

# MOT's 'LaBoheme' splendid in any language

By PATRICIA BEACH SMITH

## Review

The difference between Michigan Opera Theatre's (MOT) English and Italian productions of Puccini's "La Boheme" is about 100 years.

Both the opening night and closing performances of the opera, presented at the Music Hall Center in Detroit, were splendid in their own ways. But the English production Sunday, the last evening, was the more contemporary and intellectual.

While the Italian cast had the advantage, perhaps, of more mature, thrilling voices, it was no match dramatically for the English production.

Language made the difference. The Italian provided the vehicle for 19th century mannerisms. The expedient method of acting — the highly uncontrolled emotionalism — pervaded the Italian version. All subtlety was lost in such acting. Only vocally could this version be called dramatic.

THE ENGLISH production, on the other hand, allowed the performers to work with the words, rather than around them. The biggest advantage to the English version was the intelligent, even poetic, translation.

It is thoroughly contemporary, properly shocking and cerebral. It expects more from the players.

It is said that all the drama necessary is in the music. Certainly this is true when it is sung perfectly according to the score. Because this is hardly ever the case, there must be some argument for contemporaryizing the moods.

By this time, most opera-goers know "La Boheme" backwards and forwards, it is performed so frequently. So now audiences look for a new twist. Because it is basically a silly story, making it more believable is the task.

MOT's English production was blessed with a cast capable of pulling off much more than a pedestrian piece of theater. And it lived up to the name of its sponsor, the Michigan Opera Theatre.

VOCALLY the Italian version was dazzling. Pamela Myers led the pack with her lustrous, agile voice. Her acting cannot be discounted, either, but her style was much more controlled — therefore much less vulnerable than her counterpart Karen Hunt, who sang the English performances.

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Miss Hunt has a fragile voice with a certain delicacy Ms. Myers lacks. The styles are entirely different. The maturity of Pamela Myers' voice gives her the vocal edge. Still, Ms. Hunt's interpretation rendered a beguiling, almost naive, performance.

Both women have to be judged on their own merits. It could be called a toss-up.

As a matter of personal taste, this reviewer prefers a more subtle approach to any role, except perhaps with Otello. So Rita Serbo's performance in the Italian production didn't win all the points possible.

While Serbo's voice is sometimes exhilarating, it is inconsistent. His counterpart in the English version was George Livings who is very consistent. At times, Livings was downright boring vocally, but his acting more than made up for vocal inefficiencies. Both men were superb in the first and third acts.

Some amazing contrasts were created in the secondary lead singers. In the Italian version, it was Andreas Poulimenos as Marcello. In the English, Stephen Dickson.

POULIMENOS is a thorough singer. He does not make mistakes and his rich voice never appears to tire. However, his acting is more studied than natural not necessarily a fault, just an observation of a style not so interesting as Dickson's.

Dickson is an adept actor. His subtle gestures and real emotion are hard to beat. He steals scenes easily with his arresting ability to hold the attention of an audience. His voice is somewhat smaller, less mature than Poulimenos' but somehow it is more facile.

Dickson's potential is enormous. For such a young singer to have so much style and intelligence is an unenviable asset. Where Dickson is exciting, Poulimenos is steady and comfortable — also admirable traits.

Again, personal taste rules.

Another stunning contrast was between the two Musettas. Vocally, Jan Albright, in the English version, and Wilemnia Fernandez, in the other, are worlds apart. Ms. Fernandez appears to be cutting some large teeth on such a cameo role as Musetta.

She is destined for heavier roles like Aida and Violetta, which she has sung. But she is less the coquette than Ms. Albright who is well suited to the role.

MS. ALBRIGHT was much more amusing than Ms. Fernandez in the role, possibly because the latter singer is not relaxed in such a kitchenish guise. Ms. Albright properly stole the show with her charm and wit.

As for the men, David Herendeen as Schuanaud was appealing but more tentative about what liberties he could take with the scenes in which he was involved.

Herendeen was dauntless in his hilarious, almost slapstick approach to the role.

In each production, Joseph McKee delivered his role of the sober Colline with thoughtfulness and sincerity. The language change did not appear to change his interpretation in the slightest, thankfully.

Directed by David Alden, all the performers appeared to have been given the best of direction. Alden is very good at directing traffic in difficult crowd scenes and even better in the quiet moments of this opera when singing almost takes a back seat to the theater.

Alden's second act direction was masterful. While it had a three-ring circus feel, one never lost track of the principles when they were important, despite all the clever antics of a Chaplinesque waiter, a voluptuous lady of the evening, bickering children and a colorful Pargipano.

The chorus, which had a leading role in this act, was out of sync completely on opening night, but by Sunday the ensemble was back to its former laudible mettle. What gave the production depth was good acting down to the last supernumery.

Throughout the opening night performance and during the first half of the last evening's presentation, the orchestra was playing much too loudly. Often it was difficult to hear the singers at all. In spite of the dynamics, the orchestra sounded better than every.

Overall, the sets were attractive but lacked a certain inventiveness. The third act scene was very disconcerting with its mass of hanging bare branches and depthless scenery and props.

The garret scene was very realistic, but it was the scene where the lighting failed enormously to enhance the drama. In the first act, when the candles go out, the difference in light was practically imperceptible. It would have been nice to borrow some of the gloom from "Il Trovatore" to light that scene.

In the fourth act, what should have been pallid was warm and glowy, hardly the right ambience for a death scene. It made every one a bit more rosy-cheeked than they ought to have been.

The MOT's intern program this year has provided the company with professionalism and depth rarely seen at Music Hall. But such talent will not stay for long in one place.

Hopefully some continuity can be maintained through the expert preparation afforded the company through its music director, Mark D. Flint, and his capable staff of Karen L. Prasser, assistant conductor, and Henry Venanzi, chorus Master and coach.

The MOT productions in two languages are a good idea beyond the inherent snob appeal. Through careful casting, both productions have offered audiences a chance to see very distinct interpretations, so the smart opera-goer should take advantage next year of this opportunity.

The last production of MOT's condensed season opens Monday, Oct. 22, at the Music Hall. "Jean of Arc" will star Metropolitan Opera diva Mignon Dunn in the title role. Her husband, Kurt Klippstatter, will conduct. Other performances all in English, will be presented in matinee Oct. 24 and the evenings of Oct. 26, 27 and 28.



Karen Hunt as Mimì and George Livings as Rodolfo appear in the Michigan Opera Theatre's production in English of Puccini's "La Boheme."

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