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OPERA REVIEW

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Opera By The Auto Mall

By Janos Gereben

From Oakland, drive 40 miles south on 880, an overcrowded, dangerous highway, paved like hell, and not with good intentions. Then, 10 miles north of San Jose, hang left on Auto Mall Parkway (ugh!), in search of Ohlone College. You are now in Fremont, a formerly rural town, now a mixed industrial-residential city of 200,000, with the largest number of Afghanistans in the U.S. Another distinction Fremont has is being home to America's newest opera company.

But all these introductory factoids fade into the background as you experience one of the most involving, emotional, entertaining, and enchanting "La Boheme" performances in years. David Sloss' Fremont Opera made a debut this weekend that boggled the mind and enraptured the heart.

Sloss - formerly with small, feisty, often excellent West Bay Opera - has been music director of the Fremont Symphony for almost three decades. For "Boheme," he put the entire orchestra on the stage of the college's Smith Center, engaged thrilling young singers from the Bay Area, hired Jonathon Field to direct a delightful and effective "semi-staged" performance, and even managed to squeeze the Oakland Symphony Chorus and Cantabile Youth Singers into the wings, upstage, and probably spaces that don't even exist.

So much for the boggle part... except for one more: against all conventional rules of opera, Sloss conducted the orchestra with his back to the soloists performing in a narrow space downstage, leaving the young singers without visual cues, using the orchestra as a giant accompanist. This was a setup that might have worked for a group of seasoned professionals performing together for a long, long time. It didn't seem to make sense in this situation.

And now for the rapture: it all did work, splendidly so. There was balance, clarity, projection, and above all, a solid gestalt of Puccini at his most lyrical, fervent, abandoned and sweeping - a wonderfully Italian "Boheme" in Fremont, home of the General Motors/Toyota NUMMI (New United Motor Manufacturing), and company sponsor Fletcher Jones Motorcars. The Sunday matinee was so much of an ensemble performance that one is reluctant to speak of individuals, but it has to be done; in fact, it's good to be able to report on such promising young talent.

The Mimi was NaGuanda Nobles, winner of Opera San Jose first Irene Dalis Competition. A tiny young woman, Nobles has a warm, beautiful voice, with secure, rich high notes. Sounding at times more mezzo than soprano, she projects the voice well, but not herself, an outstanding talent still in need of further coaching and experience to make better contact with the audience. Towering over Nobles was Harold Gray Meers, the tallest Rodolfo to the smallest Mimi, a tenor with a fine, clear voice, and a sincere involvement in the drama, although both going out of focus now and then.

Marnie Breckenridge, now apparently the busiest singer around, was the statuesque and stormy Musetta, with a "big" performance that was a bit more stagey and less authentic than what she usually delivers. Musetta must be more than artifice, and I am sure Breckenridge knows that better than anyone, even if knowledge was not translated into action. Baritone Jordan Shanahan was the vocally impressive Marcello, with just a bit of awkwardness in his stage performance, still in need of learning what to do with his hands. Igor Vieira's high and clear baritone made a fine Schaubard.

And finally, the one voice sure to be heard soon in major opera houses (especially those headed by wise intendants): Kirk Eichelberger's, as Colline, a majestic bass, deep and broad, with brilliant colors and thrilling power.

If you must do "semi," be sure to get Field to do the staging. Without sets, costumes, adequate lighting or even sufficient space, using only a chair here and some props there, this was a "Boheme" dramatically clear and clean: few shticks (a good one was the Schaubard singing his invitation to Café Momus to women in the audience), doing as little as possible, serving the story and the music - bravo!