

Così fan tutte: Atom Egoyan dazzles with a new spin on Mozart's comedy for the Canadian Opera Company

Morgan Kelly

By Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart
Conducted by Johannes Debus
Directed by Atom Egoyan



A scene from the Canadian Opera Company's new production of *Così fan tutte*, 2014. Photo by Michael Cooper.

The Canadian Opera Company's current production of Mozart's romantic comedy *Così fan tutte* is an exploration of love, the fear of betrayal and the plot of three men to test the moral fiber of all women through the evaluation of two sisters.

Though composed in 1789, this opera was not recognized as a masterpiece until the 20th century, perhaps because of the way in which woman are portrayed. Even today the powerful femme fatale theme cannot be ignored, and is sure to spark discussion. After all, *Così fan tutte* does translate to "thus do all women." Also, this interpretation pairs these theories on female virtue against a backdrop of the work of feminist artist Frida Kahlo. That's quite the juxtaposition.

The dramatic events that take place throughout *Così fan tutte* are the calculated moves of Don Alfonso (Sir Thomas Allen), a bitter old philosopher who, when he observes two young men who are madly in love with a pair of sisters, offers a wager on the basis that no woman is capable of remaining faithful. Overwhelmed by faith in their lovers, the young men Ferrando (Paul Appleby) and Guglielmo (Robert Gleadow) agree to act as Don Alfonso instructs for 24 hours in order to test their fiancés.

To begin, Don Alfonso advises the sisters, Dorabella (Wallis Giunta) and Fiordiligi (Layla Claire), that their fiancés have been drafted to war and must leave immediately. The sisters respond with despair at the news and behave so dramatically that it becomes quite comical. Once the women have bid their lovers goodbye they are utterly lost. Enter Despina (Tracy Dahl), a menacing pixie of a chamber maid who offers an opposite view to that of Dorabella and Fiordiligi, advising that they should be out having fun and using men as they see fit, not the other way around.

It's actually this dog eat dog attitude that gets Despina involved in the plot against the sisters. In yet another nod to the disloyalty of woman, when approached by Don Alfonso, she agrees to help him win the bet. In exchange for payment, she uses her power as a trusted adviser to influence the odds in favour of Don Alfonso. Despina is a wonderful, dynamic character that offers a refreshing dose of comic relief and it is an absolute joy to watch Dahl's stunning performance in this role.

The sisters proceed unknowingly into a maze of tests involving their fiancés in disguise—fake poisonings, Despina dressed as numerous characters and Don Alfonso surfacing every so often to up the ante whenever the sisters resolve to remain faithful is proving too strong. All of these elements culminate into a dizzying and decadent plot that has audiences picking sides.

Visually this piece is extraordinary and a credit to the skills of set and costume designer Debra Hanson along with lighting designer Michael Walton. The use of metaphor is stunning and the play on physical scale within each scene adds a whimsical, dream-like element that is thoroughly engaging. Exquisitely imagined, director Atom Egoyan's interpretation of *Così fan tutte* truly does it the justice it deserves.

Of particular interest is the scene in which Ferrando and Guglielmo “leave” for war. In a gorgeous visual display, the ships are depicted as elaborate headdresses, and as a fleet of these ships move across the stage and into a beautiful golden sunset, there was not a single audience member who was not captivated. This is one of the most beautiful scenes I have ever experienced within an opera house and a must see.

Così fan tutte runs until February 21 at the Four Seasons Centre for the Performing Arts. A reminder to those under 30, the Canadian Opera Company offers a great Opera Under 30 program, full details are available on their website. Visit coc.ca for more information to buy tickets.

Show Dates:

Sat, 2014-01-18 - Fri, 2014-02-21

Our rating: 4 stars

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