The smoke coming from the stage floor during the finale is exactly where this production ought to go.

**WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART
DON GIOVANNI
LOS ANGELES OPERA
NOVEMBER 24, 2007**

By: Carol Jean Delmar
OperaOnline.us

The powers that be at Los Angeles Opera like to repeat productions. And that's exactly what they just did with a 2003 production of "Don Giovanni," which officially reopened this Thanksgiving weekend at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion.

Revival productions are the cost-effective way to go, I suppose, if you wait a few years between productions, as Los Angeles Opera has done with this one. But being cost-effective does have its limitations. It's one thing to update an opera and dress the characters in bizarre attire. That seems to be the trend nowadays. But when you dress the characters in bizarre attire on sets which are virtually nonexistent, one wonders what the patrons listed in the performance programs are really paying for.

Lighting was used to give the illusion that this modernistic production had sets. Most of the time the floors and walls were black, set off in squares by lines of light of various hues. There was a bed that looked as if it were destined to become a float in this year's Tournament of Roses Parade. The backdrop lighting was sort of creative, I suppose. But about the most effective aspect of this stark production was the floor, which was trapped to transport the Commendatore up onto the stage, and Giovanni down into hell, where every good Don Giovanni is destined to fall.

First performed in 1787 in Prague with a libretto by Lorenzo da Ponte, the opera depicts the counter-Reformation Don Juan theme, and is based on a play written in 1630 by Tirso de Molina and a one-act opera by Giuseppe Gazzaniga -- to warn mankind against crossing various boundaries regarding moral and sensual mores.

Don Giovanni has crossed those boundaries by disregarding all societal rules. His seductions are many. Donna Anna is engaged to Don Ottavio, but he doesn't care; he has his way with Donna Elvira and abandons her; and then Zerlina becomes his conquest even though he knows that she is betrothed to Masetto. Not even murdering Donna Anna's father fazes him. He fears nothing and has no remorse, and his refusal to seek redemption or atonement leads to his downfall.

The cast was basically an ensemble cast. The singers were actually quite excellent both as singers and actors. But not one of them brought greatness to the stage like a Bryn Terfel-Ferruccio Furlanetto combination, where either one of these greats could have played Giovanni or Leporello with equal brilliance.

The beauty of Mozart's music coupled with strong singing and exceptional acting made the evening one of value, but far from one of greatness.

According to the program and press information, Erwin Schrott is a bass. His Giovanni was young, virile and evil, although he sounded more baritone than bass, which also befits the role. Kyle Ketelsen's Leporello was smooth and agile with good stage presence, but not enough pizzazz. The ladies' voices were more than adequate: Alexandra Deshorties as Donna Anna, Maria Kanyova as Donna Elvira, and Lauren McNeese as Zerlina -- the latter being the least effective due to the interpretation cast upon her by the director. Charles Castronovo's Don Ottavio sang with the lyricism he is known for. James Creswell's Masetto was far too goofy even though his often splendid tone quality and Mozartian flair rose above the buffoonery. And Kang-Liang Peng's Commendatore was far too short-lived. I hope he graces the Pavilion stage with a more

significant role in the future. His voice certainly made the grade. Finally, the Los Angeles Opera Orchestra under the baton of Hartmut Haenchen played adequately, but lacked clarity and sharpness.

Now back to Zerlina and Masetto's buffoonery. It wasn't their fault. Director Mariusz Trelinski with choreographer Emil Wesolowski and costume designer Arkadius Weremczuk are to blame for the failing concept. The action of the opera usually takes place in Seville in the 17th century. Zerlina is a lovely peasant girl who charms us with her grace. We usually have sympathy for Masetto when Giovanni beats him to a pulp. But in this production, Zerlina and Masetto are clowns à la Pierrot and Pierret or Punchinello and Columbine. A little commedia dell'arte, the director thought. How ludicrous they looked in their yellow and black polka-dotted costumes, prancing around the stage like cartoon figures drawn on a draftboard, then brought to life. What mockery to fill the stage with moving evergreen trees during Zerlina's "Batti, batti, o bel Masetto." We missed the beautiful lyricism and simplicity of "Là ci darem la mano" and Zerlina's "Vedrai, carino." And how absurd to have nuns float across the stage during Leporello's "Catalogue Aria." Kyle Ketelsen should have wowed us with his presentation. We were far too occupied watching the nuns -- coupled with Leporello's baldness -- to pay much attention to the deliverance and subsequent baldness of his aria. It was not the job of the director and scenic designer to try to deflate the consequences of a lackluster production without sets, by mocking Mozart's luscious music with scenic antics, ghosts, skeletons, ladies with horizontal hooped skirts, and stylistic elements which were hardly stylistic. Not even the supertitles seemed plentiful.

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Conductor, Hartmut Haenchen
Director, Mariusz Trelinski
Choreographer, Emil Wesolowski
Set Designer, Boris F. Kudlicka
Costume Designer, Arkadius
Original Lighting Designer, Alan Burrett
Lighting Designer, Brian Gale
Concert Master, Stuart Canin
Associate Conductor/Chorus Master, Grant Gershon