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OPERA REVIEW: PLACIDO DOMINGO'S OPERALIA WINNERS AND VERDI'S FALSTAFF

Sunday July 29, 2012

Clare Colvin

FOR ITS grand finale before summer recess, the Royal Opera played its trump card in a glorious evening of today's stars, hosted by the greatest of them all: Placido Domingo. Operalia, celebrating its 20th anniversary, was created in 1993 when Domingo started a "friendly competition" to highlight rising singers and ensure the future of opera.

Previous winners taking part in the evening were evidence of the project's success. Rolando Villazon, Joyce DiDonato, Nina Stemme and Joseph Calleja displayed not only the star quality of their voices but that extra something that brings love as well as admiration from the audience.

Villazon's eyebrows signalled his zany streak in opening aria Kleinzach, from The Tales of Hoffmann. Immaculate mezzo Joyce DiDonato gave us a gleaming Lady of the Lake from Rossini and a stormy Romeo in Bellini's I Capuleti e i Montecchi.

Nina Stemme retained her sublime creamy tone in Wagner's Die Walküre as Sieglinde to Domingo's Siegmund. Joseph Calleja took on the challenge of Nessun Dorma, former calling card of the Three Tenors.

Most exciting of all was hearing the new winners; Russian soprano Julia Novikova (2009), Romanian tenor Stefan Pop and Bulgarian Sonya Yoncheva (both 2010). Their voices already display star quality.

There were bravos for Pop's La donna è mobile, with its ringing high C. Novikova rose to the coloratura heights of Bellini's La Sonnambula and Yoncheva gave us a delicious Depuis le jour from Charpentier's rarely heard Louise.

Antonio Pappano, conducting the orchestra and chorus on stage, paid tribute to Domingo at the end for leaving a legacy to cherish as an ambassador for classical music. Hugs and kisses all round at the end of a memorable event.

The good news is that it will be transmitted on BBC4 this Christmas.

Summer has finally arrived to bless outdoor opera festivals but Opera Holland Park's first staging of Falstaff has a distinctly autumnal flavour. Director Annilese Miskimmon has updated Verdi's opera from Elizabethan Windsor to a convalescent home for soldiers wounded in the First World War. Nicky Shaw's wooden sets and brown or russet costumes reinforce the theme.

It makes for a darker opera in every sense, despite the orchestra's lively playing under conductor Peter Robinson. Unscathed by the war, Sir John Falstaff and his sidekicks Pistol and Bardolph have wangled a free billet in the home and commandeer a wheelchair by toppling its shell-shocked occupant on to the floor. The merry wives are led by a spiky, neurotic Alice Ford (Linda Richardson) whose glee at her success in gulling Falstaff turns to maidenly alarm as the lusty knight gets to grips in her chintzy bedroom.

The Church of England gets it in the neck as well, with jealous Ford (George von Bergen) as a control freak Chaplain, and Mistress Quickly disguised as an Anglican nun to act as a go-between in setting up Falstaff for humiliation.

You see the reason for the religious angle in the final scene when Falstaff is given a very unchristian roughing up by townspeople dressed as angels.

Icelandic baritone Olafur Sigurdsson tackles the comedy with vigour. His shaggy-haired, corpulent Falstaff is prone to pratfalls but can also turn an applause-earning cartwheel.

Linda Richardson and George von Bergen are well matched but why, when Verdi has provided such lyrical music, is Benjamin Hulett's Fenton so geeky? It leaves me wondering what Rhona McKail's sassy Nanetta sees in him.

PLACIDO DOMINGO'S OPERALIA WINNERS

Verdict: 5/5

Royal Opera House, London WC2 (One night only)

VERDI'S FALSTAFF

Verdict: 4/5

Opera Holland Park London W8 (Tickets: 0300 999 1000; £48.50-£65.50)



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