

“The Capulets and the Montagues”

Opera Company of Philadelphia

April 7th, 2002 (premiere)

Review brought to you in SuperVision by Mark Burstein

Quotations from Will the Quill’s *Romeo & Juliet*, natch, though slightly altered sometimes

*O, she doth teach the torches to burn bright!
It seems she hangs upon the cheek of night
Like a rich jewel in an Ethiope’s ear;
Beauty too rich for use, for earth too dear!
So shows a snowy dove trooping with crows,
As yonder lady o’er her fellows shows.*

Divadienst may have its limits, but I do not wish to be the one who discovers them. In this case, hearing that Ruxandra Donose and Anna Netrebko were singing Romeo and Juliet respectively in Bellini’s *bel canto* version (*I Capuleti e I Montecchi*, prem. 1830) would perhaps have motivated a trip to Philadelphia, but since we were planning to be in the neighborhood at the time anyway, it just confirmed the grace of the Opera Gods. Ladies and gentlemen, by yonder blessed moon I swear it was among the most exhilarating vocal and emotional experiences it has been this operaholic’s privilege to hear. More later.

The Academy of Arts in Philadelphia, a.k.a. the “Grand Old Lady of Broad Street”, is “the oldest venue in the United States still used for its original purpose”, having opened in 1857 and has been known in recent times primarily as the home of the Philadelphia Orchestra.¹

The theater itself, along the “Avenue of the Arts”, is rather uninspiring from the outside. Inside is a small (oft-renovated) Baroque gem—a small orchestra level of seats with four surrounding tiers of boxes like most European houses, lending intimacy to the performance.

This was a Sunday matinee, with the audience averaging the same age as the late Queen Mum, and they applauded politely but without the passion the principals deserved. Furthermore, the borborygmi of the portly gentleman behind us made for an unusual counterpoint. But I digress...

Bellini and his librettist Felice Romani used neither Shakespeare nor his sources for their version of this very Italian tale. The libretto had in fact already been used in an opera—by Nicola Vaccai in 1825—and Bellini, having only six weeks to complete this commission, borrowed heavily from himself, which was fine—who remembers *Zaira* or *Adelson e Salvini* today? The story outline is basically the same as Shakespeare’s, except that here Giulietta (Juliet) is engaged to her cousin Tebaldo (Tybald), and some familiar faces are missing (her Nurse, Mercutio, Paris).

The epigraph of this review refers to the luminosity of two luxuriant jewels, the two titular principals,² radiating in the heavens whilst being held down by the earthly chains of this miserably-directed and otherwise mediocre production. Snowy doves trooping with crows, indeed.

The *mise-en-scène* was appalling. Every scene featured great gobs of stage fog, liberally applied. Even though Bellini’s opera was based on a darker version of the tale, it was overdone (and underlit).

The overture was to a staged pantomime of ... god knows what. Giulietta and *Tebaldo*—actually, two dancers whose costumes echoed those of the principals—were making out in the balcony (sacrilege!) while dozens of supers, including a large contingent of hugely distracting children, romped about for no discernable reason. Familiar as one is with the story it was prefiguring, it just didn’t make any sense. And fond as I am of littering the stage with supers, really—if they have no purpose on stage it is just off-putting, a comment which pretty much sums up the entire stage direction. The crowds—either marginally trained supers of the worst *corps-de-ballet* in the country—attempted a dance. It ended at last, and the second of the Tebaldi, the singing one (unfortunately not Renata), entered.

There was a small, soft, generally supportive orchestra (which occasionally lacked the accurate tempo or instrumental skill) under the direction of Maurizio Barbacini, and a men’s chorus of about twenty plus the usual phalanx of supers. The director’s idea of signaling that warfare lurked ominously in the background was to Superglue everyone’s hands across their bodies to their swords-hilts, an Opera Standby Pose that got old very quickly (yet lasted through two acts).

Further confusing the issue were the Capulet Father and Mother looking far younger than their son Tebaldo (would it break the budget to get some white wigs?) They descended a staircase, which, like the fabled Golden Lion in our ’94 *Otello*, never left the stage, although it was occasionally moved about by stagehands disguised as monks (by tossing a cowelled robe over their very apparent jeans and cowboy boots).

So Tebaldo, a Money-Note Tenor³ (Misha Didyk) agrees to kill Romeo while Capellio, Capo di Tutti Capuletti (Mark McCrory), agrees to marry him off to Juliet. Romeo enters, disguised as his own envoy.

