

Preview**Oberlin Opera's *Fledermaus*:
characters and challenges**

by Mike Telin



Reality TV step aside! Beginning on Wednesday, March 13 and continuing from Friday through Sunday, Oberlin Opera Theater presents four performances of Johann Strauss's *Die Fledermaus* (The Bat) in Oberlin College's Hall Auditorium. Raphael Jiménez conducts the Oberlin Orchestra in his Oberlin Opera Theater debut.

Strauss's classical comedy with libretto by Carl Haffner and Richard Genée is filled with infidelity, mixed romantic messages, bored-to-tears tears royalty, and manipulation. And who doesn't like a Strauss waltz? "I've done *Fledermaus* so many times and it's kind of nice to have an opera that is rooted in music that people absolutely love," says Oberlin Opera Theater director Jonathon Field. "The interesting thing is, the waltz used to be considered decadent, so a challenge has been to try to figure out how to put the sexy back into the waltz and still keep it kind of period."

Field explains that when the waltz first came into being in the late 1700's it was a radical departure to have people dancing face to face. Prior to that a lot of dance was side by side, and minuets were danced with the partner almost at arms length. But the waltz — face to face and up close— that was something. "I always thought of the waltz as my grandmother's dance, but I was in Vienna a couple of years ago doing some work and I was talking to people about it and they told me all about the history and I really was quite flabbergasted. It completely changed my impression."

Another historical fact Field points out is that Champagne was a relatively new drink, "It was probably about ten years old, so it was a new invention, so to try to create a sense of immediacy that the drink is brand new and how people would have reacted to it presents another challenge."

We spoke with three of the cast members by telephone and asked them about their characters and the challenges each present to the performer as well as their takes on Strauss' classic comic opera.

Rob McGinness performs the role of Gabriel von Eisenstein. Mr. McGinness is a fourth year student.

Mike Telin: Are you having a good time playing von Eisenstein?

Rob McGinness: Eisenstein has some very nasty sides to him. He's very male-centric and he comes from the time period when guys could have whatever they want. I see him as someone who's built himself up, he's made the most of his own wealth. Because of this he has an enormous amount of self confidence. He also has a way with women that is, well not very pleasant. Of course there is a certain amount of pleasantness in getting to play a character like that.

But he is interesting and I do feel that he has some worth. He has gotten into his position [in society] through his own work. But, now that he has made it the confidence has kind of gone to his head.

MT: In the end he does get his comeuppance. At least in a small way.

RMcG: It's good that he does get his comeuppance in the end but I don't think it's anywhere near enough. I'm trying to make him be somewhat repentant in the end, because he's not a totally unpleasant person. It's funny because I was Jules in William Bolcom's *A Wedding*, and they are similar characters.

MT: Both are philanderers, but this certainly isn't a personality trait of yours.

RMcG: [Laughing] Not really.

MT: So why did you want to play Eisenstein?

RMcG: I was interested in the role because of where it fits in the voice. Right now mine is kind of in a weird place — is it a tenor or is it a baritone? So getting a chance to work on a role that is in the upper range is something that I wanted [to do] and I'm very glad that I did. I was also excited [about *Fledermaus*] because it has a lot of dialogue which we don't often get to do in opera.

MT: Are Eisenstein and Rosalinde still in love?

RMcG: I think so but I think he's bored. He has kind of settled into this way of life that is comfortable but not interesting or exciting. So by going to the party he's looking to fill a hole [in his life]. Luckily it's Rosalinde who fills that hole and he's able to see what he has been overlooking or forgotten about her.

MT: Are there any challenges to playing the role?

RMcG: For me to get into a character everything needs to make logical sense. If one little bit doesn't fall into the picture you've created, then you have something that you can't justify and will stick out in the character.

MT: Do you find comedy easy, as say compared to "serious opera?"

RMcG: The only reason that I find comedy easier is because I have done a lot of it. I find that you have to release the bonds that you have on your own personality and immerse yourself in the character.

Meryl Dominguez performs the role of Rosalinde. Ms. Dominguez is a third year double degree student, voice and dance.

Mike Telin: Thanks for talking and I'll ask you a question I asked Rob: are Eisenstein and Rosalinde still in love?

