

Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

2 Theatre Reviews From Cooperstown's Glimmerglass Festival

David Sheward · Wednesday, August 6th, 2014

Cooperstown, New York, is not only home of the Baseball Hall of Fame, but also to [Glimmerglass](#) – a professional non-profit summer opera company dedicated to producing new productions each season. Their annual Glimmerglass Festival is in full swing, and David Sheward recently took in two of this year's productions. He offers these observations:

[divider]REVIEW #1: Ariadne in Naxos[/divider]



Rachele Gilmore as Zerbinetta and Carlton Ford as Harlequin in *Ariadne in Naxos*. Photo: Karli Cadel/The Glimmerglass Festival.

Setting Richard Strauss's delightful dual-personality opera *Ariadne in Naxos* in 2014 doesn't sound like it would work, but the Glimmerglass Festival's sparkling modern take staged by artistic director Francesca Zambello somehow does. The original takes place in the 18th century home of the richest man in Vienna where an opera

composer and his diva are forced to share the stage with a troupe of low-comedy dancers. The two factions clash during a prologue and in the second act, high art and popular entertainment blend as the composer's piece is combined with the comic group's improvisations, led by the enchanting Zerbinetta.

With the aide of set designer Troy Hourie and costume designer Erik Teague, Zambello has transported the proceedings to a barn on an estate in upstate New York, somewhere in the vicinity of the real festival's location, Cooperstown. There's even a live goat and chicken to enhance the rural atmosphere. The composer, a trouser role written for a soprano voice, is played as an actual woman which leads to a lesbian connection between the musician and the intoxicating Zerbinetta. The "modern" portions of the libretto (the prologue and the dancers' lines) are sung in English (the witty adaptation is by Kelly Rourke) while the opera-within-in-an-opera is sung in the original German. Just as the diverse elements of Strauss's conceit complement each other, the contemporary setting accentuates the theme of grand music integrated with burlesque guffaws without distracting from it. Zambello skillfully puts across both the ridiculous and the sublime.

In the first category, the comedians, led by Rachele Gilmore's raucously divine Zerbinetta, provide plenty of diversion. Gilmore lends sparkle and panache to Zerbinetta's extended aria, which celebrates the character's *joie de vivre*. Wielding a pair of black ostrich fans like a Follies Bergere headliner, Gilmore is a dazzling charmer. Carlton Ford offers sturdy and sexy support as her chief sidekick Harlequin. Representing the sublime, Christine Goerke displays a masterful, rich dramatic soprano in her Ariadne moments of despair and yearning and is ticklishly amusing as the temperamental diva in the prologue. She definitely has a future playing Wagner's large-voiced heroines.

Corey Bix admirably fills the tenor role opposite Ariadne and Catherine Martin expertly limns the composer's neurotic fussiness and her infatuation with Zerbinetta. There are also valuable contributions from Adam Cioffari as a savvy agent, Wynn Harmon as the officious manager of the estate, John Kapusta as a snippy choreographer, and Jeni Houser, Beth Lytwynec, and Jacqueline

Echols as a trio of nymphs.

All opera directors should take a look at this production to learn how to successfully transpose classic works to modern settings.

Now – Aug. 23. Glimmerglass Festival at the Alice Busch Opera Theatre, 7300 State Highway 80, Cooperstown, NY. Repertory schedule. Running time: 2 hours and 50 mins. including one intermission. \$10-\$144. 607-547-2255 or www.glimmerglass.org.

[divider]REVIEW #2: Carousel[/divider]

Carousel was Rodgers and Hammerstein's follow-up to *Oklahoma!*, their first big hit as a team, and many regard the sophomore effort as the legendary duo's finest work. Rodgers's gorgeous melodies and Hammerstein's intricate yet folksy lyrics combine to tell of the tragic marriage of Billy Bigelow, a bullying but attractive carnie, and Julie Jordan, a simple but strong-willed mill worker. The sentiment of unconditional love even if your husband is an abusive lout may be politically incorrect today, but the power of redemption as expressed by Billy's transformation as a spirit and the sheer beauty of the evergreen score places the show in the pantheon of Broadway classics. The Glimmerglass Festival, in Cooperstown, New York, which began presenting musicals along with its usual fare of operas a few seasons back, delivers a technically proficient production of the 1945 work, but Charles Newell's direction is lacking in the necessary passion.



Ryan McKinny as Billy Bigelow in *Carousel*. Photo: Karli Cadel/The Glimmerglass Festival.

The musical component of the evening is richly fulfilled by conductor Doug Peck and the vocal performances of the company. Handsome Ryan McKinny who made for a smolderingly sexy Flying Dutchman at Glimmerglass last season, is a solid Billy with a smoky, dark baritone. His performance of the iconic soliloquy is a towering achievement of control and nuance. Andrea Carroll's Julie has the right sweet soprano without being syrupy. Their duet of the memorable "If I Loved You" is enchanting to hear, but there is no chemical reaction between the two leads. So when Billy kills himself after a thwarted robbery attempt, there is no emotional wallop. Almost immediately afterwards, Julie's practical and compassionate cousin Nettie sings the always-uplifting "You'll Never Walk Alone" to inspire the new widow to keep on "caring about what happens." While Deborah Nansteel lends a musician-like purity to the standard, she doesn't build to a moving climax. The song just finishes rather than soaring to a tear-inducing ending.

Newell adds to the lack of drama by double casting Rebecca Finnegan as Mrs. Mullins, Billy's hard-edged employer on the carousel and the Heavenly Friend who guides Billy to the spirit world. While Finnegan is marvelous in both roles, creating totally separate characters, one appears right after the other and costume designer Jessica Jahn has dressed them similarly, causing some confusion.

The strongest presence is provided by Carolina M. Villaraos as Louise, Julie and Billy's unhappy daughter. Performing Daniel Pelzig's choreography (which appears strongly influenced by Agnes de Mille's original steps), she conveys the teenager's longing for love and guidance. In a moving duet with Andrew Harper as a heartless roustabout much like her father, she intensely expresses the frustrations of adolescence through movement. You can tell this Louise wants something, but she can't name it yet.

Sharin Apostolou and Joe Shadday provide laughs as the secondary couple, the giddy Carrie Pipperidge and her beau, the righteous fisherman Enoch Snow while Ben Edquist is a dark yet funny Jigger, Billy's no-good sailor colleague, and Wynn Harmon brings a wry, dry wit to the Starkeeper.

This *Carousel* is a satisfying night for your ears, but the heart wants more.

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David's reviews of these productions are also appearing on ArtsinNY.com and on TheaterLife.com.

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