

Cross-dressing and double-crossing

DITLEV RINDOM

The Royal Opera House's current season has been marketed as a celebratory Olympic event, with a series of operatic cycles cunningly planned to time with the festivities this summer. In practise, however, the season has been marked by a series of cost-saving revivals of popular titles and some disappointingly high-profile cancellations - most painfully, by Anja Harteros, who has already withdrawn from two roles this year. Whilst the house continues its tradition of saving its most glamorous performances for the summer booking period, it whetted our appetite with solid revivals of two of its most recent hits.



©

Laurent Pelly's production of *La Fille du Régiment* was the toast of the town when it premiered in 2007 and has already returned with nearly the same spectacular cast. Its ironic treatment of opéra-comique conventions and its emotional investment in the moments of *pathos* have made it a hit with audiences worldwide and judging by the audience reaction, it continues to draw new spectators into the house. With the choreography and *mise-en-scène* clearly moulded around the hyperactive, even manic stage persona of Natalie Dessay, and its famous succession of high Cs the signature tune of Juan Diego Florèz, however, it was always going to be tricky to find a pair of principles to match the earlier triumph. On this occasion Covent Garden almost (but not quite) succeeded. As Marie, Patrizia Ciofi displayed her pale, somewhat veiled timbre to exquisite effect in 'Il faut partir' and 'Par le rang', where her instinctive sense of rubato and ability to mould her vibrato were of the essence. Elsewhere, she sometimes struggled to find the necessary vocal thrust and focus for the military outbursts of 'Au bruit de la guerre' and her tomboy-ish characterisation felt effortful rather than innate. Nonetheless, it was a pleasure to hear such sensitive singing and one rather regrets she won't fill the vacancy in *Robert Le Diable* this winter.

Alongside her, Colin Lee had his star moment at the Royal Opera, having previously sung a handful of performances in the earlier revival and *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*. His endearingly awkward, gentle manner would seem ideal for Tonio and he undoubtedly possesses the technical and musical flair to succeed in the role. His only deficiency at present, one feels, is a lack of presence: his tone, although rounded, lacks the last modicum of ping and as an actor he still needs to find the inner glow that would convince us that he is not merely any mountain boy but also special. In most respects, his performance was unimpeachable; and yet, it didn't impress itself on one's memory as it might.

In the supporting roles, Ann Murray and Alan Opie blustered along in fine comic fashion and Donald Maxwell reprised his successful portrayal as Hortensius. More mixed were the reactions to Ann Widdecombe, who made her operatic debut in the small role of the Duchess of Krakenthorp, and who elicited a ferocious critical mauling from the British press. There is no doubt that a public reputation for egregious behaviour does not necessarily qualify one for performing such a parody on stage; but the pain was mercifully brief and at least attracted column inches for an otherwise low-key revival.

With stylish conducting by Yves Abel and strong contributions from the chorus, this was still a satisfying evening at the opera.

David McVicar's popular staging of *Rigoletto* returned once again for an uneven revival that was also being recorded for a live cinema broadcast. Barely ten years old, it's looking worryingly worn and dated and its increasingly frequent revivals are doing the production no favours. Help was on hand, however, from the surprising source of John Eliot Gardiner - hardly known as a Verdi conductor and to be frank, not my first choice in much else. It was a delightful surprise then to hear such immaculately co-ordinated orchestral and choral entries, particularly the tricky opening scene, and throughout he found a nearly ideal balance between the music's surging energy and the need for expressive flexibility. The darker colours in the score could have been more richly etched, but this was a genuinely unexpected treat.

The quality of the singing was extremely mixed however. In the title role, Dimitri Platanias made a very impressive house debut and revealed a superbly well-honed baritone voice - totally secure and rich even up to a top A and with a wonderfully smooth vocal production. He could continue to develop a more vivid range of vocal expression but 'Cortigiani' elicited goose bumps (as it should) and it was a pleasure to hear such confident Verdi singing. As the Duke, Vittorio Grigolo reprised his now familiar repertoire of sobs, croons and shouts which have become a substitute for nuanced dramatic interpretation. A legato line is almost non-existent; his top notes sound forced rather than released; and his hairpin dynamics turn every phrase into a moment of hysteria. He is a wonderfully charismatic stage presence, of course, and he acts the narcissistic cad with relish, but he doesn't sound like a performer who will be headlining new productions in ten years' time.

Lucy Crowe is not obvious casting as Gilda and judging by the performance I heard, still needs to find her feet in the role. Drafted in at short notice to replace Ekatarina Siurina for three performances, it took a long time for her normally shining top notes to emerge

securely and for her middle voice to find its centre: for much of the first two acts she sounded ill at sorts, despite an intriguingly detailed conception of the character. Once her voice settled, however, she soared confidently through the storm scene and delivered some memorably coloured phrases in her death scene. She was first due to debut in the role next year at the Deutsche Oper and by that time I am sure she will have found her own distinctive way into the role; the staccati, trills and deep feeling are there already. In the smaller roles, Matthew Rose impressed again as Sparafucile and Christine Rice reconfirmed her status as one of Britain's most reliably excellent musical exports with a deliciously sultry cameo as Maddalena. Her Eboli next season should be fascinating to hear.

With these two revivals, the cycle of encores which have dominated the season is nearly complete and the summer promises new productions of *Falstaff* and *Les Troyens* as well as glitzy revivals of *Otello* and *La Bohème* - the latter featuring Alagna and Gheorghiu in a pair of gala performances. After a lacklustre few months, that should finish things off with a bang and get opera goers really into the festive spirit.