

Bocelli's appearance, MOT's 'Werther' create spectacle beyond stage

Michigan Opera Theatre presents "Werther," an opera starring Andrea Bocelli, Denyce Graves, Ying Huang and Christopher Schaldenbrand. Music by Jules Massenet. Conducted by Steven Mercurio. Directed by Mario Corradi.

Performances at 8 p.m. Saturday Nov. 6, and Friday, Nov. 12; 2 p.m. Nov. 14 at Detroit Opera House, 1526 Broadway, Detroit. Tickets \$55-\$250. Call (313) 237-SING, or TicketMaster (248) 645-6666.

BY FRANK PROVENZANO
STAFF WRITER

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Right up until he arrived on the Detroit Opera House stage sitting atop a white horse, the

anticipation surrounding Andrea Bocelli making his North American opera debut had stirred a grand spectacle, even by opera standards.

Nearly 50 critics from around the world showed up in downtown Detroit. Local media talking-heads put on tuxedos and conducted interviews in the opera house lobby. And the streets outside the opera house were filled with pedestrians walking in the brilliant light cast by the massive towers of the nearby under-construction Comerica Park.

Without a doubt, Bocelli's debut must be considered among the operatic events of the year, not just for the Michigan Opera Theatre, but in the international

opera world.

On an exceptionally warm night in late October, the opening of "Werther," starring the world-famous Italian tenor in the lead, had the cosmopolitan feel of a historic performance. Partly because of his wide international popularity and partly because of the obvious challenge for a blind singer to perform the difficult dramatic role, there was a palpable rooting for Bocelli to succeed. Swooning females could be heard and singer's frequent applause encouragement.

Of course, when it comes to critically dissecting MOT's "Werther" and Bocelli's performance it depends on how success is defined.

For a debut, Bocelli's performance was more hype than rewarding. Unfortunately, it soon became clear that Bocelli's softly modulated, fragile tenor was better captured in the confines of either an amplified stage or a recording studio.

At times, Bocelli's voice was overshadowed by Jules Massenet's music. And for a portrayal of an impulsive, love-at-all-cost romantic caught in a tragic tale of unattainable love, Bocelli was altogether too emotionally restrained to be believable.

While the pacing and endless dirges of "Werther" is at times tiresome, the performances of mezzo-soprano Denyce Graves and soprano Ying Huang provide

a stirring demonstration of the power and subtly of a trained voice and charismatic stage presence.

Like a bright jewel in the October night, the promise of "Werther" is reflected early in the third act as Graves and Huang share the spotlight. Graves vocal girth invokes the depth of her pain over desperately loving a man she can never marry. And Huang's vocal dexterity is a delightful reprieve from the syrupy melancholy.

Yet perhaps in the end, the knight that rode atop a white horse arrived for another purpose. After all, MOT's "Werther" just wasn't about opera. There was, no doubt, a higher agenda. In the end, there's little to crit-

icize when considering the sheer guts required for Bocelli to undertake the demanding role of Werther. And perhaps equally impressive is Bocelli's willingness to broaden his horizons and bring along an adoring public to the melodramatic spectacle known as opera.

Thus, in many ways, Bocelli's mere presence on the Detroit Opera House stage is in itself an unqualified success, and a reminder that MOT Managing Director David DiChiera is one of the most creative and persuasive forces in the opera world.

To think that more and more people are talking about opera and the future of downtown Detroit's theater district shouldn't be underestimated.

"The Heidi Chronicles" has message of honesty and hope

St. Dunstan's Theatre Guild of Cranbrook presents "The Heidi Chronicles," by Wendy Wasserstein, 8 p.m. Thursday-Saturday, Nov. 4-6, at 400 Lone Pine Road, between Cranbrook and Lakeshore, Bloomfield Hills. Shuttle service available from Christ Church parking lot across from the theater. Tickets \$12, seniors and students \$10. Call (248) 644-0627.

MARY JANE DOERF
SPECIAL WRITER

Amy Lynn Smith makes such an engaging lecturer as professor Heidi Holland talking about 16th century women artists in the opening of scene of St. Dunstan's Theatre Guild of Cranbrook's "The Heidi Chronicles," that her lecturing should garner more interest in the subject. This illustrated mini-course in art history is part of playwright Wendy Wasserstein's Pulitzer Prize winning theatrical view of Americanism since 1600.

The series of 13 scenes portray and satirize women's issues over the last 40 years, from Miss Crane's high school dances to radical feminist demonstrations. Though seemingly a one-issue play (women's rights), St. Dunstan's version is a touching, more universally conceived nostalgic look at baby boomers, flower children and the new generation from the grassroots up.

As the series of episodes in Heidi's life are presented, Heidi and her friends change their orientation from idealism to political radicalism to militant feminism, and end up fully committed to 80s materialism.

Through three decades of the story, Heidi moves from being a women's rights activist to earning a Ph.D. in art history and becoming a world wide expert on women artists in history. Society and major national events do not influence her even as she is affected by the changes in society.

In these character changes Smith excels. She plays a Heidi

who is compassionate, loyal, kind, non-vengeful, and a good listener. Heidi is a person who believes in her friends, even when they are so wrapped up in their own lives that they are insensitive to her needs. Smith reveals Heidi's hurt and pain.

Mark Nathanson directs this play about women's lib in a straightforward manner making the emphases more widespread than one of just women's issues. The characters are normal, everyday people portrayed in a subtly satirical manner that, while not uproariously hilarious, is quietly funny. Linda Parker Watson plays April, a stupid TV interviewer who reviews the country's social changes through the lives of the three prominent main characters in a 1982 television program.

Scott MacDonald is the gay pediatrician Peter Petrone and

Chris Steinmayer is the outrageous but arrogant magazine publisher Scoop Rosenbaum. The two of them completely overpower Heidi in the TV interview, not allowing her any opportunity to respond to any questions.

The brilliant Peter uses little jibes to make April's ignorance more apparent. During all of this Watson plays an overdone April with an interpretation that brings out the amusement in the entire satirical scene.

Watson also plays the lesbian Fran who has a chip on her shoulder. This adorable snippet of American life in the 1970s takes place in Ann Arbor. Fran is in a women's rap group made up of Heidi, her friend Susan (played by Marnie H. Diehm), Jill (played by Nicole Stacey) and Becky (played by Jill D. Rose).

Fran is waiting for newcomer

Heidi to admit she is offended by Fran's sexual orientation. When that doesn't happen, Fran verbally attacks Heidi.

Jill is an overly self-conscious American sweetheart "cup cake" type who wants to be in the forefront of this newest fad, women's liberation, but doesn't really want to alter her comfortable position in society. Becky is a high school student from a broken home living with a difficult boyfriend. The scene is wittily written and played out with a great deal of naturalness.

All of the 13 scenes in the show are oriented toward major national events - Nixon's presidency, John Lennon's death, the AIDS crisis, Reaganomics - all meshed together with a nostalgic revue of American pop music played during many of the scenes.

The men in this show are not

just minor afterthoughts but prominent main characters. MacDonald plays the most touching scene in the show between the homosexual Peter and Heidi. While there is no romantic relationship between them these two characters, (Smith and MacDonald) make

the friendship seemed plausible.

"The Heidi Chronicles" is not just another coming of age look at American fads and fancies. It is a simple but profound, satirical, compassionate, pensive, light-hearted play for those who like entertainment with a message of honesty and hope.

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