

## *Santa Fe Opera, Part 2: A Twilight Tragedy*

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There are any number of places where one might be able to see *Rigoletto* in the course of a given season, but fewer where the slow build of the prelude might find itself in competition with birdsong, where the final duet between the jester and his dying daughter is accompanied by the not-so-distant yipping of coyotes, or where the drama is set against the final light of a magnificent New Mexico sunset. Such are the unexpected delights of the Santa Fe Opera -an open-air theatre built on a hill in the middle of one of the most beautiful landscapes imaginable- which offered a tightly played and wonderfully sung production of Verdi's grand melodrama as part of their 2015 season.

The staging itself was dependable if somewhat conventional, with director Lee Blakeley choosing to remain firmly within the dramatic limits set by Piave's libretto. Indeed, with the exception of the vaguely risqué opening scene -a laborious bacchanal that made one long for the subtle innuendo of a good old-fashioned masked ball- the action proceeded in an unobtrusively traditional manner. Certainly there was little that might have upset anyone hoping to see a straightforward retelling of the story.

Neither the setting nor the costumes were concerned with creating an impression of sixteenth-century Mantua, nor did they seem especially committed to any particular time or place. Yet there was something charmingly old-school about the set, an assemblage of vaguely italianate architectural elements formed into a chaotic central structure, a logic-defying series of spaces that revealed themselves as the stage began to rotate. While the concept was hardly novel, the different vertical levels of the set -notably the stairway in the first act, and Maddalena's loft in the third- at least offered both Gilda and the Duke a higher platform from which to deliver their most celebrated arias.

**Santa Fe,  
martes, 4 de  
agosto de 2015.**

Santa Fe Opera.  
Verdi: *Rigoletto*.  
Lee Blakeley,  
director. Bruce  
Sledge (Duke of  
Mantua), Quim



Kelsey (*Rigoletto*), Georgia Jarman (*Gilda*),  
Peixin Chen (*Sparafucile*), Nicole  
Piccolomini (*Maddalena*), Anne Marie  
Stanley (*Giovanna*), Calvin Griffin (*Count  
Ceprano*), Shabnam Kalbasi (*Countess  
Ceprano*), Robert Pomakov (*Monterone*),  
Andrea Núñez (*Monterone's Daughter*),  
Jarrett Ott (*Marullo*), Galeano Salas  
(*Borsa*), Michael Adams (*Court Usher*).  
Orchestra of the Santa Fe Opera. Jader  
Bignamini, conductor



Verdi's *Rigoletto*. Santa Fe Opera, August 2015 © Ken Howard, 2015

If the production ultimately lacked the kind of interpretive risks that might have yielded new insights into the plight of *Rigoletto* or the callousness of his milieu, it was nonetheless able to create a familiar and comfortable space in which the singers could provide the necessary excitement; and the evening, anchored by a trio of strong, often wonderful performances from Quinn Kelsey in the title role, Georgia Jarman as Gilda and Bruce Sledge as the Duke, rarely suffered from a lack of vocal drama.

Ms Jarman, it must be said, was not an especially meek Gilda; even at her most tender (Act I), or her most devastated (Act II), there was a confidence and earthy fortitude to her voice that seemed somehow at odds with the idea of a naïve young woman who would sacrifice herself to save her betrayer. Yet she had an engaging presence and her technical control was superb; in addition to her own unfailingly melodic 'Caro nome' in the first act, her three major duets with *Rigoletto* were all wonderfully rendered.



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As the Duke of Mantua, Mr Sledge -who had performed the role earlier in the season, but was standing in on this evening for an indisposed Bryan Hymel- handled the character with ease and charisma. His opening 'Questa o quella' was bracing and rhythmic and, even when disguised as the poor student Gualtier Maldè, there was an ardour in his delivery that only partially obscured the insincerity of his motives. If his 'La donna è mobile' sounded a touch burdened by the responsibility of singing Verdi's most instantly recognisable tune, his 'Ella mi fu rapita' at the beginning of Act II was able to summon a satisfying pathos.

The evening's most impressive performance, however, belonged to Mr Kelsey, whose Rigoletto was scraggly and exhausted, but also imposing in its tragic hollowness. The timbre of his voice was dark and heavy -closer perhaps to a bass-baritone than to the light baritone Verdi may have had in mind- and his phrasing was full of weariness and loathing, both for his fellow courtiers and his own humiliation. When he claimed, in the second act, that Gilda was the only light in his life, one had no trouble believing him. Yet the gloom in his voice did not stop him from elevating nearly every scene in which he appeared. There was moving anguish in his second act pleas of 'Pietà signori', and an unconcealed malice in his dealings with Sparafucile, but they were balanced by a great tenderness during his excellent first act duet with Gilda.



Verdi's Rigoletto. Santa Fe Opera, August 2015 © Ken Howard, 2015

Among the secondary roles, the Maddalena of Nicole Piccolomini stood out for the effortless richness of her voice. Her role may not have been especially large, but she proved to be an integral part of the third act quartet -arguably the most exciting part of the evening- as well as the inspired trio during which Gilda appears at Sparafucile's door.

The orchestra, under the direction of Jader Bignamini, gave a performance of extraordinary focus and impressive precision. Mr Bignamini's tightly-wound conducting style gave the

impression of someone who had left no detail to chance and, throughout the evening, the music was characterised by robust rhythms, fine dynamic shading and a great instrumental clarity; the strings during Rigoletto's early scene with Sparafucile and the delicate, detailed woodwinds in Gilda's first act aria were especially impressive. And yet, there were several scenes where one longed for a more impulsive, less restrained sound; a touch of wildness beneath Rigoletto's cries for revenge at the end of the second act might have transformed the scene into something altogether more terrifying.

*Rigoletto* may not be a difficult work to stage but, as with any frequently-performed opera, there are dangers in trying to make it do too much. Even if the text offers ample scope for novel interpretations -and, in the past three decades, *Rigoletto* has stood up to some fairly drastic reinventions- the opera as a whole must also live up to its reputation as an entertaining work of large passions and grand tunes that, when furnished with good singers, can be enjoyed with little effort. Perhaps the greatest virtue of the new Santa Fe production is that it recognised the quality of its singers, and did not go out of its way to obscure their talents.