The devil's in the details

Merola Opera Program's 'The Rake's Progress' rewards

by Stephanie von Buchau

A decade ago, I stopped going to Merola Opera productions. The repertory was stale, they looked tacky, and the singers usually included one or two spectacular talents who outclassed a bunch of weak sisters with virtually no chance of ever making it "big" in opera. Merola, with a few exceptions, had become a dutiful, end-of-summer display of directionless waste of time and talent. All that changed when San Francisco Opera General Director Pamela Rosenberg hired Sheri Greenawald to run the Opera Center, under whose guidance Merola falls (or rises, as the case may be).

Dictators with taste and vision usually make the best CEOs of arts organizations, though "dictator" is too strong a word for Greenawald, a salty, sometimes brutally frank, old-school former singer, who forged a fine and lengthy career as a character actress singing leading soprano roles. Because she worked so hard all the time and because she's so smart, Greenawald reminds me of the baseball catcher who will probably never make it to Cooperstown, but turns out to be one of the best-ever major league managers.

Jeremy Galyon as Nick Shadow, Ailyn Perez as AnneTrulove, Jason Karn as Tom Rakewell in Merola Opera's The Rake's Progress.
Because she was so direct and reliable as a singer, Greenawald flew under the short-sighted "hype" radar. Now it is payback time, because the Opera Center is steaming along at full speed, with last weekend's superbly professional Merola production of Stravinsky's *The Rake's Progress* (at the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts Theater) something that simply would not have been possible a dozen years ago. It was preceded last month by a fully-staged *Marriage of Figaro* that some observers thought was the best production they'd ever seen of that opera. (Unfortunately, I missed it.)

Yes, there have been occasional stumbles â€” usually to the smutty side. Even this *Rake* had two gratuitous masturbatory sequences. (*Pul-leeze*, people. Like vomiting, jacking off should be a solitary adventure, *i.e.* no observers required, unless you are selling porn.) Last year's *Don Pasquale* set the standard that this *Rake* exceeded, partly because it is a superior score, and partly because it is a much more difficult piece to bring off. The humor is there, but it is subtle and often unsettling. The auction scene didn't quite scintillate as it did the last time we had *Rake* at the War Memorial (remember the hilarious woman stealing Baba's stuffed auk?), but Baba (sung by Kendall Gladen, seemingly six-foot tall, but a real girl this time) was truly a compassionate figure with a deep emotional core, rather than just a freak show.

Nick Shadow (Jeremy Galyon) and Tom's graveyard card game were as scary as I've ever seen, infinitely more tense than those Texas Hold 'Ems on TV. Galyon, tall and good-looking, has a dark, harsh, impressive tone and the physical grace of a dancer. Director James Marvel capitalized on this by giving Nick a signature movement, a bent-knee "bow" that made the lanky bass-baritone look both servile and sinister all at once â€” perfect characterization for this devilish figure.

**Dim bulb**

I'm going to give Greenawald full credit for casting the leads. Tom Rakewell is such a putz, stupid rather than innocent, and not really enjoying his sex-and-alcohol spree in London. (What is the point of sinning if you're going to be a Glum Gus about it?) So handsome Jason Karn gets high marks for making Tom's dimwittedness part of his appeal. His voice â€” like an Irish tenor, as my companion remarked â€” is tireless in the high registers where Stravinsky unkindly placed much of Tom's music. If the pathos of the mad scene eluded him, well, it comes at the end of a long evening, and sometimes puts me to sleep, too.

Because he was obviously so morally dense, Anne's unshakeable love for Tom became more important. This guy really needed to be rescued from himself, and her tenacious refusal to abandon him for once seemed heroic rather than demented. This is because Ailyn Perez has the personality of a terrier, and a soprano strong enough to put across her faithfulness without smarm. Yes, the coloratura in "I go to him" was a tad sketchy, and her high C is not a thing of beauty, but her singing was so energized, so well-phrased, and her participation in the ensembles so accurate that her Anne was a really exciting, flesh-and-blood character. That made her interaction with Baba all the more poignant.

It's not that these things aren't in the score already â€” it's just that you seldom witness them, leaving the mistaken impression that Stravinsky's only full-length opera is a dry, desiccated bore. I know it isn't, because the first performance I ever heard â€” with Richard Lewis in 1962 â€” moved me to tears. I've been searching for that human feeling ever since. A good deal of credit goes to conductor Judith Yan, who made the astringent score sound as lyrical as Puccini (not a bad thing, no matter what critics more austere than I want you to believe), and supported her singers like few main-stage conductors.
ever do. Add the clever, economical scenery and costumes designed by Eric Allgeier and Anna Wronsky, with selectively brilliant lighting by Christopher Maravich, and you had an evening of pure pleasure.

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