

REVIEW: ANNAPOLIS OPERA SOUTH PACIFIC, AND BUTTERFLY PREVIEW

By: Mary Johnson, The Baltimore Sun

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In this 44th season, Annapolis Opera returns to presenting two fully-staged productions while joining major opera companies' winning trend of including classic American musicals in regular performance seasons. Annapolis Opera chose Rodgers and Hammerstein's 'South Pacific' offered last weekend in a stellar production enjoyed by capacity audiences at Maryland Hall to make an ideal pairing with its later presentation of Puccini's 'Madama Butterfly' scheduled for Friday March 17 and Sunday March 19, 2017.

Now celebrating his 34th season as Annapolis Opera's artistic director and conductor, Ronald J. Gretz cites parallels between South Pacific and Butterfly reminding that "Rodgers and Hammerstein's classic American musical South Pacific addresses both racial prejudice and moral growth as nurse American Navy Ensign Nellie Forbush struggles to accept the mixed race children of Emile de Beque, a French planter with whom she has fallen in love. A secondary romance between Lieutenant Joseph Cable and young island woman Liat explores the consequences of marrying Cable's Asian sweetheart." Puccini's "Madama Butterfly" also deals with cultural bias in age 15 Geisha Butterfly's renouncing her heritage when marrying American Naval officer Lt. Pinkerton, who within a year sails home where he weds American wife, returning to Japan three years later where faithful Cio Cio San is asked to relinquish care of their son to him and his American wife.

Both the classic musical 'South Pacific' and Puccini's beloved popular opera describe mixed culture couples. one partner a U.S. military officer whose sudden, passionate attraction to one of another culture requires adjustments while combating encountered local prejudices. Their stories are set to compatible music, the grand opera Butterfly has opera's customary tragic ending while the American musical ends happily.

Annapolis Opera's splendid production of 'South Pacific' surpassed all other revivals reviewed here, its World War II era story still relevant historically and enhanced by nostalgia; compelling in its romance, the score quintessentially American classic musical filled with Hammerstein's philosophically insightful lyrics set to Rodgers timeless melodies – romantic showstoppers mixed with upbeat sassy songs that remain fresh, bright and engaging.

On hearing the opening bars of the overture superbly delivered by Maestro Gretz and Annapolis Symphony Orchestra musicians, we were struck by hearing rare performance excellence that continued through the entire performance at Maryland Hall in Annapolis. Fully in his element, Gretz directed vocal performers including chorus to deliver together an incomparable production that could hardly be surpassed in nearby Washington, D.C. or even on Broadway, where such large pit orchestras presumably remain a rarity.

Microphones are prevalent in current musical theater amplifying singers and choruses – a practice utilized here in Annapolis Opera's 'South Pacific' perhaps unnecessary at Maryland Hall, where from my third row center seat the sound seemed muddied and at intermission a few complaints were heard from audience members who would object to such amplification in opera performances. But this is only a minor complaint in an overall stellar production.

Early in the show was featured stunning versions of romantic numbers by Nora Graham-Smith as Nellie Forbush in "Twin Soliloquys" duet with Christian Bowers as Emile de Becque followed by Bowers in an ardent "Some Enchanted Evening." Graham-Smith expertly delivered Nellie's upbeat songs "A Wonderful Guy," "I'm Gonna Wash That Man Right Outa My Hair" and "Honey Bun" complete with accompanying exuberant dance moves.

Bowers was convincing as suave French planter de Beque, passionate in his pursuit of Nellie, vigorous in his daring island explorations assisting the Navy and vocally most compelling in "This Nearly Was Mine" another show-stopper to garner prolonged audience applause.

Adding drama as Lt. Cable, Glenn Seven Allen sang a gorgeous "Younger Than Springtime" and another show-stopping "You've Got to be Taught" – a remarkably courageous song in 1949 that continues to define taught prejudice. Inbred prejudice is illustrated in the parallel forbidden love story of Cable and lovely young island woman Liat.

Liat is the daughter of island entrepreneur Bloody Mary, played by Kate Jackman with comedic skill and captivating vocal artistry in show-stopper "Bali Hai"

James Ludlum proved a lively comedic Luther Bliss, shining in the sailors' chorus' "Nothin' Like a Dame" and as grass-skirted, hip-swiveling "Honey Bun" in comic duet with Graham-Smith's Nellie in oversize sailor's costume.

Similarly a high-energy nurses group became a lively chorus supporting Nellie in washing "that man outa" her hair.

As stage director Braxton Peters brought musical performance experience as a leading stage performer. Also contributing to the show's overall professionalism were April Joy Vester's set design and Steve Cosby's set construction, Michael Klima's lighting design, and the World War II era costumes including island garb created by ten coordinated by Elizabeth D'Antonio.

In sum, Annapolis Opera's first excursion into presenting an American classic musical was a total triumph to get the season off to a great start. Ahead are a series of upcoming events including: Arias and Encores (Broadway and Opera Concert) December 4; Sleeping Beauty (new children's opera) on January 28, 2017; Take a Chance on Love (Broadway and Opera Concert) January 29, 2017; Madama Butterfly March 17, 19; and the 29th Annual Vocal Competition on April 29, 30. Call 410-267-8135 for information.