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A sparkling close

by Joseph Camilleri

Il Barbiere di Siviglia

Manoel Theatre

The BOV Opera Festival came to an end with Gioacchino Rossini's much loved "opera buffa" *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*. This staging was another joint artistic effort between the Manoel Theatre and Palermo's Teatro Massimo following the fruitful collaborations of the past years. The young singers who took part all belong to the Associazione I Solisti di Operalaboratorio. They were supported by our own National Orchestra which, a couple of rough patches apart, gave a committed reading of the score under the able baton of Michael Laus who kept the music moving at a suitably tight pace.



Cesare Sterbini's libretto, based on a comedy by Beaumarchais, takes us to 17th century Seville where Count Almaviva, aided and abetted by the barber-surgeon Figaro, attempts to woo and marry his love Rosina before her old and cantankerous tutor Dottor Bartolo pips him to the post.

The set, realised by Barbara Simoncelli on a concept of Nadia Campanotta, was deliberately kept simple and its naïve "hand-painted" look was meant to suggest, rather than minutely reproduce, the setting of the action. This was probably not to everybody's tastes but I thought it fitted with Elizabeth Smith's artistic direction. Indeed, while this production had several traditional aspects (such as Clementina Zanghi's costumes), it tended to eschew realism in favour of an emphasis on the opera's farcical elements, as the prancing musicians of the opening scene immediately made clear. Sometimes this was overdone (as in the case of the snoring Ambrogio in Act I, Scene II) but on the whole it worked. This was due in no small part to the enthusiasm of the participants who took on their respective roles with gusto.

Vocally, the soloists were generally good, though as one would expect, some singers impressed more than others. In the performance I attended (the second and final one) tenor Vincenzo Bonomo as Count Almaviva was initially disappointing: the timbre of his voice did not strike me as particularly beautiful and he sounded strained. As the evening progressed he seemed to gather confidence and his performance became much more enjoyable.

The title role of Figaro was interpreted by baritone Giovanni Bellavia, who burst on stage with a rousing rendition of the much-anticipated *Largo al Factotum*. His powerful voice ably managed the rapid fire passages, though dynamics could have been subtler. Rosina's Act I cavatina *Una voce poco fa* introduced us to the richly hued voice of Lorena Scarlata Rizzo, a voice which was also capable of great agility when required.

Of the supporting roles I liked the sonorous bass of Luca Tittoto best. He played the part of the machinating music teacher Don Basilio, depicted in this production as a cleric of dubious spiritual qualities. His aria *La Calunnia é un venticello* was one of the musical high points. Also very effective was Marco Filippo Romano as Bartolo. Indeed, some of the most entertaining scenes were those involving these two characters. Other minor roles were performed by Salvatore Grigolo (Fiorello), Giuseppe Pellingra (Ambrogio), Valentina Vitti (Berta), Salvatore Grigoli (Police official) and Gerlando Pullara (the Notary).

Rossini excels in ensemble scenes, and this particular opera boasts two particularly good ones: *Mi par d'esser con la testa* which ends Act I and the final *Di si felice innesto*. These had plenty of zest and they gathered momentum excitingly, but at climaxes the balance was rather orchestra-heavy.

At the end what carried the day was Rossini's evergreen music which, coupled with Sterbini's witty libretto, brought this year's BOV Opera Festival to a sparkling close.