

Canadian Opera Company puts on production of Verdi's 'A Masked Ball'

Christina Strynatka



Michael Cooper

Rating: 4/5 stars

Billed as "[Verdi](#) meets *Mad Men*", the Canadian [Opera](#) Company's production of "[A Masked Ball](#)" on Feb. 8, 2014 was opera in a dramatic, new direction.

But the real star of it was soprano Adrienne Pieczonka as Amelia who turned this production from "eh?" to "hey!"

Married to Renato (Roland Wood), Amelia is secretly in love with his best friend, Count Riccardo (Dimitri Pittas), who reciprocates. She realizes the futility of her situation and seeks advice from the town fortuneteller, Ulrica (Elena Manistina), but doesn't realize Riccardo is eavesdropping and eventually follows her on her midnight task. Before, though, he gets his own fortune read and learns of his imminent death from the hand of a friend. But Riccardo is undaunted, and follows Amelia on her midnight task.

How the events of the next 24 hours unfold, as told in three acts with two intermissions, gains strength as it barrels along its inevitable end, with all of the performers settling into their roles nicely and the orchestra, led by Stephen Lord, superb the entire night.

Pittas as tenor is vocally strong and possesses a light-hearted voice that matches the carefree arrogance of his Riccardo. He's able to project well and keep command of musical flourishes, but sometimes isn't able to portray the gravitas that comes along with being a Count.

Wood as his (former) friend Renato, on the other hand, gave the audience a rich and mournful baritone as he dealt with the ramifications of his discovery and the consequences of the responsibility he'd taken on for himself. No matter which way he acted, he couldn't win and Wood plunders Verdi for all he's worth.

The females are a little stronger than the males, but for different reasons than vocal strength. Pieczonka, Manistina, and Simone Osborne as Oscar sing as if their careers depended on it, but add an emotional depth that's not quite there with the men.

Osborne has been given a bit of an unusual twist on the usually male-filled role of Oscar—revival director Samantha Seymour adorns Oscar as a little too coquettish for Osborne's talents—and provides much-needed comic relief to the anguish that hangs over the spectre. Her skills aren't utilized as well as they could be, but Osborne does fantastically with what she has as always.

But this is Pieczonka's show and she absolutely steals it, especially with her aria "Morro, ma prima in grazia." Amelia's just been discovered and cast aside by her husband and as she sinks to her knees in despair, Pieczonka delivers "Morro" with such heartfelt emotion, she perfectly sums up exactly what opera is all about: larger-than-life storylines in which characters must overcome incredible obstacles, or perish (either literally or metaphorically.) There aren't enough superlatives to describe the magic present in Pieczonka's "Morro", which sets a new standard for plumbing the soul.

Two other stars of "A Masked Ball" can be found behind the scenes with set designer Barbara Ehnes and costume designer Anja Rabes. The stage is large and more exposed than usually is, and made to look like a 1960s ballroom complete with pastel colours and glittery disco-like balls. There's a fullness to it with something happening in every corner, whether it's a shadowy woman wandering the upstairs level, a couple waltzing on a far-back stage, or a group of women tending bar.

Rabes also does well with outfitting the cast, choosing to dress them up in, yes, "Mad Men"-like attire, with the men in sharp suits and slim trousers and the women in drapery silhouettes. For the most part, it takes the viewer's mind off one puzzling scene setting that doesn't quite fit, and gives an air of glamour to an otherwise dark opera.

One detail keeps niggling its way to centre stage, and that's the lack of chemistry between the love triangle. Pieczonka is excellent, yes, but conveys an older maturity than seems apropos to either man's affection. One could even use the adjective "matronly", but that only fits when viewed in relation to her companions. Both Wood and Pittas sing and move like they'd be quibbling over a younger, more sprightly woman, and Pieczonka seems like she's paired with two Pete Campbells instead of a pair of Don Drapers.

It may be a small detail, but it's enough to block the audience of "A Masked Ball" from truly immersing themselves in the magic of Verdi and the COC.

"A Masked Ball" runs until Feb. 22, 2014 and more information can be found on the [COC website](#).