

Glimmerglass Shakes It Up

The Cooperstown opera house offers a quartet
of Shakespearean variations

By James MacKillop

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There's more to William Shakespeare than the words. This summer Glimmerglass Opera of Cooperstown has programmed four otherwise unconnected works for musical theater based on their roots in the plays of Shakespeare. Gone are iambic pentameter, Elizabethan dress and all the famous quotes. Instead, we have something like the Bard as librettist, with whole characterizations and segments of plot lines rearranged for musical advantage.

Additionally, general and artistic director Michael MacLeod employs the summer's theme to introduce the unexpected. Instead of *West Side Story*, he reminds us of the musical brilliance found in Cole Porter's *Kiss Me Kate*. Instead of a venerable warhorse like Verdi's *Otello*, MacLeod is staging the North American premiere of Wagner's early flop, *Das Leibesverbot*. It's set in the leather-jacketed 1950s with visual and musical gags that are laugh-out-loud funny. Really.

Just as the music takes Shakespeare forward to later times, so too Glimmerglass takes each production back to the Globe Theatre. For each of the four main events set designer John Conklin has reinvented Elizabethan space. He has constructed a giant timber superstructure, approximating the size of a Shakespearean theater, complete with pillars and the outline of boxed seating. The thing is on casters and apparently can be moved backward and forward with ease. With inventive lighting, such as that from Robert Wierzel for Handel's *Giulio Cesare in Egitto*, we get the darkness of exotic, forbidding Egypt, instantly transformed into the golden doorways of Ptolemy's palace. In each instance space is defined as it would have been in the Globe, so that sheets stretched on a frame evoke the backstage dressing rooms of mid-20th-century Broadway in *Kiss Me Kate*.

Unlike the Shaw or Stratford festivals, Glimmerglass is not a repertory company as each leading role is understood to be uniquely demanding. Neither are productions run endlessly; there are only eight performances of Wagner's *Das Leibesverbot*, even though it is the rarest of the season's offerings and the one most likely to be talked about in coming months. Although the Cooperstown company draws heavily from Central New York, at the 914-seat Alice Busch Theater you're just as likely to be sitting next to someone from Santa Fe or Atlanta as from Camillus. Opera is a niche market, but a passionate one.

Giulio Cesare in Egitto



The oldest opera of the summer, George Frideric Handel's *Giulio Cesare in Egitto* (*Julius Caesar in Egypt*), dating from 1724, has the most familiar premise: that of the great man's dealings with Cleopatra. This stretches the link to Shakespeare a bit, as Caesar is assassinated in Rome in the Bard's play *Julius Caesar*, and in another play it is Marc Antony, not Caesar, who dallies with the Queen of the Nile. No matter. Any excuse will do when it comes to reviving a baroque opera seria in Cooperstown.

This is quite a different story from what is told in history or other dramas, such as George Bernard Shaw's *Caesar and Cleopatra*. Director Robin Guarino and costumer Gabriel Berry also set the action in the 1930s, with the Romans dressed as natty fascists in maroon and khaki.

While in Egypt, Caesar's favor is sought by brother and sister. Tolomeo (countertenor Gerald Thompson) commits a diplomatic blunder when he holds up the severed head of Pompey, Caesar's former

ally, recently defeated in battle. Horrified, the Roman is more receptive to the dead man's widow Cornelia (mezzo Lucia Cervoni) and son Sesto (mezzo Aurhelia Varak), who want revenge against Tolomeo.

Wily as in all characterizations, Cleopatra (soprano Lyubov Petrova) resolves to win Caesar's support disguised as Lydia, a servant. As her plotting becomes unraveled, Cleopatra is forced to reveal herself and is captured. Caesar appears to be defeated. And a general betrayed by Tolomeo, Achilla (baritone Jonathan Lasch), comes to the fore by the final curtain, implying Egypt's fate will not lie in either Caesar or Cleopatra's hands.

