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Glimmerglass Festival gives opera lovers Verdi and Wagner — Littler

Opera house on the shores of Lake Otsego presents three operas from the two greatest opera composers of the Romantic era.



Karli Cadel Photo / Karli Cadel Photo

Jacqueline Echols as Giulietta, Jason Hardy as Baron Kelbar, Andrew Wilkowske as La Rocca and ensemble member Sharin Apostolou appear in The Glimmerglass Festival's 2013 production of Verdi's King for a Day.

By: William Littler Music Columnist, Published on Fri Aug 09 2013

COOPERSTOWN, N.Y.—It began, improbably enough, in 1975 in the village that claims to have invented baseball, with a few performances of Puccini's *La Boheme*, mounted in the modest setting of a local high school.

But today, operating out of a picturesque 914-seat opera house on the shores of Lake Otsego (known as Glimmerglass in the 19th century novels of James Fenimore Cooper), the Glimmerglass Festival is a seasonal magnet for opera lovers throughout upstate New York and southern Ontario.

This season's program, which runs through Aug. 24, embraces more than 40 performances of three operas and a musical, together with dozens of ancillary presentations, ranging from pre-performance and post-performance talks, recitals and literary readings, to a major exhibition at the Fenimore Art Museum of Hudson River School paintings and, perhaps most unexpectedly of all, an encounter with Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg.

It is a program highlighted by bicentennial celebrations of the birth of the two greatest opera composers of the Romantic era, Giuseppe Verdi and Richard Wagner, with a rare production of Verdi's second opera, *King for a Day* (*Un giorno di regno*) an obvious point of interest.

King for a Day was a resounding, one performance failure at its Milan premiere in 1840 and marked Verdi's only attempt at comedy until he, at the astonishing age of 80, returned laughter to the stage with *Falstaff*.

His opera No. 2 is certainly no masterpiece. It exhibits the undeniable talent of a promising composer who had yet to find his own voice. Full of repetitious musical gestures and formula accompaniments, it remains interesting today largely as an example of the Rossini-dominated Italian opera the young composer would become instrumental in changing.

The plot revolves around the adventures of a royal stand-in, engaged to impersonate for one day only the King of Poland, and like so many comedies of its period, deals with various romantic entanglements along the way.

In trying to make it stageworthy for the 21st century, Kelley Rourke, together with director Christian Rath and conductor Joseph Colaneri (the festival's new music director) embarked on a considerable amount of adapting, editing and translating into English, without producing a truly satisfactory result. The score still sounds slight, barely hinting at the genius Verdi would reveal in opera No. 3, *Nabucco*.

A festival is nevertheless an appropriate place to encounter *King for a Day*, although in choosing *The Flying Dutchman* (*Der Fliegende Hollander*) to celebrate Wagner's birthday, artistic and general director Francesca Zambello honoured a composer who had by this point actually found his own voice.

Zambello's production of Wagner's fourth opera — a Glimmerglass first — turned out to be far less radical than last year's eccentric *Flying Dutchman* at the Bayreuth Festival, its tale of a wandering sea captain's redemption through a self-sacrificing woman's love emerging coherently within James Noone's convincingly nautical set (rather than in Bayreuth's perverse warehouse for portable fans.)

Conducted by John Keenan, the 48-piece orchestra sounded ample in this intimate house, accompanying a solid cast headed by bass-baritone Ryan McKinny in the title role (Melot in the Canadian Opera Company's recent *Tristan und Isolde*), soprano Melody Moore as Senta, bass Peter Volpe as Daland and tenor Jay Hunter Morris as Erik.

Zambello also directed a curious, ultimately unconvincing pairing of Pergolesi's *Stabat Mater* with David Lang's 2008 Pulitzer Prize-winning one act opera, *The Little Match Girl Passion*, both conducted by David Moody.

As its title suggests, Lang's opera sets up a secular parallel to the passion of Jesus Christ, through Hans Christian Anderson's classic tale, thereby providing a link with Pergolesi's 18th-century treatment of the passion story. Musically, however, the two works are chalk and cheese and the addition of a new piece by Lang, *When We Were Children*, may have served to introduce the festival's new children's chorus but it further confused the mix.

The final mainstage presentation, Lerner and Loewe's *Camelot*, represented the third exhibit of Zambello's new policy since becoming artistic director three years ago, of mounting a classic American musical to complement the season's three operas.

While the policy itself reduces the region's already modest exposure to opera (the season used to feature four), the idea of mounting these musicals with operatic resources undeniably benefits a work with a score as lush as that of *Camelot*.

Directed by Robert Longbottom and conducted by James Lowe, this handsome Glimmerglass production boasted fine, opera calibre voices in all three lead roles, King Arthur (bass-baritone David Pittsinger), Lancelot (baritone Nathan Gunn) and Guenevere (Winnipeg soprano Adriana Churchman.)

But I still miss that fourth opera.