



Music

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“Cosi fan tutte”: Mozart opera is set in Naples — Florida — at RIPAC

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Diana McVey, left, as Fiordiligi and Julianna Tauschinger-Dempsey as Despina discuss romantic opportunities in a modern staging of Mozart’s “Cosi fan tutte” at RICPA.

64 Degrees Photography / Lisa Bruno

It was last August when soprano Kathy Jennings got a call from an Opera Providence board member she knew from her days as the company’s artistic director about a decade ago. Would she be interested in getting involved again in the company?

Jennings, a big fan of the Mozart operas, said she would be willing to stage Opera Providence’s upcoming “Cosi fan tutte,” and set out with her husband, conductor Paul Phillips, to put a fresh spin on this stinging tale of two soldiers who set out to test the faithfulness of their fickle fiancées. Jennings and Phillips have come up with a new take on the opera, placing it in a luxury hotel in modern-day Naples, Fla., not the 18th-century Naples, Italy of the original.

“We just tried to make it fresh,” said Jennings.

The production, sung in a new English adaptation by Phillips, takes place Friday, June 3, through Sunday, June 5, at the Rhode Island Center for the Performing Arts, the former Park Cinema, at 848 Park Ave., Cranston.

This is the first staged production from Opera Providence in a while. The company, which got off to a promising start in the late 1990s with Jennings at the helm, went into the financial hole staging lavish productions of grand opera. More recently, they have been doing what amounts to dinner concerts, featuring a meal and performances from some of the top singers from the area.

But Jennings, who has appeared in numerous productions of “Cosi,” was happy to report the other day that the organization is now debt-free, and on the rebound.

“This is the story of a company that has continued to hobble along, but now has come back,” said Jennings.

Jennings said that her husband and baritone Rene de la Garza have been putting together the dinner concert programs for the company for the past year. There has been a concert a month featuring the singers who will be starring in this weekend’s “Cosi,” the grand finale for the year.

Phillips, head of the Brown University orchestra, rewrote much of the recitative, or spoken dialogue in the opera to reflect the contemporary setting in a hotel. Despina, who sings about the tribulations of being a maid in the original, is now the crafty concierge who helps hotel owner Don Alfonso, the “idea guy,” as Jennings put it, carry out his plan to show the soldiers that their women can’t be trusted.

He tells Ferrando and Guglielmo, who are just back from a tour in Afghanistan, to pretend they have been called back to active duty, then return to their fiancées in disguises and set about seducing them, thus proving the two sisters will sleep with just about anybody.

Rather than have the soldiers come back as the goofy Albanians of the original — hardly turn-ons — Jennings has the men return looking more like playboys in designer suits.

Of all Mozart’s operas, said Jennings, “Cosi” lends itself best to an updating. After all, it is mostly about Don Alfonso’s wager that he can prove the women unfaithful, and that is a lesson that is always relevant.

She said the show is funny, but in an edgy sort of way. “We see the funniness of it,” she said, “but then say, ‘Why are we laughing at these people?’ ”

At the end, said Jennings, things are left unresolved.

Phillips is impressed with the theater, which has undergone extensive renovations. He said it is just the mid-size hall the state has been looking for, even though the orchestra pit is a bit small. But then, Phillips didn’t have the budget to hire a big orchestra anyway. So he scrimped on the strings, and went with the winds Mozart calls for, hiring 23 players altogether.

“If it were ‘Don Giovanni,’ I’d be more worried,” said Phillips. “But not with ‘Cosi.’ ”

Looking on the bright side, said Phillips, the singers won’t have to struggle to be heard.

As for the cast, Jennings said it features mostly area singers, but people with a lot of experience. Rhode Islander Diana McVey, as Fiordiligi, is on her way to a “great career,” said Jennings, adding that McVey will miss the first rehearsal because she is appearing at Carnegie Hall.

Soprano Juliana Tauschinger-Dempsey, the production’s Despina, had been living in Europe, but moved here with her husband, a grad student at RISD. Baritone Paul Soper, as Don Alfonso, is well known in the Boston area. Tenor Michael Paul Krubitzer as Ferrando “makes it all sound so easy,” said Jennings.

Robb Dimmick’s minimalist sets feature a pool-side beach area, hotel lobby and bar. “The sets aren’t sumptuous,” said Jennings, “but they show what we want to show.”

“Cosi fan tutte” runs Friday, June 3, through Sunday, June 5, at the Rhode Island Center for the Performing Arts, 848 Park Ave., Cranston. Tickets are \$35-\$65, with discounts for seniors. Call (401) 467-7275, or visit www.operaprovidence.org.

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