The title role of Caesar presents unique difficulties. Originally written for a virtuoso castrato, the singer must demonstrate lightning versatility over eight notes that are drawn on again and again. Castrati no longer being on the labor market, the decision was made to cast muscular mezzo Laura Vlasak Nolen as the general, just as another mezzo, Aurhelia Varak, is Pompey's son Sesto.

Nolen's photograph in the program displays a quite feminine-looking woman, but under Guarino's direction she defines Caesar's character physically, with a heavy swing of the shoulders and a wide, jackbooted stance. In the original production, the singer for Caesar received three times the wage than the composer did, and Nolen displays the power and grace of a commander. Fittingly, her voice is not as high as that of Thompson as Tolomeo, who wins plenty of bravos for his second act's aria, speaking of his resolve to take Cornelia.

A fourth production, Vincenzo Bellini's *I Capuletti e I Montecchi*, is clearly based on *Romeo and Juliet*. Along with all the musical glories, this opera marks the Glimmerglass debut of phenomenal New York stage director, Anne Bogart. Also running this summer is a special concert performance of Mendelssohn's complete incidental music for *A Midsummer Night's Dream* with the Glimmerglass Opera Orchestra on Sunday, Aug. 17, 11:30 a.m.

Glimmerglass Opera is an upstate treasure, enjoying increasingly international esteem. The majority of the audience has come on pilgrimage from miles away, but it's only a 90-minute drive from the *Syracuse New Times* office on West Genesee Street.

All shows are presented in repertory. *Kiss Me Kate*, sung in English with projected titles, runs Saturday, Aug. 16, 8 p.m.; Tuesday, Aug. 19, 2 p.m.; and Saturday, Aug. 23, 8 p.m. *Giulio Cesare in Egitto*, sung in Italian with English titles, continues Sunday, Aug. 17, 3 p.m.; Thursday, Aug. 21, 8 p.m.; and Saturday, Aug. 23, 1:30 p.m. *Das Liebesverbot*, sung in German with English titles, will be performed Thursday, Aug. 14, 8 p.m.; Saturday, Aug. 16, 1:30 p.m.; and Friday, Aug. 22, 8 p.m. *I Capuletti e I Montecchi*, sung in Italian with English titles, runs Friday, Aug. 15, 8 p.m.; Monday, Aug. 18, 2 p.m.; and Sunday, Aug. 24, 2 p.m. Tickets range from \$51 to \$126; the Mendelssohn concert is \$48. For more information, call (607) 547-2255 or visit www.glimmerglass.org.



Caesar dressing: Anthony Roth Costanzo and Aurhelia Verek in *Giulio Cesare in Egitto*.

Das Liebesverbot



First performed when the composer was all of 22, *Das Liebesverbot* (*The Ban on Love*) opened and closed on the same night in 1836 and remained an embarrassment during Richard Wagner's whole career. Rediscovered about 25 years ago, the frothy Rossini-esque, wholly un-Wagnerian overture now gets airplay on classical music stations. So loosely based on Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* that major characters are missing and new themes introduced, we might not be getting the American premiere at all if it were not for artistic director MacLeod's scheme to link rarely seen works. Unburdened by a

ponderous production history, director Nicholas Muni stages the opera in 1950s America, when another form of Dionysian music was shaking up repressive complacency.

Luzio (tenor Ryan MacPherson), a young Brando-like tough-tender dude in a black leather jacket, leads us into the scene and narrates part of the action. While an unnamed king of Palermo is away, his German regent Friedrich (baritone Mark Schnaible) wants to close down the town. Not only is Carnival banned, but lovemaking outside marriage is punishable by death. This makes an immediate problem for young nobleman Claudio (tenor Richard Cox), who has impregnated his girlfriend Julia (soprano Juliet Petrus), who's hiding out in a convent. There she takes up with Claudio's pious sister Isabella (soprano Claudia Waite), who is persuaded that she can melt the Puritan Friedrich's heart. Resolved, Isabella gets up off her knees and puts on lipstick and sunglasses, knowing she has to get to work.

