

Jay Harvey Upstage



Saturday, March 24, 2018

Indianapolis Opera's 'South Pacific': Balancing warily on the border between American musical theater and the operatic heritage

Enough U.S. opera companies have incorporated outstanding representatives of American musical theater in recent years to make the **Indianapolis Opera's** productions ending the last two seasons no anomaly. Still, a company with such a small annual number of shows risks the appearance of diluting its brand.

The emphasis on name



Her fellow nurses help Nellie Forbush proclaim her resolve to "wash that man right out of my hair."

recognition in part must explain the 2016-17 schedule's concluding with "Man of La Mancha," and the current one with "South Pacific," which opened Friday night at Butler University's Schrott Center for the Arts. To end the just announced 2018-19 lineup we'll have "Camelot"; preceding shows will be a presentation of **Indiana University Opera Theater's** "Hansel and Gretel" and, as the only locally generated production from the opera repertoire, "La Boheme."

In hiring a professional orchestra and not miking the singers, as director A. Scott Parry proudly points out in his program notes, Indianapolis Opera has at least brought the Rodgers and Hammerstein favorite within the operatic orbit. But it must still be asserted that even the greatest examples of the Broadway musical rest on an artistic foundation of a far different order from opera.



Tropical romance: Emile woos Nellie.

For instance, in the musical you can't get past the tendency of ensemble numbers and even solos to end with an applause-soliciting wide-open pose. And there is a tradition of larding the group songs with choreography, sometimes rudimentary for the sake of underlining the pizzazz the song has already established, as in "There Is Nothing Like a Dame" and "I'm Gonna Wash That Man Right Out of My Hair." In opera, even the convention of applauding arias rarely makes singers' tableau-like acknowledgment of the ovation acceptable. In musical comedy, it's a given.

This production dutifully makes the most of the showstopping moments. And from the

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overture on, the musical-comedy genre always holds up its big tunes — "South Pacific" is rich in them — in a way that opera is less inclined to, despite the popularity of "highlights" recordings. More crucially, the ability of opera singers to create and sustain characterizations in spoken dialogue is tested by a show like "South Pacific." Many operas, of course, require stem-to-stern singing.

IO had various degrees of success with these mixed responsibilities. Brian Banion displayed sterling vocal qualities as a singer Friday night. When speaking he usually maintained the French accent Emile De Becque has to have. But I felt the characterization lacked an aura of mystery essential to the role. De Becque is not only a South Pacific plantation owner jealous of his freedom from a shadowy past in his native France. He also has a distinct guardedness about his private life as a result. He opens up to Nellie Forbush because he's in love with her, but he's still an exotic enigma to her in a nearly romance-stifling way. Banion made him too much a stiff-necked libertarian, swayed by love but in essence too simply proud.

Banion also was responsible for overstating some of the role's vocal glory, though perhaps in the prescribed Broadway manner. He planted his feet and flung his arms wide as "This Nearly Was Mine" rose to a climax. There's no question of De Becque's intense feeling of loss at this point, but the song ought to sustain a reflective glow right through to the end rather than court the audience's favor.

Banion's voice was fully equal to the role's demands, and for a bass-baritone he had a surprising degree of security in the upper range, positioning his voice well each time he chose the high-note ending of "never let her go," the last line of "Some Enchanted Evening."



Group hug: Bloody Mary exults in the romance between Liat and Lt. Cable.

The other leading role, that of Ensign Nellie Forbush, was taken by Christina Overton with a welcome measure of ingenue charm. But her vocal projection was inconsistent: "Cock-Eyed Optimist" went in and out of intelligibility, as did "I'm in Love With a Wonderful Guy." The character may be a self-described hick, but in

performance Nellie needs to command a considerable supply of Broadway "belting."

Consistency was the watchword of Lyndsay Moy's portrayal of Bloody Mary. Her spoken dialogue was clear and so was her singing. She projected the character's hustle and boisterous self-regard, right down to Bloody Mary's signature cackle. In "Bali Ha'i," the character's respect for her Tonkinese culture came through superbly in both voice and gesture.

Major supporting roles included Grant Knox as Marine Lieutenant Cable, with an exemplary rendition of his romantic solo "Younger Than Springtime." That number follows an amazingly brief love-at-first-sight scene with Bloody Mary's daughter Liat (Gretchen Adams) — a challenge to make dramatically convincing. He put a fair measure of remorseful sarcasm into "You've Got to Be Carefully Taught," the second-act song that highlights the show's attack on racial prejudice. To embody Cable's spy mission on the island and its fateful launching in the second act needed a more steely characterization, however.

Bradley Kieper got only a limited chance to display a fairly

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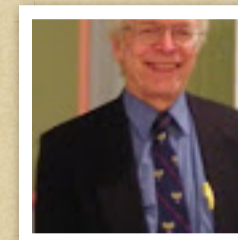
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 Jay Harvey

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mighty tenor (a bit of "Bali H'ai"), but was otherwise the comic schemer Luther Billis to the nth degree. He was the more than adequate focal point of "There Is Nothing Like a



Billis and his buddies lament the absence of somebody "to put on a clean white shirt for."

Dame," seconded by a small but effective chorus of sailors, and he helped Overton bring off Nellie's raucous Thanksgiving-show number "Honey Bun" with his burlesque impersonation.

Keith Chambers conducts the production. On Friday, his support of the singers was well-illustrated by the deftness of the accompaniment to "Some Enchanted Evening." The small but polished orchestra created just the right atmosphere to evoke the charm of Bali Ha'i (the island as well as the song). Choruses of nurses and sailors were vivid and well-coordinated.

With three sell-out crowds this weekend, "South Pacific" has already filled the IO goal of getting butts in the seat (to use a favorite marketing term usually brought up in private conversation). But the show is loaded with the demands of its genre, which were fulfilled only in part on opening night. And the larger question remains: How much is putting on Broadway musicals the proper business of an opera company?

[Photos by Denis Ryan Kelly Jr.]

Posted by [Jay Harvey](#) at 9:35 AM



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