

Opéra magazine

Amleto review

“A pleasure beyond mere curiosity, Amleto is a genuine discovery”

Wilmington
Grand Opera House
May 14

Amleto
Faccio

Milan, 1871. Amleto, written by two friends, Franco Faccio and Arrigo Boito, had been premiered in Genoa six years earlier to moderate success. Submitted to the task of La Scala, the piece was very badly performed by an ailing tenor. Franco Faccio (1840-1891) would never recover from this failure and refuse any further performance of his opera. History would remember him as the conductor of the Italian premiere of Aida in 1872 and the world premiere of Otello in 1887.

The tale of this Amleto lost for nearly one hundred and fifty years because of a bad tenor does not get old for Anthony Barrese. After extensive research, the American composer and conductor found a piano-vocal score at Casa Ricordi which contained a few orchestral annotations. From there he constructed a full score, then in 2014 conducted its re-creation, first in a Baltimore concert performance and then fully staged in Albuquerque.

Providing a pleasure beyond mere curiosity, Amleto is a genuine discovery. It is an opera perfectly structured with four strongly organized acts. One can recognize the sense of drama and the concise delivery of Boito, the future librettist of Otello and Falstaff. Shakespeare's masterpiece is condensed in about two and a half hours, with no dull moment until almost abruptly, comes the brutal and brief final carnage.

And the music? While some arias recall the bel canto style, the score's dark theatricality is very close to the best of Verdi's. Mostly, Amleto announces the verismo style. We hear a review of 19th century Italian opera, at its most intense.

Intelligently illustrative, with traditional costumes in a non-traditional set, OperaDelaware's new production mounted in Wilmington's Grand Opera House (a 1,200-seat theatre built in 1871) underlines the strength of the plot. The set is bare: Frail scaffoldings shape a ghostly castle plunged into semi-darkness, under the banner of a Danish flag. Many different retreats for the arias, duets and ensembles, where the lights (sometimes lacking subtlety) and a few props create the pictures of a ballroom, ramparts, or a cemetery.

The characters are well depicted, which is quite a task in an opera flanked with many of them. The cast is convincing in this forgotten piece. Joshua Kohl's Amleto is internalized in his own brutality. His forehead scrunched, his body tense, he seems on the edge of an outburst at any moment. Without any particular virtuosity, the title role demands stamina and the tenor tackles it valiantly, with an excellent delivery and perfect diction.

Soprano Sarah Asmar's sacrificial Ofelia sometimes presents little imagination in her depiction, but the quality of her color and the beauty of her high range triumph, in a very well-executed sleepwalking aria (one more indeed, in the repertoire). With a deep voice perfectly projected,

baritone Timothy Mix plays an anxious Claudio, with a troubled look accentuated by red makeup around his bulging eyes.

Mezzo-soprano Lara Tillotson measures up to the character of Geltrude, who sings an unforgettable duet with Amleto, remarkable in maternal fury. Bass Ben Wager is a perfect Spetro, his basso profundo sometimes amplified when he sings from offstage. Finally, the supporting characters are also very well sung.

Conducting the score he rediscovered, Anthony Barrese paints it with a heavy strength, Verdi-like colors and brilliant contrasts.

We now wait impatiently for the new production conducted by Paolo Carignani and directed by Olivier Tambosi at the Bregenz Festival, starting July 20.

Jean-Marc Proust

Opéra magazine

Falstaff review

“The ensemble stays theatrically merry and well conducted”

Wilmington
Grand Opera House
May 15

Falstaff
Verdi

Established in 1944, OperaDelaware, one of the oldest professional opera companies in the United States, focuses its activities in an annual “festival” held in May. The second day of this 2016 edition winks at the previous night: Shakespeare again, but a comedy, and another Boito libretto, his last one.

The first contrast is a musical one, with this Verdi who listened to Wagner to better articulate the Italian vigor and build a through-composed plot from the theatrical play. Well-distanced from a contemporary setting, the costumes and sets portray the Elizabethan period with eloquence. The women wear coiffes, the houses are Tudor-style and the men could be wearing ruffs and leotards if they weren't so old and weary.

When Falstaff appears in full formal dress, the brightness of the costume is hard to take seriously, but he wears his hat with panache and waves the embroidered handkerchief with the forced elegance of the gentleman he once was. Proudly displayed in the middle of the Inn's dining room is a beautiful find: an armchair mounted with a set of deer antlers, making whoever sits in it a slouched cuckold.

In front of a delighted audience, the cast executes this Falstaff with conviction and a real sense of comedy. The ladies, partner in crime, simper and scheme: they show so much energy and imagination in their caning preparation that we hardly deplore a lack of cohesion in the ensembles. Standing out among them, Victoria Cannizzo's delicious Alice displays great melodic phrasing and Ann McMahon Quintero's Quickly a great stage presence. A little limited in her high register, Sharin Apostolou offers a pleasant Nannetta, embracing Ryan MacPherson's seductive Fenton with fervor.

Sean Anderson sings with a pleasant and well-projected voice. Despite his stiff demeanor, his solid Ford shows the perfect amount of cockiness and ridicule. A special mention has to be given to Falstaff. Steven Condy appears perfectly at ease, bursting with satisfied vanity, but also with gentleness, with the ability to hop («Quand'ero paggio») as well as slouch, hulky and ultimately touching. Not to be outdone, the singer delivers excellent diction, ignores nothing of Verdi's score and restores all its nuances. As in Amleto, the supporting characters are all very well sung. In the pit, Giovanni Reggioli forces a fast tempo, which translates at times by a lack of cohesion from the orchestra. But the ensemble stays theatrically merry and well conducted.

Jean-Marc Proust