

## Ohio Light Opera: Bernstein's *Candide* (July 11)

by Timothy Robson □



Ohio Light Opera's production of Leonard Bernstein's *Candide* is in the midst of a repertory run through early August in the Friedlander Theatre at the College of Wooster. It is a splendid affair in every regard, and I can recommend it without reservation. The principal roles are double-cast — I saw it with the July 11

ensemble.

Bernstein's operetta, based on Voltaire's 1759 novel *Candide*, has a troubled history. Its 1956 Broadway premiere was a notorious disaster, running for only 73 performances, despite a starry cast that included the young Barbara Cook as Cunegonde, operatic tenor Robert Rounseville in the title role, and stage direction by Tyrone Guthrie. Since then, there have been numerous revisions and versions by later directors. For this production, Ohio Light Opera used a 1999 version prepared by British director John Caird for the Royal National Theatre.



Although the musical numbers are mostly the same as in earlier versions, Caird drastically rewrote the book to more closely follow Voltaire's sexually satirical novel. Despite Ohio Light Opera's strong performance, *Candide* is still a long slog, clocking in at three hours with one intermission. Bernstein's inventive music is a combination of pastiche, musical comedy, and serious opera. With the exception of the final chorus, the story and music of the second half become increasingly cynical and are not as exciting as the first act. The huge cast requires accomplished singer/actors as well as a large chorus.



Voltaire himself introduces the characters, assuming the role of Dr. Pangloss (Daniel Near), advisor to the young, naïve Candide (Benjamin Krumreig). Pangloss also narrates the story: a series of disasters that befall Candide, his beloved Cunegonde (Chelsea Miller), her vain brother Maximilian (Stephen Walley), and the chambermaid Paquette (Caitlin Ruddy).



Traveling around the globe in search of “the best of all possible worlds,” the characters miraculously survive and escape each disaster (the Spanish Inquisition, the great Lisbon earthquake, and many more). Along the way they accumulate wealth and lose it, Cunegonde debases herself as a courtesan in order to obtain jewels and fame, Pangloss acquires a sexually transmitted disease, and they find piles of gold in the legendary El Dorado.

They also pick up more hangers-on, including the Old Woman who has only one buttock (Alexa Devlin) and the trusty servant Cacambo (Jonathan Heller, in a mostly speaking role). Finally, Candide and Cunegonde reconcile and decide to settle for a simpler life as they sing “Make Our Garden Grow,” the inspirational chorus at the end of the show.



Daniel Near was a wily, knowing Dr. Pangloss, and Krumreig’s boyish Candide fell right into his mentor’s traps. Oddly enough, Candide is not given a big solo, but he is the catalyst for the rest of the action. Coloratura soprano Chelsea Miller was outstanding as Cunegonde — she sailed through the immense difficulties of her big aria, “Glitter and

Be Gay.” Bernstein never passed up an opportunity for a high note, and Miller also had the comic skill to make fun of the character’s various downfalls.

Alexa Devlin was hilarious as the Old Woman, especially in her tango, “I Am Easily Assimilated.” It was one of the highlights of this production. The principals and chorus often filled the stage, which left little room for real dancing, so choreographer Spencer Reese devised intricate unison hand movements that can only be described as “voguing.” It was a brilliant solution. The performances of the smaller roles were all excellent.



The difficult orchestral music in *Candide* is vital to its success, and conductor Steven Byess led the ensemble in an outstanding performance. The chorus was well-prepared and had a unified sound. Although stage director Steven Daigle never let things linger, the length of the show and the story's intricacies continue to work against it.



Set designer Kiah Kayser came up with an elegant solution to the daunting problem of a story that wanders the globe: a central hexagonal platform and four stone arches that moved into many configurations. A backdrop had projected skies depicting the various times of day. The handsome costumes by Charlene Gross looked lavish and were appropriate to each scene.

A disheveled Cunegonde at the end, with tall wig askew, was a magical touch, a symbol of the uneasy reconciliation between *Candide* and the world, which is anything but perfect.

*Photos by Matt Dilyard.*

*Published on ClevelandClassical.com July 16, 2018.*

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