

## Kelley Rourke produces surprisingly funny adaptation for Verdi's King for a Day at Glimmerglass

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Susan Galbraith

My introduction to this year's Glimmerglass Festival featured a moving kaleidoscope of "pop" bubbles projected on the theatre's curtain. The cheerful light show accompanied the overture, which, from its opening notes, raced like a cat-and-mouse chase, musically reminiscent of Rossini, and set the tone for a new, splendidly buoyant production of Giuseppe Verdi's *King for a Day*. Think Marx Brothers meets *Mad Men*.



Jason Hardy as Baron Kelbar and Alex Lawrence as Belfiore (Photo: Karli Cadel/The Glimmerglass Festival)

expert in creating surtitles for opera productions, even throws in a series of comic book graphics in one scene that flash on the screen above the stage with "Pow" and "Bam."

*King for a Day* was young Verdi's second full operatic work, an unlikely experiment in comic opera in a canon that would mostly bear his dramatically serious signature style. By all accounts, the original production in 1840 was deemed a dismal flop. It has rarely resurfaced.

Perhaps its low position in the composer's roster is one reason this resurrection is so successful. From its libretto to staging and setting, the approach is one of cheerful irreverence. Meanwhile, we in the audience, coming without much in the way of expectations, happily plunge into the production's silliness.

Librettist Kelley Rourke leads the way, so updating the text in this English version that it surprises and delights constantly. Rourke, an

Stay tuned to seeing more work from this talented librettist as she joins Artistic Director Francesca Zambello at the Washington National Opera in the coming season to fashion a new English version of *The Magic Flute*.

Rourke and director Christian R ath have excised much of the repetitive passages that dragged the original work down. They also seized the day, wresting the opera from a musty shelf, giving it an immediate accessibility by setting the work in the swinging sixties.

I'd argue this production of *King for a Day* stands as a cross-over piece, something engaging and not too operatically highbrow, in short a work to be appreciated by those even leery of opera. Another detail in this goal for cross-over production values is Zambello's demand for diction at Glimmerglass – to be as clear in opera as that delivered in musicals – and is evident here even in the sopranos' high notes. (In fact, there's rarely a need for the surtitles except that they are so deliciously invented, that I would glance up to savor a new-coined phrase before it slipped away from memory.)

As usual in opera, the plot is a bit complicated and improbable, so this production helps the set up with a clever surtitle wedding invitation as prologue. Let's just say there is a stand-in king who arrives at a baronial estate on the day when two unwarranted weddings have been scheduled, and therefore there is a lot of scheming and counter-scheming for the right boy to get the right girl.



Andrew Wilkowske as La Rocca, Jason Hardy as Baron Kelbar and Jacqueline Echols as Giulietta (Photo: Karli Cadel/The Glimmerglass Festival)

What this show is really about is celebrity, featuring the famous and their followers and surrounded by popping flash cameras of the paparazzi. Set and costume designer Court Watson gets it just right with his reoccurring red carpet treatment – literally – a red carpet getting rolled up and down with much comic business. The stage also boasts red velvet curtains and swag ropes as if we were all standing outside of Grauman's Chinese Theater in Hollywood. Lighting designer Robert Wierzel obliges by making the whole stage sparkle as with bling.

Watson also has created a series of frames, some gigantic and set mostly atilt, to create a curious depth of frames-within-frames stage pictures. These catch the core cast of characters self-consciously posing, while the chorus members scramble to line up, ogle and grope their idols. This theme seemed particularly resonant in its absurdity in the week that has given the world a new royal prince of England.



Ginger Costa-Jackson as Marchesa and ensemble member Julian Otis  
(Photo: Karli Cadel /The Glimmerglass Festival)

The production features several singers from the Young Artists Program, those who come to Glimmerglass in a kind of post-graduate opera program to gain on-stage experience. It is such a treat to hear these beautifully trained singers succeed so well in their roles. It is an even more uncommon pleasure to see these fearless and agile performers tackle and pull off the movement and staging challenges director R ath and choreographer Eric Sean Fogel have thrown at them.