Meryl Dominguez: Yes, I think so. But, I feel like she's bored. She's been married to Eisenstein [for a long time]. She's led this strange and exotic life but she's fallen into a rut. So going to the party is her chance to A, get out of the house and do something extraordinary and B, because she catches her husband it puts their relationship on a more honest level which I really like. So yes, they are still very much in love but they have fallen into a rut and that happens in life.

MT: What are the challenges to performing the role?

MD: Rosalinde is a classic character archetype. There's no emotional progression in the score so a lot is left up to the person who is playing the role. Also, I'm 20, and singing Rosalinde at any age is hard. So I'm trying to keep [things light]. Not light vocally but light in the sense that I'm not pushing anything. The vocal part is really high in some places and really low in others. There's no easy coasting. So the technical aspect has been a challenge, but the role is so much fun that it's totally worth it.

MT: What do you like about the opera?

MD: I love the music and I love finding a way to make all the dance forms come to life and work with the character. You can say what you want about there being so many waltzes, but there is so much interesting fun that can be had that I don't mind.

We're all having a fun time and I'm excited to show off this gem of a comedy. Everybody I have talked to in the community about *Fledermaus* is like, Oh I saw it here and I saw it there. So this is another great opportunity to see a really classic party. And everybody loves a good party!.

MT: When did you know you wanted to be an opera singer?

MD: Growing up I wanted to do musical theatre. I'm from New York and we went to shows whenever we could. I always loved singing in choirs, but one day my voice teacher pulled out a song in Italian. I was like, I don't want to sing an Italian song, but she convinced me and I grew to love it. And it turns out, that was what my voice wanted to do. That's a wonderful thing about singing is that your body tells you where to go.

MT: What led you to study both voice and dance?

MD: I originally wanted to be a chemistry major, but I realized that I needed to do something physical and dancing was something I've always loved. So now I have an excuse to go into a studio a few hours everyday.

Nicole Levesque performs the role of Prince Orlofsky. Ms. Levesque is a fourth year double degree student, voice and Comparative literature.

Mike Telin: So you're performing the role of Orlofsky.

NL: [laughing] that's *Prince* Orlofsky please!

MT: Have you ever played a prince?

NL: I have played a Baron but never a prince.

MT: So this is not your first trouser role?

NL: No I seem to be going in the direction of trouser roles recently but I'm enjoying it and it's a lot of fun. The character is so completely foreign to our modern sensibilities. There's a line in the opera that says "if it's boring, throw money at it." And that really is Orlofsky's motto. And playing a character who is so foreign and so desperate for entertainment is very interesting.

MT: We know that Falke is a manipulator, but do you think Orlofsky is as well?

NL: While Falke is the chief manipulator, the prince is too smart for his own good. I'm sure he understands the plot as Dr. Falke has laid it out, and he is in enough of a position of power to be manipulating the events around it. Although I don't think he has to because [the guests] are already so humorous. But he does take pleasure in others being manipulated. He is a very interesting character.

MT: What are the difficulties of playing a trouser role?

NL: The main difficulty is posture and this is something universal to all trouser roles. You need to shed the posture that you have as a 22-year old woman and replace it with [that of] a man. For example a wider stance and a lower center of gravity. On top of that, with Orlofsky you need to have a deeper voice and a very thick accent, which has been challenging but a lot of fun.

MT: Did you do any research for the role?

NL: Yes, a lot of looking at pictures to see what a typical posture might be. What the clothing might have been and how that might restrict movement. One of the props is a cigarette holder, so I had to figure out how to hold it properly as a man not a woman.

And of course a LOT of accent work. We were supplied with incredible packets that had vowel modifications. I grew up taking ballet so I have had a lot of experience with Russian accents, so I largely drew my accent from former ballet teachers.

MT: What do you like about the opera?

NL: It's incredibly cheeky and it's hard not to dance to the music. Everyone involved, the cast, the chorus, the orchestra is excited about the music. There are a lot of things built into the production that should be very entertaining for the audience.

MT: Comparative literature, that sounds quite complementary to a voice degree.

NL: It actually is. It gives one an intellectual take on opera libretti so it is a very complementary area of study.

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