

theater

'Kiss' Me, You Fool

ONE OF COLE PORTER'S MOST FAMOUS MUSICALS, 'KISS ME KATE' SHINES WITH MODERN FLAIR AND WINNING SONGS

by Jane Dieckmann

Glimmerglass Opera chose to mount Cole Porter's popular musical *Kiss Me Kate* to open its 2008 season, featuring four productions related to the works and characters of Shakespeare. This is the company's first venture into the Broadway musical, and a stunning show it is — colorful, witty, exuberant, and, as usual, a visual and musical treat.

Kiss Me Kate opened on Broadway in 1948. It won the first Tony awards ever given, five in all. It has an ingenious plot, complete with a play within a play — a feuding theatrical couple is playing a parallel couple in a performance of Shakespeare's *Taming of the Shrew*. Also part of the story is the interplay between a sophisticated, experienced stage couple and a simpler pair desirous of upward mobility (shades, perhaps, of *The Marriage of Figaro*). There is a lot of backstage business plus two gangsters who play key roles — they nearly steal the show.

Cole Porter wrote an admirable score — love songs, hate songs, popular blues and jazz, a traditional operetta number, many pieces with echoes of Italian popular and classical style. His clever lyrics feature amusing topical references, all sorts of allusions to Italy, and some direct Shakespeare quotations, including the musical's title.

Kiss Me Kate played with great success, and a 3-D film adaptation was made in 1953. The Broadway revival in 1999 made considerable changes, but Glimmerglass has re-created the original production here with no amplification and singers trained in the Broadway-musical tradition.

Kiss Me Kate is centuries and miles away from Handel's *Giulio Cesare* which I had witnessed the previous afternoon. For the musical, the wonderfully flexible orchestra — under the deft and nuanced leadership of David Charles Abell — could not have sounded more different. Violins went from playing crisp and precisely intoned baroque music to bluesy sounds; instead of basso continuo, we had swing and jazz.

The lead roles of Fred and Lilli (Petruccio and Kate in the play) were taken by baritone Brad Little and soprano Lisa Vroman. Both hail from upstate New York and from Broadway, where they have played in many shows, including *Phantom of the Opera*.

They also are collegiate friends, and they worked very well together. Both are real pros, and it showed. They acted and sang with assurance, poise, and rich tone, and with attention to varied moods and emotional states. Their

separate renditions of "So in Love" were beautifully distinct and very moving. The second couple, David Larsen as Bill/Lucentio and mezzo-soprano Courtney Romano as Lois Lane/Bianca, played in character well, exhibiting good amounts of clueless bewilderment and enthusiasm. Baritone Damian Norfleet as Paul sang and danced through "It's Too Darn Hot" with cool energy and humor. Talented singers and actors, many from the company's Young American Artists Program, competently filled the various smaller roles and sang the production numbers with happy energy.

Our two gangsters, played by Michael Mott (an Ithaca College graduate who has also appeared at the Kitchen Theatre) and Bradley Nacht were delightful in their parts as stagestruck criminals. Their

version of "Brush Up Your Shakespeare" — with extra verses that included a neat local pitch — brought down the house.

This production teemed with visual jokes, ultramodern touches (everyone talked on cell phones), comic moves, and brilliant direction by Diane Paulus, artistic director of the American Repertory Theatre. The "Globe Theatre" set, designed by John Conklin, served as background and catwalks for stagehands. It was supplemented by a box-like house lowered as set for the "Shrew" play. The backstage set showed a bank of lights, a separate dressing room/office for Fred, plus a dressing room for Lilli, both

wheeled on and off. Other scenes had backdrops, and a series of curtain-shaped panels were carried on, reversed and lit in different colors to add more variety. Petruccio tamed the Shrew against a set and costumes in black and white geometric op-art.

The lighting by Jane Cox was fabulous. Panels changed color with each verse of a song, and the Shrew's house and its background were lit at first in all green, with blue tones added later. Colorful costumes by Anka Lupes often matched the sets. Stagehands had their specially marked T-shirts. Kate's basic rose-colored spandex bodysuit, hardly Elizabethan, was a humorous touch. Everyone else in the "Shrew" part had beautiful period garb. The happy couple at the end of both plays were dressed head to foot in brilliant red.

Kiss Me Kate is filled with delightful melodies and lyrics, and many laughs. It is endowed with a great story. This production is as good as it gets. Glimmerglass has tackled musical theater head-on, with intelligence, skill, talent, and infectious enthusiasm.

The production continues through August 23. Contact www.glimmerglass.org for dates and times. ■



Lisa Vroman and Brad Little in *Kiss Me, Kate*. (Photo by Michael Manning/Glimmerglass Opera)