



Ramón Vargas as Manrico and Elza van den Heever as Leonora in the Canadian Opera Company's production of *Il Trovatore*.

Solid showing of Verdi's not so serious story

THEATRE REVIEW

Il Trovatore
Four Seasons Centre for the
Performing Arts, Toronto

BY ARTHUR KAPTAINIS

Hard to take seriously as a story but even harder not to like as a score, *Il Trovatore* is probably the least-performed of Verdi's mid-period hits. The production that opened the Canadian Opera Company season on Saturday affirmed its viability as a simple blood-and-thunder stage vehicle while assembling a cast equal to the notorious demands of the central roles.

Two of the big four were singing their parts for the first time. Ramón Vargas, a name-brand Mexican tenor, was brazen and believable as Manrico, the troubadour of the title. He had to push his voice, with some loss of colour in *Ah sí, ben mio*, but the ensuing *Di quella pira*, with grand support from the gentlemen of the COC chorus, made its proper electrifying effect.

The Canadian house favorite Russell Braun was also heard to approach the red line occasionally as the Count di Luna. He prevailed with strong projection of a basically sturdy baritone. Both of these rivals for the love of Leonora were vivid actors, Braun evoking manliness in a character whose obsessive interest in the lead soprano is extreme even by operatic standards.

Elza van den Heever hit the high notes and brought out the big moments as Leonora without quite solving the classic riddle of how to add a third dimension to this heroine. Some of her quiet singing seemed confined to the stage, a phenomenon not unknown in the Four Seasons Centre. *Tacea la notte*, her great introductory aria, was unusually slow. Nevertheless, this was a solid showing.

The principal who embodied the role in all its musical and elements was the mezzo-soprano Elena Manistina, grand and lustrous as Azucena, the Gypsy torn between step-maternal love and that overriding imperative of the Italian stage, revenge. We certainly got a full quota of both emotions from this Russian newcomer. Her duets with Manrico were powerful enough to neutralize the oddities of the libretto.

The production from the Opéra de Marseilles as realized by Frenchman Charles Roubaud was pretty straight-up by COC standards, notwithstanding the curious opening scene that found the servants and soldiers of the Count in their long johns idling in a dormitory rather than a vestibule of the Palace of Aliaferia. When they dressed themselves, their uniforms were of the 19th rather than the 15th century.

Nevertheless, the darkly-lit slate flats, unadorned with properties, let the drama be itself, even if they robbed the show of old-fashioned operatic colour (which, to judge by the muted applause accorded the production team, some in the audience wanted to see). The two scenes that added visual perspective, one comprising a pair of giant romantic landscapes and the other a hanging drapery, were self-consciously antique artworks (presumably by set designer Jean-Noël Lavesvre) rather than attempts at scenic realism. Roubaud's straightforward blocking (Azucena centre stage with her tormenters forming a semicircle behind her) also suggested a perception of *Il Trovatore* as an artificial operatic icon, inevitably one step removed from reality.

Concept or no concept, the singing and acting kept us involved and the Italian conductor Marco Guidarini paced the score with a fine sense of ebb and flow. The COC orchestra was on its game, the strings creating texture in passages that often pass for pure rhythm. I have mentioned the male choristers, but the ladies also made their mark in the matchlessly tuneful Anvil Chorus, prepared by Sandra Horst.

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Il Trovatore runs until Oct. 31
at the Four Seasons Centre for the
Performing Arts. For tickets and show
times, call 416-363-8231 or visit coc.ca.