

situating (such as it is) the opera's action. In 2019 Botstein led a concert version of this work with the ASO at Carnegie Hall. Three dynamic singing actors reappeared here—the tenor Aaron Blake and bass-baritones Alfred Walker and Philip Cokorinos—as well as James Bagwell's alert Bard Festival Chorale, a significant boon throughout. Blake must be the world's most experienced Michel, having sung the non-stop role in French, English and Czech. He gave an admirably all-in performance in a part that demands both comic chops and pathos. In the opera's almost Thornton Wilder-ish third act, we learn (along with Michel) that Julietta is the girl not only of his but of everyone's dreams: an illusion many choose to prefer to their quotidian existence. Rodell Rosel's



Erica Petrocelli and Aaron Blake as Julietta and Michel at Bard

Spieltenor acidly etched the Clerk in the Central Bureau of Dreams, a seductive yet dangerous liminal space. Walker, consistently a star of Bard and ASO offerings, delivered three powerful characterizations in imposing sound. With bags of voice and personality, Krysty Swann took on three mezzo/contralto roles including the Fortune Teller (a role created in late career by the first Katya Kabanová, Marie Veselá). Other able participants included Cokorinos, Kevin Thompson, Taylor Raven and Isabelle Kosempa—the men more vivid in dramatic presence, the women more dulcet to hear.

DAVID SHENGOLD

Aspen

There's something about the 1970s in American culture that today brings out a sweet smile (or a cringe) at the memory of days when we all got a little crazy. Bell-bottom jeans, flowery shirts with big collars, big hair for the gals, mullets for the guys, and pop-culture heroes whose muscles (recalling *Rocky*) and perfect figures (Jane Fonda exercising in a leotard) created a magical world of dreams. It was that long-gone fantasy world that inspired a modern-day setting for Mozart's *Così fan tutte*.

The production by ASPEN OPERA THEATER AND VOCAL ARTS, as presented in the WHEELER OPERA HOUSE on July 26, was set in a small Massachusetts town in the 1970s—mostly in Al's Gym, a claustrophobic macho world where the two leading couples wrestled with their emotions while their friends squared off in the upstage combat ring. This was the concept of Renée Fleming, making her debut as

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Renée Fleming's directorial debut: *'Così fan tutte'* at Aspen, with (centre l.) Lauren Carroll and (centre r.) Ashlyn Brown

a stage director. The renowned soprano had planned on staging her *Così* at Washington National Opera in 2021, but the pandemic intervened. Serving as the co-artistic director with Patrick Summers of Aspen's opera programme, Fleming saw her opportunity to try again, and she enlisted a cast of young professionals. Did Fleming's concept work? Yes—for the most part.

The cast was superb and the music sailed through, thanks to the steady hand of Summers and his exceptional orchestra in the pit. Fleming did her best to have fun with the plot while keeping the characters distinct, showcasing the talents of her singers and, thankfully, letting things take their time to breathe. In a cute touch, she had a cast member lead the audience in some Fonda-esque stretching before Act 2.

The potential for excess kitsch never got out of hand, and the director never let her characters descend into cheap mugging or silly shtick. In fact, the leading ladies projected sympathetic personalities. With an elevated wrestling ring as a backdrop, the opening and closing scenes offered the most coherent action, though the mayhem got a bit bogged down when the scene changed to the seaside: the disguised men were cleverly garbed in long mullets, but their switcheroo romances unfolded with sluggish pacing. And when everyone returned to Al's Gym for the frenetic finale, it was difficult to follow who was with whom. Suddenly the music ended with the two men standing together, and both sweethearts dashing off without them—perhaps in line with the opera's title, 'women are like that'.

All six principals earned high marks. Lauren Carroll, as Fiordiligi, showed confident dramatic and comedic flair in this demanding role and sang 'Come

scoglio' with power and control of its full range—but it's unfortunate that Fleming made the choice of staging a distracting game of dodgeball in the ring during this aria. The soprano later delivered much of the heartbreaking 'Per pietà' while lying flat on her back—and it was stunning. Dorabella was portrayed with an extra dash of girlish energy, making for a lively contrast with her sister. Ashlyn Brown injected her role with charm and a finely focused mezzo, bringing subtle shading to 'Smanie implacabili'.

The leading men proved equal to the task of serving as buffoons and sincere lovers. Jonghyun Park never lost his comedic touch, nor did his tenor waver, particularly in a nicely turned 'Un'aura amorosa'. As Guglielmo, Finn Sagal looked handsome in his Act 2 wig and showed a fine sense of comedy in 'Non siate ritrosi'. Laura Miah's Despina and Peter Barber's Alfonso were given plenty of opportunities for silliness and drew big laughs from the audience; they also made the most of their solo moments. One of *Così*'s many glorious masterpieces, the touching trio 'Soave sia il vento', was sung impeccably by Carroll, Brown and Barber.

Michelle Harvey's creation of Al's Gym was a delight. The cast members nimbly navigated the ropes and managed their tumbling like pros. The gym's dominating presence forced most of the action downstage, but Fleming handled that restriction nicely. The rear walls were festooned with posters (*Rocky* was there, of course). Lockers off to the side were a nice touch—used for cute comic effect at one point. When the action moved to the Massachusetts coast, Harvey created a lovely seaside scene that was a relief from the cramped gym of Act 1. Josh Hemmo's lighting had just the right touch throughout, and Amanda Seymour's costumes brilliantly captured the era. And when's the last time you've seen a credit for a wrestling consultant (Jacob O'Shea) in an opera review?

MARC SHULGOLD

Central City

Each season, opera-lovers must navigate a long, winding road to this hilly former Colorado mining town, 35 miles west of Denver. But it's worth the drudgery of distance and the dreadful summertime traffic to attend three shows by CENTRAL CITY OPERA in the charming, antiquated, intimate OPERA HOUSE. Alas, fate and an unexpected hospital visit limited my attendance to only one of the three productions. But there was gold in them there hills, for here was a colourful, often hilarious, marvellously sung *Il barbiere di Siviglia* that was so fresh and original (if over-the-top silly) that it made a tired old warhorse come alive and remind us how comic opera can perk up our eyes and our ears—and, oh yes, really make an audience laugh out loud.

Credit must be shared with Opera Theatre of Saint Louis for loaning its delightful Technicolor costumes, a two-level, multi-window set and some Barbie-on-steroids furniture (I want that giant pink inflatable-lips couch) that added immeasurably to the slapstick fun. There seemed to be no limit to the goofiness, from oversized baggy pants to cavorting policemen armed with long-stem plastic sunflowers

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