

'Orpheus' spoofs love, sex, marriage

By Mary Jane Doerr
Special writer

Outrageous, preposterous, awful, extravagant, sacrilegious, satirical, dreadful, zesty, naughtily, wicked, racy, stunning, erotic, burlesque, gaudy — a total romp, is the way the English press described the English National Opera's version of Offenbach's "Orpheus in the Underworld."

This sizzling production opened Michigan Opera Theatre's fall season at the Fisher Theater last weekend. A more probable name would be "Orpheus in his Underwear" or "Orpheus in the Undergrowth." Considering, though, this tasteless version of "Orpheus," the appropriate title for the show would be "Orpheus and the Undertaker."

There is little left of the original Offenbach operetta in this silly, farcical, spoof about love, sex and marriage in the Victorian era.

Since the 1858 softly satirical French operetta could hardly be considered naughty today because of the audacious Can-Can dance, the English National Opera spared the libretto. Gerald Scarfe's sets and costumes made it a smash hit in London last year.

The show stopped here in Detroit on its way to Houston and Scarfe came with it to promote his dazzling and shocking cartoon-like sets. Orpheus, William Livingston, Eurydice, Tracy Dahl, and Venus Susan Larson will go to Texas with him.

The show isn't opera — barely operetta. About the only thing musical is its major and minor sexual overtones and Orpheus's yellow and black underpants (fabric designed with a musical score print), quickly revealed when he rips off his Liberae suit.

In Greek mythology, Orpheus, a musician with magical powers, could charm the gods with his harp. He marries, but his wife is bitten by a poisonous snake in the field and dies. Orpheus' grief is heard by the gods on Mount Olympus who come to his rescue.

IN THIS SAUCY VERSION, Eurydice, Orpheus' wife, is actually playing around with Aristaeus, a beekeeper. Pluto, Master of Hades. She

thinks her husband's violin playing sounds like "a broken nail rubbing across a blackboard."

Orpheus would just as soon be rid of her and is elated when she writes a note saying she is off to Hell, freeing him to pursue his violin students.

Public Opinion, performed by Roderick Cook, has something to say about all of this, demanding that Orpheus go after his wife. Reluctantly, he goes to Heaven where Jupiter, Byron Webster, is being psychoanalyzed for his habit of ravishing women in his infamous animal disguises. In Act III, Jupiter changes on stage from the father of the gods to a fly in order to bug Eurydice who is in bed waiting for Pluto. (The five days the Fisher stage crew had to prepare this show was hardly enough to get the hang of it. They let the rope fall when they flew Jupiter).

When Pluto, Carroll Freeman, who speaks with a French accent, comes to Heaven to explain the disappearance of Orpheus' wife, the gods are easily enticed into a bash in Hell, Costa del Sin, for some good food.

Why does everyone think it is a joke to need surtitles for English productions? Snoo Wilson's hilarious libretto would have been wonderful in surtitles.

The star of the show is sex (in all forms except an innocent one). Dahl sings exceptionally well. Her voice doesn't have a chance to warm up until the third act, but her acting heats up quickly.

LIVINGSTON'S OPERATIC voice is hardly noticeable, but not for lack of ability. His suggestive gestures are a far more important in this production. Zale Kessler, as satomasochist John Styx, doesn't overact.

The most sparkling dancing is by tap dancer, Joel Blu as Mercury, in silver shorts and top. Larson's singing isn't as interesting as her red costume — what little there was of it.

Marja Lagos as Cupid and Karen Nickell as Diana are rousing.

Houston Grand Opera music director, John De Main, had the revamped MOT orchestra in good form keeping the action moving — not very difficult with this show.



British mezzo-soprano Jocelyn Wilkes as Juno and English actor Byron Webster as Jupiter are an integral part of the "Orpheus" happenings.

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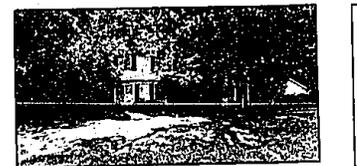
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