

Canada Opera Piccola plays to disappointing crowds

Opera a stylish success

Canada Opera Piccola
SUB Theatre
Friday and Sunday

review by John Charles

The best opera productions Edmonton's seen for some time were Friday and Sunday at SUB Theatre. But only 100 people saw them.

Canada Opera Piccola, from Vancouver, offered two sprightly one-acts and performed them with stylish assurance.

Ermanno Wolf-Ferrari's *The Secret of Susanna*, written in 1909, is in a class by itself as an exquisite comic jewel of opera. It's like Rossini writing one hundred years later, but with the added musical palate of Strauss and Puccini.

It's about a happily married couple, Susanna (Kathleen Brett) and Gil (Peter Barnes), who have one problem. Gil keeps smelling tobacco in the house, but neither of them smoke, nor does the mute servant Sante (Timothy Sherwood). Gil deduces that his wife must have a lover, and the opera depicts the terrible jealousy and confusion that reigns until Susanna is finally caught - smoking.

The funniest moment occurs when she thinks he has caught on and calmly explains that her "secret craving" makes the time pass more quickly when he's at the club. He listens to this justification, and thinks she's being appallingly hardened about having a lover.

What makes the opera so special is the meltingly Mediterranean music that is wonderfully melodic, from the Chopinesque piano piece Susanna plays off stage — which becomes a principal theme — to her languid cigarette aria. The opera deliberately takes a tiny domestic misunderstanding and blows it

up to grand opera proportions, so that Gil's jealousy echoes Verdi's *Otello*. But Wolf-Ferrari writes such yearning music for Gil that the comedy contains glints of real tragedy, like clouds passing over the sun.

That's what makes the work a comic masterpiece of human emotions, and the cast of Opera Piccola, under Thomas Schweitzer's direction, did a fine job of bringing the story to life.

Both Barnes and Brett have solid, well-focused voices, and excellent diction. They're appealing, talented performers who are learning a hell of a lot about opera on this national tour.

With the composer's luscious orchestral score reduced to piano there are losses in the work's tenderness, since Wolf-Ferrari wrote exceptionally for the strings. But pianist Wayne Vogan handled the impossible task excellently, only rushing some of the fast, bubbling sections too much.

The second opera is less known: Arthur Benjamin's *La Prima Donna*, (written in 1933).

Benjamin, an Australian who died in 1960, wrote quite a few attractive works, including a *Romantic Fantasy for Violin, Viola and Orchestra*, which Heifetz and Primrose recorded — (It's still available.)

This comic opera is set in 18th-century Venice, thus allowing for further operatic parody, especially of the Handelian sort. The elaborate comic plot lends itself to amusing musical pastiche of earlier eras. In spite of that it sounds very much like British music on the 1930s, especially music by Arthur Bliss.

The cast of six was quite polished, with special kudos to Steven Horst's vigorous comic acting, and the coloratura piping of Janet Dea (Edmonton's own) and Donna Ellen Trifunovich.

Next time Opera Piccola comes to town, be there.



Kathleen Brett and Peter Barnes in *Secret of Susanna*

Martin Scorsese's most muddled film

Detached dark comedy

After Hours
Geffen Company
Gameau Theatre

review by John Charles

When you're a nine-to-five guy, after hours can be a threatening time. And that's what Martin Scorsese's new movie *After Hours* is all about.

Most of Scorsese's movies are about relationships, and the terrible blocks which keep people from connecting. Often it's being macho-Italian and Catholic that becomes the stumbling block. In Scorsese's first feature *Who's That Knocking On My Door?* Harvey Keitel thinks of women as madonnas or whores. So when his girlfriend painfully confesses she was raped once, he can't handle it. If she was nice she would have died of shame, so she must have led her attacker on. End of relationship — and the movie.

Once you've seen that film it's easier to understand this director's men, and see that *Raging Bull* isn't about a boxer, it's about a man who can only deal with the world by punching it in the face.

After Hours, which has a script by graduate film student Joseph Minion, is a quirky, sometimes surreal story about Paul (Griffin Dunne), a New York word processor who seems bored and lonely. He meets an interesting girl, Marcy (Rosanna Arquette) in a restaurant, gets her phone number and spontaneously phones her. She invites him down to SoHo, New York's artsy area, and he grabs a taxi. The rest of the movie show us his adventures among the nocturnal bizzaroes which almost leads to his death before he's restored to his little world.

Minion's script is neatly schematized, and if you add up the key lines, and the meaning of the scenes — as my friend Alan Rutkowski and I did — you get a serious fable about a young guy who's been hiding from life, decides to investigate, barely escapes with his life, and returns to his word-processor, where the screen says: GOOD MORNING, PAUL, which is as personal a greeting as he can handle.

But, the seriousness of what the movie seems to be telling us doesn't jibe with what we see, or with Scorsese's style. All the people Paul meets turn out to be creeps, and usually sinister ones, and he can't wait to flee

from them, although they're calmly opening themselves to him. And the film's objective style encourages us to feel Paul is right to scurry away. There's no sense that he's really Avoiding Commitment by doing so. Only after the movie, using a tallysheet, does the pattern suggest that he was wrong to leave again and again.

The movie is sometimes funny, and it has a comic opening and resolution. But Scorsese's visual style is as heavy and menacing as in *Taxi Driver* or *Raging Bull*. There's a lot of ponderous camera movement in the first scenes, when nothing's going on, as if the camera is swinging into place to show us something significant. And there are lots of close-ups of objects, especially phones toward the end, when Paul is frantically trying to phone the police to come rescue him.

If Roman Polanski (for example) had directed the movie we might have gotten the right combination of unsettling black comedy that seems to be meant. Repeatedly the movie's atmosphere reminded me of Polanski's *Repulsion* and *The Tenant*, which are very disturbing paranoid films and move between super-realistic and fantasy-nightmare in a powerful way.

The unsettling feeling I had in *After Hours* was not because the movie was getting to me, but because the movie wasn't getting to me since I couldn't figure out its tone.

If our leading man, who looks like a young American Dudley Moore, was a better actor, maybe his reactions to the events would tell us he's wrong to be so paranoid. But Dunne gives us the same expressions and reactions throughout, and since we know nothing about Paul we can't compare this behaviour with any other.

The movie seems to adopt his viewpoint entirely, making ordinary things look sinister — keys tossed down from a balcony look like a death threat — and the script creates strange, absurd connections that further suggest Paul is right to flee.

Which suggests that Scorsese's movie shows us a dark comedy that's divorced from the tight, cold little script he's filming. The result — in spite of fine performances by the rest of the cast, notably Arquette, John Heard, Linda Fiorentino and Terri Garr — is Scorsese's most muddled film.

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