

Ohio Light Opera:
***Cousin from Batavia* (July 23)**

by Kevin McLaughlin



Last seen in Wooster in 2002, *The Cousin from Batavia* (1921) — with its tangle of mistaken identities, impromptu romance, and Southeast Asian impostures — may be less familiar to English-speaking audiences than other Golden Age operettas. But Ohio Light Opera's sweet-tempered, farcical revival at Freedlander Theatre on July 23 proved charming enough to win over

even the staunchest devotees of the present-day and plausible. The late operetta scholar Richard Traubner rendered the text into vivid English.

Composed by Eduard Künneke with a witty libretto by Hermann Haller and “Rideamus” — “Let us laugh,” the Latin pseudonym of German-Jewish satirist and lawyer Fritz Oliven — *Batavia* blends the lyricism of Viennese operetta with the slapstick of farce. Wilson Southerland's crisp conducting and the orchestra's fine playing brought out all the color and buoyancy in Künneke's sparkling score.

Set outside a Dutch country villa in the early 1920s, the story turns on the romantic idealism of heiress Julia de Weert (Jenna Justice), who clings to a childhood vow to her cousin Roderich, now long vanished to Batavia.

The name *Batavia*, by the way, though a favorite of Edwardian operetta, is historically rooted — it was the name given by the Dutch in colonial days to present-day Jakarta.

When a mysterious, scruffy Stranger (Adam Griffiths) stumbles into her garden, Julia is only too eager to believe he is her long-lost love.



Justice was radiant as Julia, her soprano bright and direct in “Glistening Moon” and tender in “Sweetheart, What Horrible Thoughts You Are Thinking.” And Griffiths, to borrow a Viennese phrase, has “gold in the throat” — an exceptional vocal gift — yet he’s assured enough to let vulnerability shape his character. He sang “I Drink to Your Laughing, Enchanting Eyes” and the rhapsodic “Seven Years I Spent Out in Batavia” with an almost shy tenderness, but he capped “I’m a Poor Wandering Minstrel” with a thrilling high C that nearly stole the show.

Maggie Langhorne’s Hanna, Julia’s confidante, was a comic delight and another vocal standout, particularly in her sparring duet with Griffiths (“Now What’s This All About?”) and her flirtations with Wesley Diener as the real Roderich (Stranger No. 2). Diener, suavely self-aware, turned up mid-Act III with youthful ardor, sharing a slyly suggestive “Ta-Ti-Ta! Ta-Ti-Ta!” with Langhorne that drew hearty laughs.

Niko Theriault (Josse) and Caroline Hawthorne (Wimpel) provided bickering counterpoint as Julia’s guardians. Their Act II trio “If You Think That I Know Who He Is” was a model of comic and rhythmic timing. Jack Murphy brought corny comic relief as Egon von Wildenhagen, while Jeron Robinson and Amia Korman

gave spirited turns as the household servants Hans and Carlotta, especially in the lilting Act I numbers “One More Glass of Bordeaux” and “Uncle and Auntie.”



Spencer Reese’s stage direction revealed his choreographer’s instincts, capturing both the whimsy and warmth of the piece, and offering the actors marvelous opportunities for physical comedy (the bouquet-sitting gag in Act II was pure Buster Keaton).

Reese also choreographed the show, as he has done so well in every one of OLO’s six productions this season. Dances emerged naturally from character and music, avoiding operetta’s occasional trap of set-piece decorative movement. Chyna L. Mayer’s set, a dreamy Dutch garden, proved versatile and atmospheric, while Jaysen Engel’s costumes, with their breezy linens, helped distinguish fantasy from reality.

Brittany Shemuga’s lighting evoked mood shifts, from moonlit fantasy to stormy revelation, while Madeleine Carroll’s subtle sound design supported all the singing and dialogue with clarity.

If *Batavia* leans heavily on predictable coincidence and contrivance, its message still lands sweetly and sincerely: sometimes true love arrives disguised as a complete stranger.

Final performances of *The Cousin from Batavia* will take place on July 31 and August 3 in The College of Wooster’s Freedlander Theatre.



Published on ClevelandClassical.com July 28, 2025.

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