Watson's series of cantilevered steeply-raked platforms are challenging to navigate. R ath and Fogel have pushed

the young artists into something that might be ranked as an extreme sport. Performers boxed, crawled, clambered,

kicked off their heels (literally,) got down and go-go danced, and then ran after each other in true silent-movie chase sequences up and down the ramps.

Maybe the best thing about this production is that from the first moment, you can forget having to know a darn thing about the difference between a *cavatina* and *cabaletta* or worry whether a soprano or tenor is going to produce a less than gorgeous sound. In this production, the singers went for soundmaking as fun and allowed the audience to just sit back and enjoy the show.

There is something John Cleese-y about the tall and limber-jointed Alex Lawrence who plays the rakish stand-in king Belfiore, who tries to escape detection from the Baron's household and particularly by the Marchesa whom he'd once thrown over. The hot Ginger Costa-Jackson, the Marchesa in question, who from her blonde bouffant do and luscious pink lips to her tight-fitting short silk skirt and her winkle-picker high heels looked like she'd stepped out of a classic sixties European film, was unstoppable on the Cannes-like runway. She seemed to be cloned from parts of Anna Magnani and Brigitte Bardot. And baby, she had the moxie to give the character of Joan in those early seasons of *Madmen* a run for her money. Lawrence and Costa-Jackson were a sensational theatrical duo.

My only caveat is, that with all due respect, if Miss Costa-Jackson wins any opera award equivalents to the Oscars, she should by all rights give a nod to her little poodle, aptly named "Rosina," who all but stole an early scene. The singer justified her every soprano trill and non-verbal as the inane cooings of a material girl to her toy pooch.

The off-and-on courtship of Lawrence and Costa-Jackson, climaxing by the nearly perilous leap from the top of a ramp by the drama-queen, was beautifully counterpointed by the true romance of young lovers Patrick O'Halloran and Jacqueline Echols. Halloran in particular being both superbly comic and ridiculous in his argyle vest and knee socks with gray flannel shorts and yet completely compelling and poignant in his unambiguous pursuit of his one-true love. His tenor voice rang full and assured, making this relatively new singer on the scene seem all the more terrific. Echols, as the daughter being promised in

marriage to the wrong man, plays at times a gawky girl then shifts into a leading-lady radiance. Her voice is as pure and pliable as her acting.

Jason Hardy and Andrew Wilkowske, as the nefarious and greedy social climbers, anchor the work with their musical intelligence and theatrical experience in the *comique buffo* characters. They complete the excellent core roles in the complicated plot. Hardy as Baron Kelbar, who wishes to marry off his daughter to advance his nepotistic ambitions, swings the whole story into action, while Wilkowske proves an inventive theatrical *tour de force*.

Joseph Colaneri unabashedly drives the Glimmerglass Orchestra at a galloping pace. Only occasionally, such as the quintet in Act I, does the orchestra overpower the romantic duet on top with the trio of male patter below, making it all get a little indistinct.

**Highly Recommended**

**King for a Day**

*Closes August 24, 2013*

Glimmerglass Festival 2013

7300 State Highway 80

Cooperstown, NY 13326

2 hours, 20 minutes with 1

intermission

Tickets: \$10 – \$117

Truthfully, I am often left unimpressed with broad physical comedy bordering on camp, but these performers delivered the goods with such confidence and physical abandon that I found myself weak from laughing. Their timing was superb. If you want to see opera blown wide open and freed from dusty conventions, get on up to Cooperstown, New York and take in the show in the beautiful lake surroundings. The show runs through August 24. You will feel you too are King (or Queen) for a day.

King for a Day. Composed by Giuseppe Verdi. Libretto by Felice Romani with an English adaptation by Kelley Rourke. Conducted by Joseph Colaneri. Directed by Christian R ath. Produced by Glimmerglass Festival. Reviewed by Susan Galbraith