

Review: Not All Così(s) Are The Same

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Così Fan Tutte

Singapore Lyric Opera

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Esplanade Theatre

Betting on a woman's loyalty, challenges Don Alfonso, is like trying to "catch the wind in a net". Unconvinced, two gentlemen of leisure – Ferrando and Guglielmo – decide to accept the wager and test their fiancés, Dorabella and Fiordiligi.

How does an opera with an untenable plot bordering on misogyny survive well into the 21st century? SLO's latest offering definitely provided some good reasons.

Tom Hawkes' strong directorial hand gave the thin plot its much needed nuance. There was a good balance between the comical flourishes and realistic moments. This made the show entertaining despite it being three hours long. His interpretation, which defies a straightforward reading of the plot, compels one to wonder whether it would be happily ever after for the characters after the curtain has fallen. Così part deux anyone?

Of course, a director's creativity would be in vain if the performers fail to translate his vision into performance. I am glad that the translation was crystal clear.

At first glance, Rachelle Gerodias (Fiordiligi) and Du Qin (Dorabella) appear to be an unlikely pair of sisters. However, they play off each other really well as the conflicted Fiordiligi and the playful Dorabella. Gerodias must be praised for her strong vocals and subtle shifts in portrayal between resolutely faithful and grudgingly giving in. While Du Qin has the vocals to match, her exaggerated facial expressions – while great for the comical scenes – sometimes spilled into other scenes.

The other duo, Raffaele d'Ascanio (Ferrando) and Park Byeong-in (Guglielmo) did not pale in comparison. In fact, they provided most of the comedy with their slapstick routines enhanced by strong sense of physicality. d'Ascanio and Park must be commended for their effort in differentiating the two characters – the slightly reserved Ferrando and outgoing Guglielmo respectively. It was unfortunate that d'Ascanio was sometimes overshadowed by Park. However, d'Ascanio proved that he can command the stage in Ferrando's aria as he declares he will punish his fiancé.

The performances by Ee-Ping (Despina) and David Hibbard (Don Alfonso) must not be overlooked for they anchor the show and drive the plot forward. Ee-Ping brought a zest of energy to the stage as the disgruntled and greedy maid, Despina. She also possessed a keen sense of comic timing as her portrayals of the doctor and lawyer were absolutely

hilarious. Hibbard lent a sense of gravitas to the jaded and cynical Don Alfonso. His stage presence was strongly felt as my attention was often drawn to him even when he was looming in the background and watching the events unfold. Both performers proved the old adage that there is no such thing as a small role.

Another aspect that makes this *Così* stand out would be the striking visuals. Christopher Chia's set design reminds one of Raffles Hotel which lends a certain old world charm to the production. It suitably localises the setting nearer to our shores without being trite.

Moe Kasim's costumes beautifully complemented the set. The wide array of designs – from the Jazz Age to more ethnic touches – is a thoughtful presentation of the various influences that converged in region during the early 1900s.

While lots of praises have been heaped thus far in this review, the production is not without its minor flaws. There was an asymmetry in the surtitles with almost every line projected in the minor scenes but only two lines were shown during the arias. This eroded the emotional and literary nuances of the arias. Additionally, I wonder if the music – while wonderful for those sitting in the stalls – was clear enough for those in the gods.

The moral – “common sense shows the way” – may be a chauvinistic snipe at women being irrational but the thoughtfulness exhibited in this production makes it an enjoyable one.

Clearly not all *Così*(s) are the same.