

Cleveland Opera Theater moves to Playhouse Square with *La Bohème*

by Daniel Hathaway



Puccini's *La Bohème* was produced 598 times worldwide during the 2017-2018 season, making it the fourth most-performed title in the repertoire (trailing *La traviata*, *Carmen*, and *The Magic Flute*). It's also the show that Cleveland Opera Theater chose for its move from venues like the Masonic Auditorium and the Maltz Performing Arts Center to the Ohio Theater, a more traditionally-outfitted house. On Friday, September 13, Scott Skiba's clever production surrounded a fine cast with memorable scenic design by Matthew D. McCarren and projections by Brittany Merenda that brought a Parisian garret, the Café Momus, and a toll gate outside the city vividly to life in Playhouse Square.



Singing was high-quality throughout the opera. The clear-voiced soprano Eleni Calenos was a sympathetic Mimi opposite the robust tenor Mackenzie Whitney as Rodolfo, who relaxed in his high register as he went along. Angela Mortellaro turned up the heat of her personal charm and vocal warmth as Musetta and enjoyed a closely matched vocal

partner in baritone Young-Kwang Yoo as Marcello. And they all looked good in period costumery designed by Glenn Avery Breed and lighted by Steve Shack.

Scott Skiba stages groups and crowds masterfully, and he concocted humorous interchanges between Rodolfo, Marcello, and their fellow Bohemians (John Tibbets as Schaunard, and James Eder as Colline). The second-act Christmas Eve scene outside Café Momus was a riot of organized chaos, enhanced by the belting voices of an excellent children's chorus (prepared by Jennifer Call) and made even a bit more outrageous by the ladies of Cleveland Burlesque.



Jason Budd was hilarious in his dual role of Benoit the landlord and Alcindoro the beau, in both cases soundly humiliated by the Bohemians. Shaun McGrath, Jonathan

Stuckey, and Matthew Mueller filled out the cast as Parpignol the toy vendor, the sergeant, and the customs officer.



Down below — in a real orchestra pit for a change — conductor Domenico Boyagian drew expressive playing from his 35-member ensemble, and kept a tight rein on the proceedings onstage while giving soloists plenty of room to emote. Offstage choruses were admirably synchronized by assistant conductor Dean Buck.

Beautiful production that this was, a few problems remain with the plot. What happened to sour the relationships of Mimi and Rodolfo and of Musetta and Marcello between Christmas Eve and

February? That played itself out during intermission when we weren't looking. And it seems odd for the main characters to put off splitting up until springtime, when they think that sunshine and flowers might ease the pain.

But hey, this is *La Bohème*, whose music enchants, where Mimi's Bohemian friends suddenly become selfless and hock earrings and winter coats to buy her medicine, and where Mimi's deathbed scene always brings tears to the eyes. Never mind the fat lady — this opera's not over until the consumptive soprano sings.



Photos courtesy of Cleveland Opera Theater.

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