

## Comedy Is Not Pretty

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A large, ornate picture frame dominates Court Watson's set for the Glimmerglass Festival's production of the Verdi's rarely seen *Un giorno di regno*, presented in English as *King for a Day*. Smaller frames periodically fly in or are carried on. It's a good conceit for a comedy, because a frame represents the discipline needed for jokes to work.



*Ginger Costa-Jackson in King for a Day, photo by Karli Cadell--Glimmerglass Festival*

Unfortunately, director Christian R ath hasn't a clue about what he's dealing with. The free-for-all nature of what he gives us is appalling at first and tiresome in the end. Like lousy Gilbert and

Sullivan productions, it has the air of the inmates taking over the asylum. It's clear that the director probably doesn't understand and certainly mistrusts the material, but knows that a certain bewildered audience segment will always laugh when people on stage make goofy faces.

*King for a Day* was Verdi's second opera, a colossal failure that kept him from comedy until he bowed out gloriously with *Falstaff*. It features a mistaken-identity plot in which a soldier is charged with impersonating his country's regent and thus is able to self-indulgently wield power, which he does to confound a pair of arranged marriages to the satisfaction of the unhappy brides-to-be.

First on deck (a dangerously raked deck, I might add) are the costumes, also by Watson. They suggest that the action has been moved from the early 18th century to around 1960, only reinforcing how much the piece looks like a bad Frank Tashlin movie. Patrick O'Halloran, as Edoardo, sports shorts and knee socks—hey, that's funny!—and even after he's measured for fancier duds (with the obligatory dick joke), the shorts remain.

This would work in a cartoon short or blackout sketch. It weakens the credibility of a full-length piece, because if every character is a buffoon, there's no room for rebellion. But you wouldn't know this from most of the principals and *all* of the chorus in this production, whose faces-per-second rate would set an Olympic record—if such recognition was given for mugging.

As the frames suggest, comedy needs style and structure. An antique plot like this one is built on social-class differences and expectations, which is realized through the stylization of character—something that was lost in the homogeneity of this production. And there's a logical structure to comedy, the punchlines of which only pay off satisfactorily when the setup makes sense. Again, there's no chance of it when chaos is made the norm.

I'll spare you the tedium of a scene-by-scene dissection of the production. The misfires were legion, from an awkward Shirelles-style harmony moment to the sudden, inexplicable appearance of a stageful of chairs. Throughout the piece, the frames cried out to Rāth and company to impose some discipline, but his witless response was to require the performers periodically to step through them, which proved distractingly awkward.

You know a production is troubled when the finest scene takes place between a singer and a dog. As the Marchesa, Ginger Costa-Jackson brought one of the few effectively realized characterizations to the piece, and even pulled off the challenging task of making effective use of a live animal in her arms.

Another requirement for an effective comic opera is a good libretto, preferably in the language of the country in which the piece is being presented. Unfortunately, the English version by Kelley Rourke lacked even fundamental craftsmanship. The lyrics-to-music matching was consistently weak, and she has no idea how to construct a rhyme. Each almost-rhyme lands painfully on the ear, yet I have to assume that neither she nor anyone else with artistic authority at the company recognizes the problem. Rourke needs to be locked in a room for a week with the Clement Wood rhyming dictionary, the first third of which is actually a primer on poetic form.

The orchestra was excellent, as usual, under the able baton of Joseph Colaneri. The singers brought excellent voices to the production, but it was a lost cause. As the latter half of the old showbiz adage puts it, comedy is hard.