



The cast of Tacoma Opera's production of "La Périchole" at the Rialto Theater. PETER SERKO Courtesy

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Review: Despite great singing, Tacoma Opera turns Offenbach into a high school musical

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It isn't pleasant to write critically of a show that had only half an audience to begin with. But neither is it pleasant for folks to pay up to \$85 to see opera reduced to high school humor and B-grade staging.

Tacoma Opera's Rialto production of Offenbach's "La Périchole" — a Peruvian street singer whose luck takes a bizarre turn when the Viceroy falls in lust with her — has some luscious vocals. But that's not enough to save a show (or a company) from embarrassing amateurishness.

The problems started with the words themselves. Deciding that Tacoma couldn't handle an opera in French, director Christopher Nardine chose a translation by Phillip Krause that was occasionally funny but mostly just clunky ("Come one, come all and take the plunge/I think my head's become a sponge"). You'd think it would be hard to mess up music by the guy who composed that famous can-can, but here the stilted lines flattened all the champagne bubbles, rather like Gilbert and Sullivan translated into heavy German. Numerous mistakes in the supertitles made things worse.

Then there was the humor. One or two contemporary jokes seem hip; three hours of them is just irritating, and by the time we got to the prisoner binge-watching Netflix on Amazon, the audience laughter had gotten thin and embarrassed.

Nor did the acting help. Marcus Shelton brought a reedy tenor and high-school ego to La Périchole's hapless lover Piquillo, with an angry, stand-up-comic bitterness that wasn't very funny. Igor Vieira, with velvety baritone and brilliant upper register, was slightly better as the bumbling Viceroy, though the endless womanizing got old quickly. The chorus resorted to the usual stereotypes — sassy bartenders, snooty court women — and the Viceroy's sidekicks just threw in some outrageous Hispanic accents and called it a day.

Add in one stone-wall-and-pillars set that never varied and choreography that mostly consisted of pacing in circles, and you have a production that even a community theater wouldn't touch.

The only salvation for "La Périchole" was the singing. As La Périchole herself, Caitlin McKechney was marvelous, a lush mezzo with low notes like pools of water and just the right mix of long-suffering and flirty. Unlike Shelton, her drunk scene was a delightful blend of tipsy slurs, physical comedy and fine singing, and her "Why are men so stupid?" aria brought down the house.

Other vocal highlights were the seguidilla duo of Don Miguel (Jonathan Hill) and Don Pedro (Michael Heitman), and their soaring trio with Shelton in "Women are Wonderful." The chorus sang strongly, and though there were some ragged tempo changes under conductor Bernard Kwiram, the orchestra brought out some nice chamber-music moments, especially the woodwinds.

A special shout-out to Michael Drumheller, who gave such a plummy-voiced snobbiness to the Marquis de Tarapote and such a quirky craziness to the imprisoned Marquis de Sambucco that my seat companion didn't realize they were the same singer.

Fine singing, however, isn't enough for good opera. For years, Tacoma Opera has relied on old chestnuts with boring production. Now tacky humor is added to the mix. It's time for a change.

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