*Alas poor Romeo! he is already dead; stabbed with a white
wench’s black eye; shot through the ear with a love-song;
the very pin of his heart cleft with the blind bow-boy’s butt-
shaft.*

² OK, the titular principals from the play

³ By which I mean he hit the high *fortissimos* splendidly, but getting there was not pretty

¹ Since moved to the Kimmel Center for the Performing Arts

Up to this point I must confess that I was questioning the renowned acoustics of the theater (or at least our seats).⁴ But with the first succulent note from Ruxandra Donose,⁵ the gauze seemed to fall out of my ears to behold a mezzo in one of the best-emoted and sung trouser roles I've heard or seen to date. I see why ol' Vincenzo B wrote this for a mezzo instead of a tenor⁶; in this otherwise almost entirely male-voiced opera, it cuts above the din like a beacon. At this point, I was fairly happy to have gone to all the trouble to be there.

*O, I cry you mercy; you are the singer: I will say
for you. It is 'music with her silver sound'*

And then, to the first melted starlight notes of "Oh! Quante volte" from Anya, resplendent in a golden wig under a tapestry of a golden lion rampant, the ears opened, the heart stopped (only to be reopened wide), the eyes misted, and the breath almost stopped.

*O, sing again, bright angel! for thou art
As glorious to this night, being o'er my head
As is a winged messenger of heaven
Unto the white-upturned wondering eyes
Of mortals that fall back to gaze on her
When she bestrides the lazy-pacing clouds
And sails upon the bosom of the air.*

Having heard Miss Netrebko's Lyudmila, Louisa, Susanna, Ilia, Musetta, Zerlina, Marfa, Adina, Nannetta, and Natasha,⁷ I have always dreamed of hearing her in the pure *bel canto*, or in this case *purissima e bellissima canto* repertoire. Her strong and radiant tone "*bestride the gossamer / That idles in the wanton summer air*", that "gem of purest ray serene", perfectly pitched with a facile vibrato, is incandescent miracle enough in a large venue like the War Memorial, but in a small theater is a divine revelation. She proved, too, a careful and generous artist, articulating vocal flourishes with apparent ease.

*Ah, Juliet, if the measure of thy joy
Be heap'd like mine and that thy skill be more*

⁴ As it turns out, my ears did not deceive me. Apparently their conductor Wolfgang Sawallisch found the hall too "bright" for recording, so had the basement filled with sand. Regrettable.

⁵ This beautiful Rumanian singer is fortunately well-known to us, having had her U.S. opera debut with San Francisco Opera in a spectacular turn as Nicklausse in Civic Center production of *Les Contes d'Hoffmann* in 1996. She was also a standout in the title role in *L'Incoronazione di Poppea* in '98, and will be doing *Giulio Cesare* this summer.

⁶ A 1964 rewrite gives this role to a tenor

⁷ Respectively: *Ruslan and Lyudmila*, '95; *Betrothal in a Monastery*, '98; *Marriage of Figaro*, '98; *Idomeneo*, '99; *La Bohème*, '00; *Don Giovanni*, '00; *The Tsar's Bride*, '00; *L'elisir d'amore*, '01; *Falstaff*, '01; *War and Peace*, Met, '02. Not to mention her '96 Merola concert and the now-legendary '98 Schwabacher recital

*To blazon it, then sweeten with thy breath
This neighbour air, and let rich music's tongue
Unfold the imagined happiness that both
Receive in either by this dear encounter.*

Here Juliet is mournfully preparing for her wedding, until the sudden appearance of Romeo. As their voices sensuously intertwined, it was seriously Hamster Time.⁸ The two singer/actresses clearly were quite joyful to be working with each other.

*How silver-sweet sound lovers' tongues by night,
Like softest music to attending ears!*

Juliet in the characterization is different from the Shakespearean one—more the dutiful daughter (hence more "operatic"). In this case, it cost them their *nuit d'hyménée!*⁹

Her wedding turns into a scene of warfare, as the Guelphs and the Ghibellines threaten mayhem. Same ol' Superglue Super-foo. And yet...

So smile the heavens upon this holy Act

In the scene in Act II where Romeo returns to the Capulet castle grounds, it is set in a forest, with a cluster of bodies (the chorus) hovering on the ever-present staircase and looking like oversize Xmas ornaments suspended from the trees. Later, a procession of mourners in the funeral cortege was lead by an awkward silly kid skipping about. Why, o why?

So: a second-tier production, uninspiringly (let's be frank: badly) directed, in a small venue – tell me again why this will be near the top of my Life List of the most awe-inspiring experiences in Opera.

*Did my heart love till now? forswear it, sight!
For I ne'er heard true beauty till this night.*

I simply cannot imagine anything more emotionally gut-wrenching, more sublimely sung, more dramatically perfect, any *canto* more *bellissima* than the closing Tomb Scene, set on a candlelit stage, with these two magnificent artists, enthralling each other and those of us who were privileged to be there, breaking all hearts as the lovers, as they must, sweetly expire.

Spread thy close curtain, love-performing night

⁸ A phenomenon wherein it feels like hamsters running up and down your spine.

⁹ Their wedding night. In Gounod's more familiar version, this is the epitome of a romantic duet, made use of at well-remembered wedding on May Day, 1999.