

Oberlin Opera: *Candide* (Mar. 12)

by Daniel Hathaway



Oberlin Opera’s wonderful mid-March production of *Candide* combined several layers of brilliance.

First, the source: the anonymous 1759 novella *Candide, or the Optimist*. Later owned up to by the French Enlightenment philosopher François-Marie Arouet — better known by his *nom de plume*, Voltaire — it was a deliciously wicked send-up of the absurd

teachings of optimist philosophers like Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz, who taught that everything was for the best “in this best of all possible worlds.”

Then in 1956 came the first staged version of *Candide* as a comic opera with a witty libretto by Lillian Hellman and a high-spirited score by Leonard Bernstein — originally conceived by Hellman as a play, but Bernstein’s intentions of making it an operetta won out.

In 1974, after Hellman withdrew from any future revisions, the show was outfitted with a new libretto by Hugh Wheeler that sticks closer to Voltaire’s original. A number of hands got involved in subsequent versions — James Agee, Dorothy Parker, John Latouche, Richard Wilbur, Bernstein himself and his wife Felicia.

Next, a succession of stage directors tweaked the show in various ways, including Harold Prince, whose 1974 “Chelsea” version gutted the Broadway Theater and played the show in the round.



And most recently: Oberlin's Jonathon Field, whose expertise in crowd control and love of absurdity (plenty of that in this show) kept lively ensemble scenes organized and production details fresh and amusing in his take on the Scottish Opera House version of the libretto (with the assistance of choreographer Colette Boudreaux).

Finally, the top layer: the cast of singing actors both individual and plural and the musicians down below who add flesh and blood brilliance in real time to a fantastical tale. I saw the fourth performance of *Candide* with the Friday/Sunday cast on March 12 in Hall Auditorium.

The show began with Raphael Jiménez conducting the Oberlin Orchestra in an assured performance of the bright, clever, and tricky overture, the only number in the score that Bernstein orchestrated himself — a piece that plants tunes in the audience's ear for future reference and has become a standalone on symphony orchestra programs.



Act I introduces the principal characters: Dr. Pangloss (the quirky and always amusing Evan Tiapula, playing his character in mad scientist style), who has swallowed the Optimism pill whole, and the two innocents-in-love, Candide (lyrical tenor Nathan Romero) and Cunégonde (coloratura soprano Morgan Wolfe), who are being tutored in its precepts.



In his 1974 opening night review of the Harold Prince version, *New York Times* critic Clive Barnes attempted a synopsis of the plot:

“It would be unfair to tell the story in detail. Unfair?—it would be downright impossible. But loosely, very loosely, it is the story of two young people in love. They are Candide, an innocent who remains an innocent, and Cunegonde, who also remains an innocent but starts out life raped by a regiment of Bulgarian foot soldiers and finds herself with a slightly variant view of chastity.

Dominating this Voltaire-style view of life is Dr. Pangloss, who believes, of course, “that we live in the best of all possible worlds,” and that everything turns out for the best — especially disaster. And disasters abound.

Barnes details just a few of those.

The characters are raped, flogged, shipwrecked, hanged, killed, and one of them—most memorably—loses her left buttock. Voltaire's world was not an easy one.



And it doesn't get any easier. After getting kicked out of Westphalia and escaping the Bulgarian Army, our happy couple and their master arrive in Portugal where they are blamed for the Lisbon earthquake and Pangloss is hanged — in a bit of stagecraft so realistic that there were audible gasps from the audience on Sunday as the noose jerked life out of the philosopher's body.



The itinerary is dizzying. Paris, where Cunégonde becomes a prostitute in the employ of Rabbi Don Issachhar. Spain, where they're found by the French police and Candide goes off to South America to fight for the Jesuits. Uruguay, where Cunégonde marries the governor, and Candide flees with his valet Cacambo to a Jesuit camp run by the baron's son Maximillan and Pacquette (as Father and Mother Superior), and Candide stabs Maximillan.



Fast forward three years and Candide is sailing downriver to El Dorado, where he's allowed to leave with enough golden sheep to buy Cunegonde — and a ship — from the Dutch scoundrel Vanderdendur.



The ship sinks, and they're rescued by a passing galley (one of the rowers is Pangloss, brought back to life), which reaches Venice during Carnival, where Candide and Cunégonde are eventually unmasked and reunited. Disillusioned by these travels, Candide buys a small farm outside Venice, and marries Cunégonde.



The couple vow to make some sense of their new, simply-led lives in a brilliant, partly *a cappella* finale, "Make Our Garden Grow," joined by the full cast.



Memorable performances of Bernstein's songs decked out this whirlwind journey of self-discovery. Evan Tiapula delivered Dr. Pangloss's "The best of all possible worlds" with verve and excellent diction. Candide (Nathan Romero) and Cunégonde (Morgan Wolfe) were charmingly out-of-sync in "O Happy We," Bernstein's parody of The Gershwins' "Let's call the whole thing off." And Romero was at his lyrical, soul-searching best in his meditation "It Must Be So."

"Auto-da-Fé," a Sondheim addition, got an appropriately irrereligious send-up ("*What a day, what a day For an auto-da-fé! What a lovely day for drinking And for watching people fry!*"). Candide and Cunégonde were affecting in their duet "You Were Dead, You Know" and Isabella Hoyou brought the steaminess of experience to the Old Lady's tango, "I Am Easily Assimilated."



But the real show-stealer was Cunégonde's first act aria, "Glitter and be Gay," a coloratura *tour de force* that Morgan Wolfe absolutely nailed in perfect coordination with Jiménez and the orchestra.

Meanwhile, the busy chorus (prepared by Ben Johns) took on multiple roles: Westphalians, People of Lisbon, Penitents, Priests, Informers, Natives of El Dorado, People of Suriname, Gamblers, Venice Prostitutes, Sea Men — and stagehands, heaving to and rotating Michael Grube's set platforms between scenes.

Brilliant though it remains after all the versions the show has been through, there are still problems to be solved, some of which date back decades. Mainly, the second act begins to suffer from an “If it’s Tuesday it must be Belgium” syndrome — too much territory to cover, however delightful the sights.



But Jonathon Field has ended his Oberlin Opera tenure with a brilliant show whose professionalism and energy will be difficult to match. *Candide* began with a little touch of theater that has been in the score since the 1973 version: Candide first appears with a falcon on a perch that suddenly flies up for a kill, followed by a descending flurry of feathers. Nothing to do with the plot, just one of those little touches like the staging of the hanging of Pangloss that assures you that the man in charge knows what he’s doing onstage.



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