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Opera and Kind of Opera: Guillaume Tell, Falsettos

David Sheward · Wednesday, November 9th, 2016

Two current operas (or one opera and a sort of opera) provide New York audiences with contrasting musicals experiences. Technically *Falsettos* isn't really an opera, even though it is sung-through with only a line or two of spoken dialogue. But it does evoke high emotions for the modern age despite it's being close to 25 years old. The Metropolitan Opera's production of Rossini's *Guillaume Tell*, almost three centuries old, offers more traditional musical thrills and at over four hours it's quite the challenge for the non-buff, but its rousing third act is well worth the wait.



The company of *Falsettos*

Joan Marcus

The new production of *Falsettos* for Lincoln Center Theatre isn't that much different from the original 1992 Broadway production. Both are directed by James Lapine who collaborated on the non-spoken book with composer-lyricist William Finn. The show is actually a pairing of two one-acts—*March of the Falsettos* and *Falsettoland*—both presented Off-Broadway in 1981 and 1990, respectively. They follow the chaotic domestic relations of Marvin, a gay man who bursts out of the closet, leaves his wife Trina and son Jason to move in with the younger party boy Whizzer. Trina later marries Marvin's psychiatrist Mendel and the makeshift extended family, which also includes Marvin's lesbian friends Dr. Charlotte and Cordelia, faces a crushing blow when Whizzer contracts AIDS. Set decades before gay marriage, this chamber musical chronicles the painful journey of Marvin from frivolous boyhood to a messy maturity. All the male characters deal with maturity issues, hence the falsettos reference in the title(s).

Once again Lapine moves the nearly three-hour show at a quick pace, skillfully balancing its lighter and darker elements and Finn's rich, complex score comes across brilliantly. The new cast, bouncing around David Rockwell's building-block set, gives as deep performances as the originals. At first, Christian Borle is stingly entitled as the self-centered, neurotic mess Marvin. But as his character grows in compassion, the limning becomes more shaded. Likewise, Andrew Rannells' Whizzer branches from a shallow boy to a tragic figure. I didn't think anyone could top Barbara Walsh's marvelously manic Trina from the original, but Stephanie J. Block equals her dizzying confusion and desperate neediness, particularly in the hilarious "I'm Breaking Down," Trina's comic lament at losing her husband to another man. Brandon Uranowitz makes Mendel lovably nebbishy. Anthony Rosenthal delivers an impressive Broadway debut as the precocious adolescent Jason and Tracie Thoms and Besty Wolfe are an adorable couple as the lesbians next door.

This new *Falsettos* doesn't provide any stunning new insights into the material, but it does offer a heartfelt portrait of an unconventional family struggling to find a way to live and a glimpse at a

time when such unions were beyond the pale of mainstream America (and, with our new radically conservative president, may be again).



Gerald Finley in *Guillaume Tell*

Credit: Marty Sohl/Metropolitan Opera

Another Lincoln Center production also focuses on a family in crisis. *Guillaume Tell*, Rossini's last opera, receives its first Metropolitan production in over 80 years. It probably best known for its overture which was employed as the theme for the *Lone Ranger* radio and TV series. In recent weeks, the production made off stage headlines when an audience member sprinkled the ashes of his late opera-loving mentor in the orchestra pit during intermission, causing a police investigation and the cancellation of the performance. The powerful work deserves notoriety on its own rather than for these associations. Pierre Audi's bizarre production places the 14th century story of the archer forced to shot an apple off his son's head in an abstract dreamscape (George Tsypin's minimalist, weird sets feature upside-down cows and boulders.) In addition to the set, there are some kooky, distracting staging concepts. One of the strangest is having the decadent court of the tyrant Gessler got up by costume designer Andrea Schmidt-Futterer in black leather and top hats and forcing the downtrodden townspeople to do the can-can.

But all this eccentricity is forgotten in the climactic third act which culminates in that famous feat of archery. Gerald Finley is a manly, heroic Tell matched by the rumbling bass of John Relyea. John Osborn and Marina Rebeka deliver gorgeous duets and solos as the prerequisite star-crossed lovers. Opera or almost-opera., Lincoln Center delivers prime examples of both.

Falsettos: Oct. 27—Jan. 17. Lincoln Center Theater at the Walter Kerr Theatre, 219 W. 48th St., NYC. Tue, Thu, 7 pm; Wed, Fri, Sat, 8; Wed, Sat, 2 pm; Sun, 3 pm. Running time: two hours and 45 mins. including intermission. \$79—\$149. (800) 653-8000. www.ticketmaster.com.

Guillaume Tell: Oct. 18—Nov. 12. Metropolitan Opera at Lincoln Center, 66th St. and Broadway, NYC. Repertory schedule. Running time: four hours and 40 minutes including two intermissions. \$27—\$460. (212) 362-6000 or www.metopera.org.

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