

Ha, ha arias

Many of this summer's operas have a humorous side

By JOSEPH DALTON, Special to the Times Union

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Opera is serious business. But it can also be a heck of a lot of fun.

With comedies outweighing tragedies in this summer's offerings, opera companies are hoping audiences will find themselves laughing out loud.

Lake George Opera's staging of Gilbert and Sullivan's seafaring sendup "The Pirates of Penzance" launches the season tonight in Saratoga Springs. Later in the month, the company also offers Puccini's one-act comedy "Gianni Schicchi" paired with "Buoso's Ghost," a new sequel to "Gianni" by American composer Michael Ching.

Glimmerglass Opera in Cooperstown kicks off its season Saturday with Cole Porter's "Kiss Me, Kate," the company's first foray into musical comedy. But the headline work and great mystery of the Glimmerglass season is Wagner's early and rarely performed "Das Liebesverbot (The Ban on Love)," based on Shakespeare's comedy "Measure for Measure." Nobody did long, dark, mythological narratives better than Wagner, so it should be fascinating to see how he handled lighter material.

Finally, in August the Berkshire Opera in Pittsfield, Mass., presents "The Marriage of Figaro," Mozart's opera buffa based on Beaumarchais' tale of love and intrigue among the noble and servant classes.

That lineup is more than enough to make one rethink the notion of opera as dry, somber and "important." It also reminds us that comedy has a long tradition in the opera house: The titles come from the classical, romantic and contemporary eras.

A little laugh

Even in the most tragic of operas, laughter has a place.

"A laugh now and then, even in a drama breaks the tension," says local opera buff Robert Jaquay, the recently retired director of the William K. Sanford Town Library in Colonie. "A really great plot can lead you along a tense path, and all of sudden you get a laugh line that releases everything and gives you a chance to take a breath."

Through his lecture series "Opera Over Easy" at the Sanford Library, Jaquay encourages novice operagoers to trust their instincts and responses to what's happening on stage, especially if a director overworks the comic elements.

"When it goes too far and they keep repeating a gag line or action, it's like, 'Enough already,' says Jaquay. "But a keen director who has a sense of humor might pull off a laugh where people aren't expecting it."

Thanks to the advent of supertitles (the projection of English translations above the stage), it's gotten a lot easier to catch what's funny in an opera.

Funny lines and game singers aren't enough. Because opera is an inherently collaborative art form, successful comedy demands teamwork.

"The orchestra has to have as much fun as the characters on the stage. They have to be good and pulled together," says Peter Haley, the former Times Union critic and president of the Siena Opera Club. "The conductor has to put a lot of energy into this, but when it happens, it's good stuff."

Up close

An intimate hall can also help comedy come across, and the Lake George Opera seems ideally situated in the Spa Little Theater. Located on the grounds of Saratoga Spa State Park, the house has only 482 seats; the performers are even closer to the audience, because there's no orchestra pit, and the musicians are positioned behind the stage.

"We can't do grandiose things, but there's something about our environment that lends itself well to comedy," says general director Curtis Tucker, who will conduct "The Pirates of Penzance."

Tucker hesitates to declare the genre as the company's specialty, although he does point to a number of successful comedies in recent seasons, including "Tartuffe" last year and "The Italian Girl in Algiers" in 2005.

When it comes to Gilbert and Sullivan, Tucker says the operettas shouldn't be discounted just because they're popular. "A lot of companies do Gilbert and Sullivan because it sells tickets, and yet they look down at the material. They don't put it on the same artistic plane as they do many other kinds of work. You have to respect the material," says Tucker, who adds that the new staging of "Pirates" won't be overly indulgent but "straightforward."

Director Nelson Shelly has told the cast "they don't have to try and make this funny," says Tucker. "Play it straight and believable, and it will be funny."

