

Saratoga Springs

OPERA SARATOGA joyfully celebrated the opening of its 65th season at UNIVERSAL PRESERVATION HALL—an intimate space convenient to the resort city's downtown. But visual concerns challenged the conductors, directors and designers. Sound design issues for *My Fair Lady* (seen on June 20) and *L'elisir d'amore* (June 21) were resolved well. The duo pianists Adam Nielsen and Jesse Wong for the Lerner and Loewe musical achieved tighter ensemble than Nicolò Sbulz and his clearly capable band of 15 musicians did for the Donizetti. Both Mary Birnbaum (the company's general and artistic director, who directed *My Fair Lady*) and John Matsumoto Giampietro (the director of *Elisir*) spewed more ideas and utilized more blocking on the central performance platform than either piece could logically sustain; but high energy and high spirits prevailed in each show. Generally, the characters and their interactions emerged comprehensibly—though outing Nazrin Azlan Alymann's youthful Colonel Pickering via his campy phone manner with a Home Office school chum seemed a reach (even for Pride Month), and having Nemorino 'enlist' to *become* a movie star (Belcore's occupation in this production) who was instantly pulling down millions of dollars rang false in any of the multiple eras of film production this *Elisir* referenced. Another cavil: Oana Botez's clashing candy-coloured *My Fair Lady* outfits proved mystifying and unflattering—which was strange since her superb white-and-beige designs for *Elisir* made everyone look terrific.

Nevertheless, audiences for both shows seemed to enjoy the lively presentation style and the highly skilled performers. The cast for *My Fair Lady*—especially the dynamic, almost effusively detailed central pair, Christine Taylor Price (Eliza) and Bill Army (Higgins), who generated chemistry and gracefully met the vocal hurdles—made Lerner's 'words, words, words' admirably audible. It was gratifying to see the charming, seasoned Amy Burton and Keith Jameson not only amuse as Mrs Higgins and Doolittle but also take part in the vocal ensembles throughout, with clarity and line undiminished. The biggest ovation went to the clarion tenor Nathan Romportl following 'On the street where you live', *My Fair Lady*'s most operatic number. The mezzo Sadie Spivey nailed every nuance of Mrs Pearce's rather complex character. Without a full orchestra or Cecil Beaton's Hollywood gowns, this spirited performance affirmed what a well-constructed piece of theatre we were witnessing.

The same goes for *Elisir*. Giampietro's cinema-drenched concept contained some striking visuals, thanks partly to Anshuman Bhatia's lighting, and won many laughs. The leads showed much talent, but the Nemorino, WooYoung Yoon (an endearingly goofy actor), though gifted with a penetrating tenor and a fine interpolated high C, has room for growth in artistry and technique: too often he underestimated the music's call for legato binding and dynamic variety. Dasol Lee (Dulcamara) unveiled an engaging stage and vocal presence needing only more consistently smooth high notes. The star quality of the Adina and Belcore (Shelén Hughes Camacho and Joseph Parrish) evinced palpable chemistry: they're a couple

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offstage as well. Among New York's leading young practitioners of recital repertory, they relished and communicated the text in firmly drawn lines. Not at all a 'tweety bird' coloratura, the Bolivian soprano is instead a lyric with agility, pleasingly evoking the tradition of Bori and Scotto in her role. Parrish's rock-solid, wide-ranging bass-baritone ranked with the best I've heard in this part; plus, he channelled the confident panache to fulfil Giampietro's suave



Opera Saratoga's 'L'elisir d'amore', with Joseph Parrish as Belcore and Shelén Hughes Camacho as Adina

movie star (with an entourage to prove it) concept. Giannetta's Act 2 scenes allowed us to hear Fantine Douilly's fine solo singing, but from the staged overture's start she was a piquant comic force: imagine the heroine of the film *Amélie* working a side hustle as a circus magician's barker. Three of Laurie Rogers's choristers (Sarah Rachel Bacani, Maya McGuire and Kayla Sconiers) joined Giannetta's pursuit of the rich legatee Nemorino, permitting us to enjoy each of their high-quality timbres.

DAVID SHENGOLD

Vienna, VA

WOLF TRAP OPERA opened its season with a wickedly funny production of *La Cenerentola* (seen on June 21) directed by Joel Ivany, with sets and costumes by Jacob A. Climer, lighting design by Jason Hand, and hair and make-up by Anne Nesmith.

The box set was very nicely designed for the intimate stage at THE BARNES. Don Magnifico's run-down house, with flaking paint, peeling wallpaper and cracking pictures, was able to easily transition into the palace's handsome red ballroom. The main room in his home had three double doors, and stairs at the rear with a hatch leading, presumably, to the kitchen.

The action was updated to an era somewhere between the 1930s and the 1950s and was rather cinematic. (Billy Wilder films readily came to mind.) Costumes were key: the palace footmen wore proper dark livery, with brass-buttoned tailcoats, and the coachmen red livery with black hats. The other men wore white tie or military uniforms. The stepsisters' outfits were a hilarious riot of colour and exaggerated vulgarity, tight in all the wrong places. And the hairstyles for the ball, especially Clorinda's, were laugh-aloud comical.

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