

STAGE / Wednesday, August 7, 2013 By James MacKillop

## Two for The Road



No theatrical enterprise is more labor-intensive than opera. The 104-page program for this summer's Glimmerglass Festival, in Cooperstown, includes 12 double-columned pages for performers and some staff. We expect that all that assembled person-power can really deliver the passion, as it does in Richard Wagner's *The Flying Dutchman*.

What is more surprising is that the assembled artistry can also be both intimate and gossamer-light. Take for example, Giuseppe Verdi's all-but-forgotten comic confection, *King for a Day*, sure to be the most talked-about production this season. Under Christian Rath's quicksilver direction, the breath-stopping visual legerdemain wins over audiences without even thinking of the music. Verdi's score surprises, as well, on what he borrows from the previous generation and how he foretells of things to come.

The premiere of *King for a Day* (*Un giorno di regno*) was a legendary flop in 1840 for two reasons. Comic operas by worthies like Gioacchino Rossini and Gaetano Donizetti were falling out of fashion, and the two leads, unhappy with their material, sabotaged their own performances. Verdi, only 27 and down on his luck (his wife and two children had just died), took on a commission with a complex but silly libretto by Felice Romani and was relieved to let the thing be forgotten. Its revival here owes much to new Glimmerglass music director Joseph Colaneri, who conducts with such conviction that he clearly wants skeptics to view the score as worthy of the master, not just a curiosity.

Enter script doctor and translator Kelley Rourke, who combed out the plot knots and turned all the words into racy contemporary English while retaining the projected titles. Except for Moliere, jokes rarely survive translation, and for all we know, she may be introducing some here not heard in the 1840 disaster. That can mean shorter vowels than are found in Italian, as in this sung threat: "Sign on the dotted line/ Or I'll gut you like a fish." The singer does not always have to sound the last word of a line. The benefit, of course, is that all the gags are fresh and there are no verbal duds as one often hears in evergreen musicals.



The “King” of the title is a hired impersonator who sometimes covers for the real king of Poland when he’s traveling or indisposed. He’s a handsome, mischievous dude named Belfiore (baritone Alex Lawrence). His daylong imposture takes place in the court of Baron Kelbar (bass Jason Hardy), where everyone but the local ruler has an Italian name. The Baron wants his beautiful daughter Giulietta (soprano Jacqueline Echols) to marry a moneybags with a bad pompadour, La Rocca (baritone Andrew Wilkowske). Instead she pines for impoverished Edoardo (tenor Patrick O’Halloran), in glasses and short pants, a cross between Clark Kent and silent comic Harold Lloyd. Equally

misguided, he wants his niece the Marchesa (mezzo Ginger Costa-Jackson) to couple with doddering Count Ivrea (tenor Joe Shadday).

The imposter king should rearrange this symmetry, except that the Marchesa is his ex-sweetie who threatens to blow up everything.

Musically, much of the score could be mistaken for Rossini or Donizetti, not a liability today. Despite the complaints of the original cast, the seven principals do get to display their powers, as they do. Among the younger members of the cast, tenor Patrick O’Halloran is especially fine as the denied suitor, but the audience favorite is Costa-Jackson, often heard at the higher end of the mezzo range. Topped-off in a 1960s-style blonde beehive, she’s completely dazzling in a first-act solo with a poodle in her hands. Even though the mutt has been trained to stop and hold on cue, she can’t be upstaged.

Court Watson’s post-modernist sets place actions on different steeply raked platforms and frame them, literally in large portrait frames with ornate gold borders. His costumes identify some characters in the chic present, while some others dress so out of date we that we know the Baron’s court is in the boonies. Choreographer Eric Sean Fogel keeps the chorus so busy running, dancing, jumping and tumbling he could also be cited as fight coordinator. King for a Day has performances Aug. 10, 17, 19 and 24.

Of the 25 or so classic Broadway musicals now being refitted as operas, Alan Jay Lerner and Frederick Loewe’s Camelot would not be at the top of the list because the male lead, Arthur, was written for a guy, Richard Burton, who couldn’t sing at all. An additional liability, one of the reasons it is revived less often these days, is the length, a fault even Lerner acknowledged.

The Glimmerglass production, directed by Robert Longbottom, still runs nearly three hours, but action moves so quickly it feels shorter. The first act is improved by the removal of Nimue, the temptress who used to sing a number to Merlyn. Putting splendid bass-baritone David Pittsinger in the role of Arthur also means that the king grows up much more quickly.

Lerner's book for Camelot, once assumed to be cheerleading for the John F. Kennedy administration, draws not on medieval Arthurian legends but rather T.H. White's epic but comic retelling of them. When we first see Arthur he's a youth named Wart, trembling in set designer Kevin Depinet's stylized metal tree. That tree, a reminder of Arthur's insecurity, remains at stage left during much of the action and is counterbalanced by a large, high-hanging crown, a prefiguration of the Round Table at stage right.

As Pittsinger's Arthur matures so quickly, the impishness of his early solo, "I Wonder What the King is Doing Tonight," comes off a bit heavier than usual. Arthur's one romantic solo, "How to Handle a Woman," and the heart-pounding title number reprise at the finale convince us Camelot comes off very well on the operatic stage.

Three other roles, however, give evidence of composer Frederick Loewe's early years in Viennese musical theater and give opportunities for operatic singers to display their strengths. Soprano Andriana Chuchman's portrayal of Guenevere delivers the kind of glory that draws culture pilgrims to Cooperstown. Thus her early number, "The Simple Joys of Maidenhood," not usually cited as one of the most memorable in the score, sets the pace. Similarly, she is stupendous in the ensemble number, "Then You May Take Me to the Fair" and delivers all the nuanced feeling in "I Loved You Once in Silence."

The other two male singers are at bottom caricatures, which never diminish their musical contributions. Baritone Nathan Gunn's Lancelot opens with the self-mocking but robust "C'est Moi," pushing his voice to limits as anything in grand opera, and he scores high with the most romantic number, "If Ever I Would Leave You," a declaration of adulterous intentions. Tenor Jack Noseworthy brings an expressive Broadway style to the villainous Mordred in the sulphurous "The Seven Deadly Virtues." Happily, his other celebration of evil, "Fie On Goodness," a comic showstopper cut in some productions, has been retained.

Music conductor James Lowe emphasizes the grandeur of Frederick Loewe's score.

Set designer Kevin Depinet and costumer Paul Tazewell borrow the muted colors of Victorian medievalist William Morris. Camelot continues its run Aug. 11, 13, 15, 17 and 23.

The Glimmerglass repertory season includes the aforementioned *The Flying Dutchman* by Richard Wagner, with performances on Aug. 10, 12, 16, 20 and 24.

Both Wagner and Verdi celebrate 200th birthdays this year. The fourth program is a double bill titled *Passions* (Aug. 9, 18, 22), teaming the *Stabat Mater* by 18th-century composer Giovanni Battista Pergolesi and contemporary composer David Lang's *The Little Match Girl*, after Hans Christian Andersen.

The Glimmerglass Festival at the Alice Busch Opera Theater is a few miles north of the town of Cooperstown on Route 80. It is about a 75-mile drive east from Syracuse on scenic Route 20. For ticket information, call (607) 547-2255.