The same might be said for Puccini's "Gianni Schicchi," which comes with a ready-made comic setup: A family tries to change their deceased patriarch's will by staging a conference between the corpse and a lawyer. The dead man causes more problems in Michael Ching's "Buoso's Ghost," a sequel written in 2000. The composer will conduct both operas on the LGO double bill.

American staging

At Glimmerglass Opera, the new production of Wagner's "Das Liebesverbot" has been highly anticipated since the company announced it more than two years ago. Because Wagnerites sometimes travel around the world to attend performances of his "Ring" cycle, the thinking is that they might also come to Cooperstown to see the first American staging of the composer's second opera.

Wagner wrote the music and libretto to "Das Liebesverbot" when he was 21 years old; it played for only one performance during his lifetime. He later referred to it as "a sin of my youth."

According to stage director Nicholas Muni, the piece's obscurity is somewhat understandable -- although it does have its merits, both musical and dramatic.

"Wagner brought a tremendous vitality and brilliance to the music," says Muni. "You hear (elements of) his later work in it, but you also hear a lot of Italian, a mix of Donizetti and Bellini and some Rossini."

The plot turns on a royal ban on love and sex, as the characters go through various high jinks to reunite lovers and expose the king's own betrayal of the law.

"Wagner was very taken with French and Italian sensuality, and he wrote this to explore a hypocritical morality that tries to repress sensuality," says Muni. "One of the main points of the piece is this clash between sexual liberation and a liberal lifestyle and a severe conservatism."

With that in mind, the Glimmerglass staging places the characters in the late 1950s, what Muni calls "an effervescent time." The depiction of one character, the principal corruptor, will remind audiences of modern libertine icons such as James Dean and Elvis.

A characteristic trait of Wagner operas -- extreme length -- will be absent. Muni says that about 30 minutes of music has been cut from the original piece. The evening's entire running time will be under three hours, performed in the original German with some spoken dialogue.

'Bedroom farce'

Rounding out the season will be the Berkshire Opera's August staging of Mozart's "Marriage of Figaro," which stage director Gregory Keller describes as a "bedroom farce," a style that "can be seen in almost every episode of 'Frasier.'

"It's about characters working out their marital and sexual problems, and how they all stoop to a certain level of vice to achieve their goals," says Keller, whose previous work for the company includes a comic double bill in 2005 of Menotti's "The Old Maid and the Thief" and Ravel's "L'heure espagnol."

"There's little difference between comedy and tragedy -- it's just a matter of proportion," adds Keller. "The sense of proportion gets overblown in a comedy, but the characters don't know that. They don't know what kind of opera they're in. They such should just be pursuing their motivations."

Joseph Dalton is a local freelance writer who contributes regularly to the Times Union.

Lake George Opera

"The Pirates of Penzance": 7:30 tonight, 2 p.m. Sunday, 2 p.m. Wednesday and July 12

"La Traviata": 7:30 p.m. Saturday, 2 p.m. Tuesday and July 11 and 13

"Giannic Schicchi" and "Buoso's Ghost": July 10 and 12

Where: Spa Little Theater, Saratoga Spa State Park, Saratoga Springs

Tickets: \$50-\$80

Info: 587-3330 or <http://lakegeorgeopera.org>

Glimmerglass Opera

"Kiss Me, Kate" 8 p.m. Saturday, 2 p.m. Monday and 11 more performances through Aug. 23

"Julius Caesar" 2 p.m. Sunday and nine more performances through Aug. 23

"Das Liebesverbot" opens July 19 and runs seven more performances through Aug. 22

"I Capuleti e I Montecchi": Opens July 26 and runs eight more performances through Aug. 24

Where: Route 80, Cooperstown

Tickets: \$75-\$126

Info: (607) 547-2255 or <http://www.glimmerglass.org>

Berkshire Opera

"Marriage of Figaro": Opens Aug. 15 and runs four more performances through Aug. 24

Where: Colonial Theatre, 111 South St., Pittsfield, Mass.

Tickets: \$20-\$90

Info: (413) 997-4444 or <http://berkshireopera.org>