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Yali-Marie Williams as Luisa Fernanda, Plácido Domingo as Vidal Hernando

LA Opera's 'Luisa Fernanda,' pleasant but unmemorable.

**FEDERICO MORENO TORROBA
LUISA FERNANDA
LOS ANGELES OPERA
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By: Carol Jean Delmar
OperaOnline.us

After viewing the lovely newly released DVD of "Luisa Fernanda" recorded live at the Teatro Real de Madrid in 2006, I was certain that I would want to see Los Angeles Opera's version more than once since it is a co-production with Washington National Opera and the Teatro Real. I knew that the singers would be different, except for Plácido Domingo, but because the reviews of the 2004 Washington production were so excellent, because I knew that some of those singers would be returning for the L.A. run, and because the director and conductor would be the same, I was expecting great things.

Yet after seeing the opening night performance at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion on

Sunday, June 3, I can honestly say that once was probably enough. As promised, the zarzuela, or Spanish operetta, was a cross between Viennese operetta and verismo. It was full of lyrical music and hummable melodies, but something about it was flat. If it's any consolation, things did pick up after intermission.

Part of the problem was probably due to the minimalistic set. Characters were dragging scrim in and pushing it out as if it were a massive drape. That was kind of clever, I suppose, especially the first time it happened when David Lomeli (El Savoyard) did it, then sang his habañera about a girl and an unfaithful soldier with Domingo's cute little granddaughter Nicole close at hand. That was kind of sweet and endearing although the action seemed a little out-of-place. After that, everything remained bland and in black and white. There was virtually no scenery, just some IKEA-like chairs and a lot of lighting projections. Thank heavens for the big green tree in Vidal Hernando's estate in Act 3. What a difference a little color can make.

Quite honestly, I thought the singers contributed to the production's case of the blahs, but at intermission, a friend of mine, who is a member of the press, pointed out that the problem was really in the pit. By God, he was right! Either conductor Miguel Roa was falling asleep or the orchestra was. It wasn't the tempo though. The music needed to smile more. Then maybe the singers would have followed suit.

And where was the verismo element that I'd read about? There was no "Tosca" or "Madama Butterfly" here. I certainly didn't hear Cavaradossi in anything tenor Antonio Gandía (as Javier) was singing. Some of his tones did have a certain ring to them, but it was hard to hear the other tones over the orchestra. His presence was so diminutive onstage that we wondered why he was so successful with the ladies.

As usual, Plácido Domingo (Vidal Hernando) came to the rescue. His was the performance of a pro. Although Vidal is supposed to be a baritone, Domingo has often said that he loves the role and that the music sits high. Domingo sounded more tenor than baritone, was in excellent voice, and in my mind, stole the show. He was the master onstage showing everyone else how to do it. His character was strong and virile. I don't understand how Luisa Fernanda could have possibly fallen for Javier Moreno when Vidal was around. And that cummerbund around his waist certainly didn't hurt matters. His physique was statuesque, and he sang with utter assurance and support. It seems that I read somewhere that Domingo wore a belt at the onset of his career to remind himself to support. Well, that cummerbund sure did something, and with those boots, he looked like the "rhinestone cowboy." But make no mistake! He was Vidal Hernando -- the kind, wealthy, stable landowner who was willing to fight as a revolutionary in 1868 Spain to win Luisa Fernanda's heart. Javier, a monarchist, was more of a womanizer with a roving eye -- the one Luisa couldn't resist even though he was having his way with the duchess, Carolina. Luisa was willing to marry Vidal, but he didn't want her halfway. At the end, we weren't quite sure whose lover or wife she would be. But Vidal certainly had my vote. Domingo's singing and acting were irresistible although sometimes I felt he was the mentor onstage, always assessing the situation.

For this performance, fair-haired Yali-Marie Williams sang the role of Luisa Fernanda since Maria José Montiel (who sang the role in Washington, D.C.) was indisposed. In the looks department, Williams appeared miscast. When Vidal Hernando sang a poignant romanza to his “morena clara” in Act 3, the supertitles said that he was singing to his “dark-haired beauty.” Surely the makeup and wig departments could have come up with a brunet wig and some darker foundation because this Luisa Fernanda deserved to look the part since she could certainly sing it. Her warm, mellow soprano far surpassed all the other female singers in the cast.

Elena de la Merced, Duchess Carolina, had some beautiful black costumes to wear. She was supposed to be the flirt who lures Javier away from Luisa Fernanda. She was thinner and more model-like in stature than Luisa, but her voice was thinner, too. She wasn’t all that vivacious, voluptuous or alluring, so we wondered why Javier was so attracted to her. In the DVD, the action made much more sense.

Except for Domingo, all of the singers and actors seemed to simply be going through the motions. Where was the electricity between them? Only Gregorio González as Bizco Porrás seemed to move and speak his dialogue with any measure of proficiency, seconded by Suzanna Guzmán in the role of Mariana. Her accomplished mezzo-soprano was an asset to the cast. Although stylized and reminiscent of the waltzes in Viennese operetta, even the “Mazurca de las sombrillas” seemed somehow flat.

This zarzuela is one of Domingo’s favorites. His father played the role of Vidal, and his mother sang Luisa when they toured from Madrid to Mexico after World War II, then settled with their own zarzuela company in Mexico. Domingo has sung both Javier and Vidal, and he has conducted the zarzuela. Likewise, “Luisa Fernanda” means a great deal to director Emilio Sagi whose great-uncle Emilio Sagi-Barba sang the first Vidal Hernando in Madrid in 1932. With such strong feelings for the piece, you’d think the duo could have gotten it right. Don’t get me wrong though: L.A. Opera’s “Luisa Fernanda” is a pleasant production with a legendary tenor-baritone who is in excellent voice in (what has become) the lead. It just could have been better.

Libretto by Federico Romero and Guillermo Fernández Shaw
Critical version by Federico Moreno-Torroba Larregla

Conductor, Miguel Roa
Director/Set Designer, Emilio Sagi
Associate Director/Choreographer, Nuria Castejón
Co-Set Designer, Paul Taylor
Costume Designer, Pepa Ojanguren
Lighting Designer, Mary Louise Geiger
Concertmaster, Stuart Canin
Chorus Master, William Vendice