

A must-see for Opera fanatics

Masterful casting, monumental setting make for a stellar production of Verdi's tragic tale

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Giuseppe Verdi's musically magnificent *Il Trovatore* is, by modern lights, an opera almost at war with itself, weighed down by the now-clichéd melodrama of Salvatore Cammarano libretto (adapted from a play by Antonio Garcia Gutierrez), even while it is carried aloft by some of Verdi's most passionate and enduring compositions.

But when the Canadian Opera enters the fray between a leaden libretto and a soaring score, their audience almost always emerges victorious.

For the second time in less than a decade, the COC is showcasing a production of Verdi's tragic opera that ranks as a must-see for opera-philes. This time out, it is a production from Opera de Marseille, under the direction of Charles Roubaud and it opened at the Four Seasons Saturday, with conductor Marco Guidarini marshalling the impressive skills of the COC Orchestra to maximum effect.

In staging *Il Trovatore*, Roubaud deals with the challenges of the tale — a story of two brothers, separated at infancy, who grow up on opposite sides of the political spectrum, only to fall in love with the same woman — with appealing wisdom and dispatch.

Recognizing that almost all the most interesting and certainly active elements of the story take place off stage, he conspires with his design team — Jean-Noel Lavesvre,

sets, Katia Duflot, costumes and Marc Delameziere, lighting — to create a monumental setting for the work and then sets his hugely talented cast down smack in the middle of it, challenging them to illuminate Verdi's score with simple, exquisite passion and utmost vocal artistry. This may indeed be museum opera, but in Roubaud's vision, it is, by every light, a most impressive museum.

And the COC has assembled just the right cast, it

seems, to fill that museum with masterpieces, with baritone Russell Braun and tenor Ramon Vargas cast as the Conte di Luna and the troubadour Manrico respectively — antagonists in a romantic and political struggle that can only end in unwitting fratricide. Soprano Elza van den Heever, meanwhile makes a worthy object of both their affections, giving lustrous depth to the steadfast and constant Leonora. Meanwhile, mezzo-soprano



Russell Braun, right, portrays Conte di Luna in the Canadian Opera Company's latest production of *Il Trovatore*.

IL TROVATORE



At the Four
Seasons Centre

DIRECTOR
Charles Roubaud
STARRING
The ensemble

Elena Manistina rounds things out with heart-breaking skill as the gypsy Azu-

cena, driven to vengeance and then madness by an act of horror that spawned the brothers' separation.

In the hands of this cast, Verdi's masterpiece emerges as so much more than the classical earworm that is the *Anvil Chorus*, although even that is delivered here with a fresh sheen, thanks to the talents of the COC Chorus. Backed by a supporting cast that includes assured performances from the likes of bass Dmitry Belossel-

skiy, tenor Edgar Ramirez, bass-baritone Robert Gleadow and soprano Rihab Chaieb, each of the four principals mines the emotional jewels with which Verdi adorned his score and polishes them until they blaze with pain and passion.

And in the process, of course, they ensure that this production of *Il Trovatore* will be remembered as yet another jewel in the ever-more impressive crown of the Canadian Opera.