

Review: Salt Marsh Opera pleases with performance of Verdi's 'Rigoletto'

By Milton Moore

Publication: theday.com

Published September 29, 2012 3:00PM Updated September 30, 2012 12:52AM

Westerly — Salt Marsh Opera doubled up on winning hands of recent seasons by bringing back baritone Ron Loyd and tenor Brian Cheney to dominate the stage Friday in a high-voltage performance of Verdi's "Rigoletto."

The production at the George Kent Performance Hall, to be repeated at 3 p.m. Sunday, is the 12-year-old company's most ambitious yet, with a visually sumptuous set and costumes and clever use of the hall's space limits.

But it was the vocal power and characterizations by Loyd, in the title role, and Cheney, as the Duke, coupled with the emotional turbulence and dramatic hammer blows of Verdi's great score, that carried the night. Music Director Simon Holt led the 25-piece orchestra through the musical rage, sorrow, pathos and horror to the gripping finale: Rigoletto cradling his mortally wounded daughter Gilda, stabbed during an emotionally and sonically roof-rattling thunderstorm, begging her not to die, as the winds of fate swirl.

This is the red meat of Italian opera, and it was served up steaming in Westerly.

Both male leads were returning after starry turns here in recent seasons, Cheney in 2008 as Edgardo in "Lucia di Lammermoor," and Loyd in 2010 as Dulcamara in "L'elisir D'amore."

Physically compelling in his characterization of the hunchback court jester Rigoletto, Loyd mined dramatic material at every turn, whether cowering, raging or pouring affection on Gilda, sung by soprano Sarah Callinan. His seething musing on his fate, to be mocked daily by those who stand straight and tall, "Pari siamo," came across as a Shakespearean soliloquy writ larger than life.

Rigoletto is one of opera's most complex characters, a man of fear and resentment, yet also nobility and love. These elements are revealed in his duets with Gilda (Verdi's baritone/soprano, father/daughter duets are among his finest). The complexity of the character was portrayed in all of its subtleties Friday in the long series of arias and duets when the distraught Rigoletto finally finds the missing Gilda, swept off her feet and into the Duke's bedchambers, despite all of Rigoletto's efforts to shelter her from court life and the womanizing Duke.

Here, soprano Callinan was at her best, expressive and full of pathos in "Tutte le feste al tempio," trying to explain away her shame as the desolate Loyd sat far from her, hunched over, clutching his knees and rocking like a forlorn child. His heart melts and he accepts her tears — "piangi" (much like the garden scene in "La Traviata") — in a heart-rending pairing of characters and voices.

The lithe and girlish Callinan was well-cast as Gilda, but in the live acoustic of this voice-friendly hall, she oversang a bit in the early scenes, especially in her big aria "Caro nome," when it seemed she was aiming for key cadences rather than singing to them, though she gave the aria a lovely, subtly shaded half-voice finish. In the hair-raising final act, as the musical and emotional storm exploded onstage, she was vocally dominating, spot-on and flashed the lightning atop the ensembles.

And how welcome is tenor Brian Cheney to this stage? We hear few tenors in these parts so confident and powerfully at ease in a high Verdian tessitura such as the Duke's. With an actor's stage presence and with a ringing tone unaffected at the top, Cheney seemed immune to challenges of technique to sing key arias with full interpretation and artistry, especially his soaring love vow to Gilda "E il sol dell'anima" and his heartfelt and nuanced "Parmi veder le lagrime." His ardent farewell scene with Gilda, "Addio, addio," the lovers clinging tight, was hot in every sense.

The 25-piece orchestra was arrayed along the right wall of the hall to open up a theater-in-the-round effect for action. Perhaps because of this, there were frequent breakdowns of ensemble between the singers and orchestra, especially in the big choruses. The delicate chorus "Zitti, zitti" was mercifully cut, and only in Act 3, when the spare, exposed voices in the orchestra wandered astray from Loyd's fervent pleading for Gilda with the courtiers, was Holt unable to right the ship promptly.

Director Nathaniel Merchant, who directed "L'elisir D'amore" here, used the hall's peculiar space expertly. The two-story set, rising high where the Chorus of Westerly is usually arrayed, was both detailed and darkly atmospheric, and Merchant spread courtiers and dramatic moments out into the wide aisle judiciously.

At times, an enraged Loyd would claw his way through the hall as the very embodiment of rage. Singing exits and entrances spread the action, none better than when bass Michael Reder, in the role of the assassin Sparafucile, walked down the center aisle and out of the hall while holding that famous low F as he sang "Sparafucile."

Rich in timbre and powerful in the darkly delicious role, Reder headed a fine cast of supporting principals. In the small, but crucial role of the Duke's condemned enemy Monterone, bass-baritone Michael Ventura's shattering curses were threatening indeed. As Sparafucile's seductive sister Maddalena, used by the assassin to lure male victims to their dooms, mezzo-soprano Maria Elena Armijo both looked the temptress and was able to project well in the ensembles (no mean feat) even while being groped on a table top by the Duke.

It all added up to a searing evening of opera theater. The vivid stage presences and vocal aplomb of Loyd and Cheney, the darkly ominous production and well-paced, mounting horror, and the musical thrills of the final act not only conveyed the full weight of this most dramatic of operas but was also another step forward for Salt Marsh Opera.