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Surprises Galore Abound At LA Opera's 20th Anniversary Gala.

**VERDI/J.STRAUSS II
DOMINGO & FRIENDS GALA
OTELLO/DIE FLEDERMAUS
LOS ANGELES OPERA
APRIL 19, 2006**

By: Carol Jean Delmar
OperaOnline.us

Los Angeles Opera was in a celebratory mood on Wednesday night, April 19. And what better way to celebrate than with the bubbly New Year's Eve champagne music of the second act of Johann Strauss's "Die Fledermaus," conducted by the man of the hour, Los Angeles Opera's general director, Plácido Domingo. Billed as "Plácido Domingo & Friends," it was the company's 20th anniversary celebration, and indeed, that's exactly

what it was: a celebration among friends in honor of the man responsible for making LA Opera one of the top five companies in the United States.

The evening might have been a wake up call for Mr. Domingo as well. The performance began with Act IV of Verdi's "Otello." Domingo was recreating the role he played for LA Opera's inaugural production 20 years before. His voice sounded splendid from the onset as he sang his duet with soprano Patricia Racette, his Desdemona. But then, for one fleeting moment, for just one fleeting moment, his voice cracked. Many didn't even hear it. At intermission, some people said that they thought the break in his voice was simply an emotional expression of Otello's desperation. Nevertheless, it happened. And as the dying Otello dragged his guilt-ridden body toward his beloved Desdemona, the wife he had just strangled after being tricked by the evil Iago into believing that she was unfaithful -- my stomach felt queasy and my heart was sinking, for I knew that on some level, the passion that Domingo's Otello was exhibiting on that stage at that particular moment was in part real.

But this was not La Scala. This was a forgiving audience. Many of those in attendance were Los Angeles Opera patrons and contributors who were rooting for their team, anxious to attend the after-performance dinner-and-dancing gala with the stars. Alas! What was there to forgive? Domingo's voice is still vibrant and strong. Maybe it was just an off-day for him. Maybe he'd been multi-tasking too much. He sounded splendid to the ear for the most part. This Dorothy Chandler Pavilion audience was there to support him so that he will continue to bring to LA the culture which for so many years was lacking.

CONTINUING ON

As Domingo's Desdemona, Patricia Racette displayed her usual Rock of Gibraltar technique and resonant high tones. Her farewell to Emilia was heart-wrenching. What was somewhat absent, however, was the foreboding quality that should have resonated during the "Willow Song" and "Ave Maria" sequence.

For some reason, it seemed as if the audience wasn't quite ready to see the fourth act doom and gloom of "Otello" as a curtain raiser. It takes time to prepare for such heated emotion, and since there were no previous acts, the death scene seemed like it was somehow coming out of nowhere. Not even the horns and woodwinds under the direction of conductor Eugene Kohn could prepare the audience for what was coming, nor the basses that so aptly introduced Otello to his lady's bedchamber while the audience watched his larger than life silhouette on the strips of drapes backing the stage before his impending entrance -- an effective marriage of scenery and lighting.

The costumes and set were reminiscent of other Domingo "Otellos." Word has it that he is retiring the role which now seems to bear his name. He is still scheduled to sing another Act IV at the Wiener Staatsoper next season though.

DIE FLEDERMAUS

Now for the fun!

“Fledermaus” was all in English so we could understand it. Yet that’s my first gripe. The action takes place in Vienna, Austria at the end of the 19th century according to the program. Strauss has written a typical Viennese operetta. The charm is derived from the waltz culture, so why not enhance it? In this under-rehearsed but still effective Act II party extravaganza, the Viennese element was really underplayed. In fact, some of the lyrics were changed so that at one point we heard the words: “After all, this is LA.” Then why did the program say that the scene was taking place in Vienna? Oh, well, that little discrepancy didn’t really seem to matter and probably only served to endear the audience.

However a better way to go would have been to mimic the 1984 Royal Opera production of “Fledermaus” with Kiri Te Kanawa and Hermann Prey, conducted by none other than a young Plácido Domingo. Much of the production, which is on DVD, was sung and spoken in German, but a substantial amount of the dialogue was in English as well. Thus the audience was party to the best of both worlds. Everything about this 1984 production approached perfection. So although LA Opera pulled off a somewhat joyful creation that left everyone feeling exuberant, there was room for improvement and more rehearsal time – since it appears that the gala and some of the cast members were only recently announced, when it is a known fact that in the opera world, plans are often made years in advance. But I don’t fault LA Opera for such short notice. Thanks to Mr. Domingo, the star power on the stage was enough to draw in a full house.

