THE GLOBE AND MAIL

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Hit and miss, but Glimmerglass is well worth the trek

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The prestigious Glimmerglass Festival in upstate New York is a mecca for fans who hunger for summer opera. It is certainly worth the schlep to the village of Cooperstown this season, because, in spite of some hit and miss productions, the 2013 festival is marked by excellent singing and conducting.
One of the mandates of artistic director Francesca Zambello is producing classic Broadway musicals without amplification. Her aim is to hark back to the good old days when great voices did not need microphones to be heard over the orchestra.

This season's classic musical is Lerner and Loewe's *Camelot* (1960), which is a fabulous showcase for the festival's lone Canadian singer – Winnipeg's Andriana Chuchman as Guenevere. Lyric sopranos are the most common opera fach, so a singer needs something extra to put her at the head of the pack. Chuchman is blessed with a delectable vibrato in her lovely voice that draws in the listener. Moreover, she is capable of great expression in her delivery, and a wonderful ability to make her notes stronger when she comes to the end of a breath, rather than allowing the sound to peter out. That she can act just gilds the lily.

Camelot is a fine production enhanced by director Robert Longbottom's clarity and economy. (Stratford and Shaw should have a look at this guy for their musicals.) Conductor James Lowe brings out the lushness in the score, while bass-baritone David Pittsinger shines as a poignant Arthur. The other big star, the usually excellent baritone

Nathan Gunn as Lancelot, lacks oomph in his singing.

Glimmerglass is celebrating the bicentenaries of Giuseppe Verdi and Richard Wagner with two early works. The most unusual is Verdi's *Un Giorno di Regno*, or *King for a Day* (1840), the only comedy by the great composer other than Falstaff, his last opera. Wagner is represented by *The Flying Dutchman* (1843).

In an inspired choice, the Verdi is sung in English, based on a clever new libretto by Kelly Rourke. The story is utterly silly, so by putting the text in English, one can follow the amusing antics more clearly. The opera is certainly worth staging because it is filled with glorious melodies that are the harbinger for the great Verdi operas that follow.

Kudos to German director Christian Räth, who has found ways to make the staging funny and witty without lapsing into excess. For example, one hilarious highlight has mezzo-soprano Ginger Costa-Jackson as the Marchesa singing her florid lament to her miniature poodle.

Among the fine cast, young tenor Patrick O'Halloran should be singled out for his enticing ease of high notes and his requisite Italian sob. Glimmerglass' new music director, Joseph Colaneri shows he is a strong Verdian with appropriate tempi, never letting the music flag. Court Watson's picture frame set and 1950s-era costumes are a hoot. Zambello's direction of *Dutchman* has a fabulous second act and a questionable, over-busy first one, the latter cluttered up by James Noone's complicated rope and scaffold set. When it is just the four main characters on a bare stage, the opera catches fire.

The superb singing and characterization are brilliantly executed by Ryan McKinny (Dutchman), Melody Moore (Senta), Jay Hunter Morris (Erik) and Peter Volpe (Daland). John Keenan's magnificent conducting tells the story through the restless music.

The pairing of Pergolesi's *Stabat Mater* (1736), with David Lang's *The Little Match Girl Passion* (2007) is ambitious, but falls short. The Pergolesi has been turned into a dance piece with utterly boring choreography and direction by Jessica Lang. Happily the singers (countertenor Anthony Roth Costanzo and soprano Nadine Sierra) and conductor (Speranza Scappucci) are wonderful, so it's a close-your-eyes-and-listen production.

As for David Lang's piece, nothing works, particularly the repetitive score that gives contemporary music a bum rap.