

OPERA REVIEW

Strange but true

Gottfried Helnwein's wondrous staging of 'Der Rosenkavalier' is eccentric and anachronistic -- yet utterly faithful to its spirit.

May 31, 2005 | Mark Swed | Times Staff Writer

First things first: There is no overt lesbian sex in the new Los Angeles Opera production of "Der Rosenkavalier." Hardly a hint of it.

Those who have been objecting to the company's advertisement featuring two attractive women, moist lips apart and microseconds away from plunging deeply into a sensual kiss, have little to fear. Maximilian Schell's production, which opened Sunday night at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion, is not chaste, exactly, but it won't shock the typical "Rosenkavalier"-goer. At least it won't shock anyone who doesn't mind Bugs Bunny popping into the Marschallin's boudoir along with all the other weirdos.

For The Record

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"Der Rosenkavalier" -- A headline on a review in Tuesday's Calendar section about an L.A. Opera production referred to it as Gottfried Helnwein's staging of the opera "Der Rosenkavalier." Helnwein is the set designer and costume designer; the work is directed by Maximilian Schell.

The second thing you should know about this "Rosenkavalier" is that it is terrific. Richard Strauss' opera sounds great and looks sensational. It is excellently sung, sumptuously conducted by Kent Nagano and, thanks to Gottfried Helnwein, wondrously strange.

Helnwein -- the Austrian artist (painter, photographer, performance artist, filmmaker, hobnobber with the stars) who has a studio in downtown L.A. -- is known for everything from Marilyn Manson videos to Holocaust installations. He is responsible for the sets, costumes and that ad (which, by the way, looks like an image from a recent staging of a Schumann oratorio that Helnwein designed in Dusseldorf).

Helnwein's vision of "Rosenkavalier" is monochromatic and a riot of color. It is oddly traditional yet seriously odd. It is updated but couldn't be more 18th century. And none of those opposites contradicts.

"Der Rosenkavalier" -- an opera from 1911 in which Strauss and his librettist, Hugo von Hofmannsthal, cling to 18th century Vienna as they witness the seeds of destruction of their Old World -- is seemingly impossible to update. The Marschallin, the title for a field marshal's wife, has a dalliance with a 17-year-old cousin, Octavian. She struggles to retain her youth, meditates

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on the cruelty of passing time and lets him go. We can't stop young love, we can't stop history, but, as Strauss and Hofmannsthal so deliciously demonstrate, we can't stop nostalgia either.

Helnwein modernizes nostalgically. An artist who experiments with monochromatic canvases, he gives each act a different color. The Marschallin's bedroom is a handsome minimalist loft with a couple of antique chairs, bathed in blue. The parvenu Faninal -- whose daughter Sophie catches the eye of Octavian -- resides in an oversize yellow Colonial. The opera plays itself out as erotic farce in a low-life inn. Helnwein makes that a Spanish-style studio, full of his own portraits, and all is lewd red.

Then there are the nutty, glorious costumes that match the color schemes. Who are these people? Some look space age. Baron Ochs, the opera's vulgarian, wears full 18th century regalia, though he gets his colors wrong. When the Marschallin enters the inn/studio she is in a yard-long hoop skirt, something that Elisabeth Schwarzkopf might have worn in an overstuffed Salzburg production 50 years ago.

One more thing about the remarkable sets, which are brilliantly lighted by Alan Burrett: They are basically acoustic shells that reflect sound, and that means the singers are much more vividly projected than they usually are in this acoustically difficult opera house. (At the company's "Falstaff" the previous day, the sets had few reflecting surfaces, and the singers sounded as though they were in the next room.)

Strauss wrote Octavian for a mezzo-soprano (hence the lesbian implications), and the opera begins with Octavian and the Marschallin lounging in bed, following the orchestra's very specific musical description of lovemaking. Schell handles this more discreetly than most -- the lovers are off in a corner, unseen. Indeed, Schell goes so far as to accompany that orchestral opening with a video clip of galloping horses from a 1926 silent film of "Der Rosenkavalier." So much for sex.

But Alice Coote (Octavian), Adrienne Pieczonka (the Marschallin) and Elizabeth Futral (Sophie) make up for that. All three are superb, each in her own way. Pieczonka's Marschallin is regal, unsentimental and smart, and when her vulnerabilities break through as she reflects on her situation, they are all the more touching. Her soprano is brushed steel, burnished yet not hard.

Coote's Octavian is a testament to testosterone, all confused and amber-toned. Futral is not the typically demure, naive Sophie -- she can't be, in that low-cut, translucent gown -- but, like the Marschallin, softness is found in hardness. She doesn't lose innocence but gains it, so that in the end she can understand real experience. And she soars while doing so.

Kurt Rydl's Ochs has all the standard gaucheness, but he also has something else. He is a brute, an inept Genghis Khan wannabe who dominates the stage.

A large cast of minor characters are here all colorful and contribute far more interesting small touches than would seem possible from an opera production that doesn't have a king's ransom in financing.

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Nagano brings a large, enthusiastic sweep to the score, which is the other key element to the evening's success. The company's music director will, a season hence, decamp to Munich, Strauss country. He's ready. He's got the orchestra sounding first rate, and he bathed the whole wacky authentic/inauthentic production in utterly authentic, yet modern sounding, opulence.

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'Der Rosenkavalier'

Where: Los Angeles Opera at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion, 135 N. Grand Ave., L.A.

When: 7 p.m. Wednesday and June 8, 11 and 16; 2 p.m. Saturday and June 19

Price: \$25 to \$190

Contact: (213) 972-8001 or www.losangelesopera.com

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