

Review

Opera Circle's *Rigoletto* at the Ohio Theater (June 15)

by J.D. Goddard



Before performing at a major theater in downtown Cleveland last Saturday for the first time in its 17-year history, Opera Circle logged an impressive record of 47 opera performances in churches and other venues throughout Northeast Ohio. On June 15, Opera Circle brought to the Ohio Theater stage in PlayhouseSquare an adventuresome production of one of the most venerated operas of all time, Giuseppe Verdi's *Rigoletto*. In the works for over two years and previously performed on a smaller scale in 2007, Opera Circle's *Rigoletto* bravely broke away

from the company's past operational and financial constraints.

The production's frugal yet effective sets and upstage projections, somewhat restrained lighting and straightforward staging allowed its strong cast of singers to keenly concentrate on the dramatic flow of this most tragic of stories, free from the distraction of flamboyant and opulent sets. Facial expressions and carefully managed stage movement carried this production from beginning to end, along with strong vocal realizations.

Tenor Isaac Hurtado brought a healthy, well-rounded voice to his role as the conniving, roguish Duke of Mantua. His pitch was excellent and his voice carried clearly into the house.

Baritone Marco Stella completely inhabited his role as Rigoletto, the Duke's hunchbacked court jester, masterfully using his vocal capabilities from top to bottom while maintaining a continuous sense of tragedy and pathos. His midrange, which rang with brilliance and resonance, was especially impressive.

As Rigoletto's daughter, Gilda, soprano Dorota Sobieska (Opera Circle's executive director) sang brilliantly as she deftly underlined the moments of sadness that commingled with shock, horror and anger. Her dramatic involvement and maturity of style thoroughly defined this beloved, gentle character.





Nathan Baer, a wonderful bass with an extraordinary range, played Sparafucile, the hired assassin. His notes lay low and he was occasionally covered by the orchestra but his demeanor was strikingly appropriate for a difficult role that is not easily projected.

Contralto Christina Carr was wonderful as always and portrayed Maddalena, Sparafucile's sister, with aplomb. She carried off her scenes with Sparafucile convincingly and with great

ease of movement while showcasing a magnificent contralto voice.

Baritone Jason Budd as Count Monterone was on stage only briefly, but made the most of this tragic role with resonant vocal projection and a properly stylized characterization. The curse he delivered in Act I was powerful and profoundly frightening.

As Giovanna, Gilda's governess and companion, mezzo-soprano Kirsten Hart was the surprise of the evening. Though her part was miniscule, she stole the show and her brilliant and resonant singing left a lasting impression.



Rounding out this cast of fine talented singers was baritone James Binion as Marullo, tenor Andrzej Stec as Borsa, bass Ray Liddle as Count Ceprano, mezzo-soprano Nicole Wong as Countess Ceprano, mezzo-soprano Carey Wentzel as the Page and bass Shaun McGrath as Court Usher. The chorus was equally strong and deserves accolades for an outstanding performance.

Conductor Andrea Raffanini paid close attention to the interpretive needs of the singers. The orchestra was well balanced and their level of professionalism added the crowning touch to this Verdi masterpiece.

May Opera Circle continue to grow and prosper with its ever more appealing operatic endeavors.

Photos by Eddy Wong courtesy of Opera Circle.

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