King for a Day: Verdi's second opera at Glimmerglass

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Whether you call it *Un giorno di regno* or "King for a Day", Giuseppe Verdi's second opera and his first comedy is mostly unknown. That has not stopped the Glimmerglass Festival from mounting a spirited production for its 2013 season in the Alice Busch Opera Theatre on the shores of Otsego Lake in upstate New York.

The production takes advantage of the comic elements of the opera, and in fact enhances them by using an English adaptation of Felice Romani's creaky libretto by American writer Kelley Rourke. She has moved the opera to the 1950s, with beehive hairdos and a young Elvis Presley as "The King", and director Christian Räth treats it as the silly comedy that it is. Most of the singers are members of Glimmerglass' Young Artists Program, and the singing much of the time is commensurate with youthful exuberance and lack of experience.

The plot involves the unraveling of two intended weddings of mismatched couples and the triumph of true love with the intercession of an impersonator king for a day. All weddings need bridesmaids dressed in hideous pink dresses, paparazzi, and some other colourful characters. This production has them all.

The main issue is the quality of the singing. There are some bright lights, but overall, the vocal quality is not of the highest order. Italian mezzo-soprano Ginger Costa-Jackson has some of the best arias and she does the best job in the production. She is the Marchesa who is supposed to marry the ridiculous Count Ivrea (tenor Joe Shadday). But she is in love with Belfiore (baritone Alex Lawrence) and is full of comic spunk and gives a very good vocal accounting of the role.

Lawrence is tall, very adept at slapstick comedy, and has a fine stage presence as the pretend king and Belfiore,

but he was indisposed the night I saw the performance and it would be unfair to comment on his voice.

Edoardo (tenor Patrick O'Halloran) and Giulietta (soprano Jacqueline Echols) made up the other set of lovers. O'Halloran sounded uncertain at the beginning and had difficulty with his high notes but he settled down and belted out some good singing by the end. Echols sang very prettily, although initially one had a hard time hearing her on occasion. Giulietta was supposed to marry the buffoonish but rich La Rocca (baritone Andrew Wilkowske). With a tuft of hair on top of his head, Wilkowske struck the appropriately ridiculous posture of the character and sang well.

What is missing between Edoardo and Giulietta is romance. The same criticism applies to Belfiore and the Marchesa. Räth pays attention to the comic hijinks but not the quieter love interests. Edoardo, dressed in short pants, looks more ridiculous than passionate, and I would have preferred more amorousness and less comedy.

Bass Jason Hardy as Baron Kelbar is the host of the the king for a day, as well as the two weddings. He is the old guard that stands in the way of the love matches but is eventually forced to do otherwise. Hardy provided some comic and vocal pleasure without any particular pyrotechnics.

There was comic compensation for the vocal shortcomings. Räth is imaginative and inventive in his movement and positioning of the characters, and keeps a brisk pace. When the King unmasks himself as Belfiore, he wears an Elvis Presley mask – a good joke in a silly opera.

Set and costume designer Court Watson provides a large tilted frame in which the action takes place with smaller frames being lowered on a number of occasions. The backdrop changes colours numerous times and lighting designer Robert Wierzel projects a veritable kaleidoscope of shades. The set has the benefit of being vibrant without breaking the budget.

The Glimmerglass Festival Orchestra is conducted by Joseph Colaneri, and he chose a brisk pace in keeping with the shenanigans that were happening on the stage. The chorus unfortunately sounded loud when it should have sounded melodic, and it did not add greatly to the production.

Glimmerglass gave us the gift of a rarely seen opera with some good comic business, some uneven singing and good orchestral playing – and all in a simply gorgeous rural venue.