

Review: Ohio Light Opera's *Die Fledermaus* (June 26)

by Nicholas Jones



On a beautiful summer day last week, we drove to Wooster to spend the afternoon in Shangri-La – or, more specifically, to watch Ohio Light Opera's opening performance of Johann Strauss, Jr.'s comic masterpiece, *Die Fledermaus* ("The Bat").

In this blissful concatenation of dance and melody, a marital comedy is played out in a fantasy world of masquerade. A chambermaid becomes an actress for the evening; a transvestite Russian prince staves off boredom by throwing a lavish ball; a prison is transformed into a party; a squabbling bourgeois couple seems to learn how to fall in love again.

These are all issues that, in other hands than Strauss's, might have threatened the mood of unselfconscious happiness. But here, infidelity, betrayal, and revenge become simply occasions for yet another in an unending stream of lively songs. No Sondheim here to send in the clowns.

In a post-Freudian world, the principal relationships in the plot would have been fraught with tension – two old friends, one responsible for the public humiliation of the other; two former lovers linked by repressed desire and self-interest; a husband and wife each dangerously playing the sexual field. But of course this is a Vienna before civilization discovered its discontents.

Might a production of *Fledermaus* on this, the hundredth anniversary of the 1914 assassination in Sarajevo, acknowledge the imminent death of the Austrian empire and the Great War that bade goodbye to all that?

Not this time, and, for the most part, appropriately so. The Ohio Light Opera's production of *Fledermaus* turned on the figurative bubble machine. Director Ted Christopher's staging was largely farcical rather than dramatic; moments of conflict touched on darkness only fleetingly, and swiftly became occasions for laughter or dance.

Strauss's comic spirit was triumphantly embodied in Daniel Neer's Eisenstein. Neer, returning for his sixth season at OLO, is an accomplished comic actor and singer, whose infectious charm gives sparkle to every scene in which he appears.

Playing Eisenstein's wife Rosalinda was Tara Sperry, whose soprano voice was powerful and expressive, especially in the upper registers. Neer and Sperry were particularly good in the scene when he (transparently disguised as a French marquis) attempts to flirt with her while she (posing as a Hungarian countess) sets up her plot to expose his wandering eye. Unfortunately, it was hard to understand the words in her songs, even from the sixth row; the haunting Czardas she sings in the ballroom scene might well have been sung in Hungarian, for all I could tell.

Andrew Maugham played Rosalinda's former lover, the tenor Alfredo, with comic gusto, bursting unreservedly and expertly into snippets of grand opera at moments of high passion.

Long-time OLO veteran Boyd Mackus (Doctor Falke, "The Bat") was not in the best of voice Thursday, and was not much aided by having to sing his lovely second-act melody ("Brüderlein und Schwesterlein") from extreme upstage, with very uneven amplification. Overall, the revenge of *The Bat* was accomplished without very much lasting damage to anyone. The characters and the audience were carefully protected from harm by liberal inoculations of kisses, champagne, and, above all, music.

Die Fledermaus continues (with the principal roles double-cast) for six more performances at OLO on July 2, 8, 17, 24, 30, and August 7, in repertoire with six other shows.

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