The set was far from elaborate but was sufficient, and the ladies’ matching golden gowns made a nice palette of color which was accented by some very oversized crystal chandeliers.

Most of the singers seemed a little insecure about blocking and even about their singing, possibly due to a lack of rehearsal time. The acting was fair, but the timing was somehow off.

The chorus and supernumeraries also seemed in need of direction. The overall effect would have been enhanced with more movement. At times, members of the chorus were singing while standing in a horizontal line facing the audience. Their movements were static. A little more Viennese waltzing around the room would have been a welcome addition.

Lucy Schaufer as Prince Orlofsky came the closest to developing a viable characterization. She’s becoming a trouser-role expert, just having played Cherubino in LA Opera’s “Figaro.” But I liked her better in this operetta because she wasn’t over-the-top. Her dialect was accomplished. It could have been executed a little bit slower with more enunciation at times though. Doris Soffel in the Royal Opera production was sheer perfection in both acting and singing. Maybe Schaufer could watch the DVD. Then she too could reach perfection. She’s not that far away from it.

I can’t stress enough that although the artists offered more than capable singing, they were short on Viennese charm. The well-heeled Gabriel von Eisenstein is supposed to be

in prison; and Adele, his wife's chambermaid, is supposed to be visiting her sick aunt. But they all end up at a party given by the wealthy Russian Prince Orlofsky. The scheme has been devised by Dr. Falke, who is bent on avenging Eisenstein for once letting him walk home from a costume party dressed as a bat. Eisenstein's wife, Rosalinde, comes to Orlofsky's soiree in disguise as a Hungarian countess, while Adele arrives wearing one of her lady's finest gowns, thus making the situation ripe for some heavy-duty flirting, specifically between Eisenstein and his incognito wife.

Rod Gilfry's tall, handsome Eisenstein was a little bit flaky although well-sung. Sarah Coburn's Adele was rather icy although she hit all the right notes in all the right places. Her "Mein Herr Marquis" lacked sparkle. Cynthia Lawrence's csárdás was nicely done, although her character wasn't classy and alluring enough for Eisenstein to find her so appealing. And Earle Patriarco's "Bruderlein und Schwesterlein" lost some of its lyricism in the translation, although his overall performance as Dr. Falke was strong.



Photo: Robert Millard

THE SURPRISE PARTY GUESTS

When soprano Angela Gheorghiu walked onto the stage with Plácido Domingo, their tête-à-tête silent and vocal repartée immediately revealed to the audience the true meaning of what stage presence is all about. Their "Lippen schweigen" from L  har's "The Merry Widow" was overflowing with what was lacking the entire evening. And when Gheorghiu sang George Grigoriu's "Muzica," one of her Romanian favorites, she simply took over the stage. No one that evening could match her beauty or presence. Her pink, blue and white-striped gown was luscious, and her dynamic magnetism drew the audience in. When a true pro walks onto the stage, there can be no denying it. This "diva" has it all.

Other surprise guests included tenor Charles Castronova singing Salvatore Cardillo's "Core 'ngrato" with great lyricism, energy and passion; soprano Ruth Ann Swenson singing a far too slowly paced "And This is My Beloved" from "Kismet"; and Ver  nica Villarroel displaying a warm mellow timbre with Mar  a Grever's "Te quiero, dijiste."

The ballet sequence was an enjoyable diversion. Ellen Rosa's technique was solid and strong garnering her applause after some well-spotted fouettes, and her pas de deux with

Jonathan Sharp was nicely choreographed, although his dancing should have been cleaner.

Baritone Mark Delavan sang the “Soliloquy” from Rodgers and Hammerstein’s hit musical “Carousel” with mixed gusto. His rendition was reminiscent of Gordon MacRae’s “Soliloquy” in the filmed version, although it was somewhat uneven.

Tenor Roberto Alagna sang Arturo Buzzi-Peccia’s Serenata Spagnola “Lolita” with zest and charisma, then concluded the evening with his wife Angela Gheorghiu, both singing a refrain of the drinking song from “La Traviata” – a sign of more good things to come for an opera company that’s on the rise. Stay tuned for our review of LA Opera’s “La Traviata” in June.

Conductors, Plácido Domingo and Eugene Kohn

Director, Stanley M. Garner

Set Designer, Lisa Hashimoto Stone

Choreographer, Peggy Hickey

Lighting, Allen A. Miller