

La Cenerentola plays to the company's choral strength

KENNET Opera chose Rossini's sparkling *La Cenerentola* ('the girl of the ashes', aka *Cinderella*), for their 22nd annual production.

Given that opera is a notoriously difficult art form to mount successfully, Kennet Opera wisely used the expertise of some professional practitioners – as principal singers, and in direction, stage and costume design, lighting and music – which also allowed the production to play to the company's choral strength.

Cinderella is a girl with a hard life, 'who dreams of a life less ordinary'. The set, uncluttered but cleverly versatile, put the kitchen hearth centre stage, with action also glimpsed behind tall side windows. Under director Stan Pretty, the cast made entrances and exits from both backstage and the auditorium, giving continuous, flowing interest and ensuring there were no breaks in the action.

Here set in the 1930s but with a nod to the original fairytale, scenes were also linked with sequences from the mice dancers, Cinderella's kitchen companions, and from her phalanx of fairy godmothers (one with a dodgy wand).

Opera

Kennet Opera: *La Cenerentola*, at Arlington Arts, Snelsmore, from Wednesday, November 9, to Saturday, November 12

The part of Cinderella in this opera has real substance. No cipher, hers is a credible character who develops as the opera progresses. Mezzo Katherine Cooper, with her agile, expressive voice and dramatic ability, gave a genuine heart and sweet centre to the production. Though, off to the ball in a vintage car, she takes to riches as to the manor born.

Robin Whitehouse as Prince Ramiro, whose heart she wins (thank goodness for matching bracelets...), is a less developed character, but his delicately sweet tenor blended well with hers.

Baritone Shaun Aquilina was ideally cast as the Prince's valet Dandini, relishing his assumed princely role; he must, he sings, 'marry for procreation or suffer deprivation'. He has a full, warm

voice, with lots of vocal colour, and dramatic ability in spades. James Mitchell played Alidoro, the Prince's tutor and court magician; a main part which, somewhat paradoxically, always seems dramatically superfluous.

Don Crerar made the most of the foolish Don Magnifico, desperate to get rid of the bane of his life, his two 'female offspring', a couple of unsuccessful vamps. Be-medalled and toupéd (cue for some great business), he put in a genuinely comic performance. Dandini's hand on his knee causing him a moment of alarm. Costume designer Lili Tuttle displayed her passion for 30s style in the sisters' over-the-top clothes and wigs (scarlet woman Julie van Haperen as Clorinda, a dead ringer for my idea of Lillian Archer).

The 11-piece orchestra, under music director Max Fane, brought vivacity to Rossini's quicksilver score. The production was sung in English, with very pleasing ensembles. There were moments, however, when the chorus, and Tamsin Slatter (Tisbe), sang behind the tempo, compromising the essential bright, witty thrust of the music.

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