

Lively and sparkling *Elisir*

MUCH as Verdi's Falstaff lacks memorable tunes, Donizetti's *L'ELISIR D'AMORE* abounds in charming motifs and graceful melodies that continue echoing in the ears of the audience long after the opera has come to an end.

The score of this opera is one of the most pleasing that Donizetti wrote in the comic vein: in the first act the duet for tenor and bass between the young villager and Dr Dulcamara is a little masterpiece of animation, the accompaniment of which is as interesting as the vocal parts; in the second act the chorus *Cantiamo, facciam brindisi*, the bacchanale for two voices *Io son ricco, e tu sei bella*, the quartet *Dell'elisir mirabile* the duet between Adina and Dulcamara *Quanto amore* the lovely and smoothly flowing romance of Nemorino's *Una furiva lagrima*; and finally the melodious passage in which Adina makes her peace with Nemorino are all memorable moments of the opera.

L'Elisir d'Amore, featuring 1 Solisti di Opera, abatoritorio of Palermo, was the second of two operas staged by the Manoel Theatre over the past fortnight for the Bank of Valletta Opera Festival, now in its eighth season. This was an invigorating evening, young and lively, in which all performed as an ensemble bringing out the vigour, and the comedy as well,

as the high quality of the music. The characters and the voices were what we expect of the opera buffa genre: tenor and soprano young lovers, deep-tenor buffo as the rival suitor and baritone cantante who pulled the strings of the plot.

The cast was strong. Caterina Ilardo was winning in the part of the flirtatious Adina, her voice the equal of her character. Hers is not a big voice and occasionally the orchestra proved too loud for her, especially when she used her *mezza voce*. (Otherwise the powerful voices of the singers vanquished the rather loud orchestral sound.)

Also, Donizetti reserves his most difficult writing for soprano for the end of the opera — her duet with the tenor which is nothing but a coloratura aria with some contribution from the tenor — and at this point her breathing, on Wednesday at least, was rather strained and her voice lost some of its power. Otherwise she displayed agility and an attractive tone.

Maltese tenor Charles Vincenti was vocally a powerful Nemorino. His voice had all the rich glow usually associated with this part. He was shy and withdrawn yet carried away by the lively singing and dancing of the villagers. His *Una furiva lagrima*, the show stopper of the opera, one of the most remarkable interpretations of Donizetti, deservedly brought the house

down. His stage presence, compared to that of his companions, looked rather rigid.

Marco Filippo Romani was eloquent as the quack Dulcamara, clear and characterful, remaining lovable throughout, while Giovanni Bellavia made a good comic Belcore, perhaps too much of a buffoon to make the exacting Adina, rich, young and beautiful to agree to marry him, even if only for pique. The chorus as well as Claudia Munda in the part of Giannetta was unfailingly musical, on the same high level of accomplishment as the production itself.

The production, directed by Elizabeth Smith, flowed at a lively pace; there was just one mannerism that I was not sure of — the lowering of lights at two moments that interrupted the pace of the action. Unlike the costumes, the sets did nothing for the production. Although the libretto does indicate a change of set, one attractive set could easily have worked for the whole production and would have even saved the need for Adina and Nemorino to have their long duet between the two scenes of Act I in front of the closed curtain.

Conductor Michael Laus drew some highly polished and brilliant

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playing of one of Donizetti's greatest scores from the National Orchestra. The instrumental playing, save for the piano continuo in Act two that sounded tinny, enhanced the spirited production. Donizetti was a serious composer of operas like *Lucia di Lammermoor*, but he also happened to be capable of some of the most sparkling music ever written — and that is how he was presented here.

Cecilia Xuereb



MARCO FILIPPO ROMANI (as Dulcamara, left) with Charles Vincenti as Nemorino in *L'Elisir d'Amore* at the Manoel Theatre's 50th Opera Festival