

Opera Theatre offers a very merry Mozart

“**C**OSI Fan Tutte,” Hawaii Opera Theatre’s second production of the season, has always been a problem to produce. Its plot and libretto are as insubstantial and artificial as cotton candy, while Mozart’s score is a cornucopia of musical riches and sophistication.

When mounting “Cosi,” producers are faced with the question of whether to treat it as a knee-slapping, slapstick comedy, or as a sophisticated drawing-room farce. HOT’s production falls between these two poles, albeit closer to slapstick than farce.

Producer Terence Knapp has taken the opera out of the 18th century, moved it to Hawaii and renamed it “Pela no Ho’i na Wahine” (Women are like that). The action is set in “Merry Monarchical times” and the location is “in and around a Waikiki Hotel-Apartment and garden,” with a view of Diamond Head in the background.

The production’s visual look was inspired by the paintings of Madge Tennent. Instead of the usual curtain, the audience is greeted by a scrim upon which are reproduced three Tennent portraits of Hawaiian women. Joseph Dodd’s handsome scenic designs create a marvelously effective setting.



OPERA REVIEW

By Cary
Smith

Sandra Finney’s costumes utilize Tennent’s colors, but seem more contemporary than Merry Monarchy. Luckily, realism has never been a hot issue in this opera. (Were there actually Waikiki apartment-hotels back then?)

The pretentious, stilted and not very singable English translation is credited to Andrew Porter. A good deal of re-writing has been done, including cutesy local references and lots of Hawaiian words thrown in for flavor — most of which flew over the heads of Friday’s opening-night audience.

Matthew Faruggio’s staging presents no surprises, once the novelty of the Hawaiian setting wears off. His is very much a standard “Cosi.” Faruggio understands his characters and the score, and allows the action to flow smoothly, without interruption or extraneous gimmickry.

Conductor Martin Fischer-Dieskau,

in his U.S. debut, proves himself to be an extraordinary talent. He leads a meticulously shaped and beautifully nuanced reading of great refinement. Seldom has a pit orchestra played as ravishingly as does the Honolulu Symphony under his direction.

The young cast is equally responsive to Fischer-Dieskau’s baton. Tenor David Eisler as Frederick (Ferrando), handles his high tessitura nicely, with only occasional moments of insecurity, and produces a steady stream of honeyed tones. Baritone Richard Byrne who portrays William (Guglielmo), is adequate to his task, despite a pronounced tendency to overact.

Bass William Fleck is a suave Don Amalu (Don Alfonso). While his big, roughly resonant voice is not always as smooth as his characterization, Fleck contributes some wonderfully controlled singing in the ensemble numbers. The first-act farewell trio is simply gorgeous.

Pualani (Flordiligi), is sung by soprano Juliana Gondek. Though her voice is too light for the big moments, she handles this exceedingly difficult role quite well. Her big aria, “Come Scoglio,” is solidly sung, complete with gymnastic vocal leaps.

Mezzo-soprano Victoria Livegood is

a knockout as Keanani (Dorabella). Not only does she have impressive vocal equipment, but she is a convincing actress as well. Nancy Elledge makes the most of her many opportunities as Leilani (Despina), the scheming chambermaid.

Beebe Freitas must be singled out for her outstanding contribution at the harpsichord. Her sparkling accompaniment of the all important recitatives was inventive and always appropriate to the moment.

HOT’s “Cosi Fan Tutte” would be far better suited to a performing space of more intimate proportions than those of the Blaisdell Concert Hall. One wants to be able to see faces and expressions clearly.

Nevertheless, this is a production in which the whole is greater than the sum of its individual parts and the final impression is of a well-prepared ensemble effort of exceptional musicality.

The final performance of “Cosi Fan Tutte” is at 7:30 p.m. tomorrow at Blaisdell Concert Hall. Tickets are \$25 to \$40. Call 537-6191.

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