Early in the action the promise of comedy arises from a self-important deputy to Friedrich, Brighella (basso Kevin Glavin). Wagner, who read Shakespeare thoroughly, probably expanded Brighella from the character Dogberry in *Much Ado About Nothing*. In a subplot undermining Friedrich's iron rule, Brighella falls to the lures of Dorella (soprano Lauren Skuce), who forces him into drag to try to make time with her. In Wagner's libretto, this is not just comic relief but foreshadowing that the plot will be taking a lighter turn.

Out of the convent, Isabella turns into a zaftig femme fatale whose pursuit of Friedrich takes abrupt turns, one of them uncovering an abandoned wife, Mariana (soprano Holli Harrison). Like the repressive hypocrites in Greek drama, Friedrich turns out to crave what he seeks to destroy. He makes a pass at Isabella, and he is exposed. Meanwhile, much is made of dour Friedrich's being a German, and in the end the fun-loving Sicilians have triumphed over gloom and the stage explodes with energy.

A cynic might observe that *Das Liebesverbot* is Wagner for people who don't really like Wagner, but his champions have been at work to claim it as his own. Obviously influenced by the Italianate *bel canto* generation before him, as well as Carl Maria von Weber, Wagner here is developing his own distinctive voice, such as the introduction of the leitmotiv and the rapid movement between sequences. The theme of unrestrained sexuality shows up again in *Tannhäuser*, *Die Walküre* and *Tristan und Isolde*.

Also Wagnerian, the demanding music calls for big voices. Even as he is the villain, Friedrich's second-act aria, "So spat und noch kein Brief von Isabella?" allows him tragic dimension. Soprano Claudia Waite claims the largest share of the audience's heart with the coruscating brilliance of such arias as "So sei's! Für seinen feigen Wankelmut" at the beginning of the second act.



Grease is the word: Claudia Waite and Ryan MacPherson in *Das Liebesverbot*.

Kiss Me Kate



Let's have no blather about purists objecting to the elevation of popular fare like Porter's *Kiss Me Kate*. For the record, *Kate* is the first Broadway show to appear on the boards in Cooperstown, although Offenbach's *Orpheus in the Underworld* last summer was a 19th-century equivalent. No matter: Audiences are crazy about it. *Kate* has been scheduled for the most performances, 15, and is the hottest ticket of the season.

It's less frequently staged as an opera than such Broadway items as *Man of La Mancha* or Bernstein's *Candide*, but *Kate* makes the cut many times over. Soprano Lisa Vroman's delivery of the first act's "So in Love," plaintive in a minor key, is what fans travel miles to hear. The same is true of the rich resonance in baritone Brad Little's second-act soliloquy, Petruccio's "Where is the Life that Late I Led?"

Other numbers in a popular vein that were indeed once AM radio standards gain when highly trained voices raise them to the top, without betraying their origins. So it is with Damian Norfleet in the second act's sizzling opener, "Too Darn Hot," and Courtney Romano's naughty "Always True to You (In My Fashion)." Both leads excel on their popular sides. Vroman's novelty number, "I Hate Men," could be excerpted from the production and have a separate life as a comic video for the discriminating.



Brushing up their Shakespeare: From left, David Larsen, Courtney Romano, Jonathan Fiske Hill and Robert Kerr in *Kiss Me Kate*. **CORY WEAVER/GLIMMERGLASS OPERA**

The reverse question should be: Does mounting *Kiss Me Kate* as an opera diminish any of the demotic fun? Well, it's good to remember that the word "zany" originates from the Italian word for the kinds of clowns found in operas. The soft-shoe duet, "Brush Up Your Shakespeare," sung by the two debt-collecting thugs, played by Michael Mott and Bradley Nacht, still stops the second act. The duo earn even more laughs from an improvised last verse, "Brush Up Your Opera," with convoluted Porteresque rhymes flacking the company's other offerings of the summer.

An even gutsier spoof is directed toward Vroman's sparkling upper range. She keeps reaching for higher and higher notes, as if in a contest with a lark ascending—until Nacht's gangster pulls out his pistol and plugs the winged creature, who falls to the stage with a thud.

Stage director Diane Paulus' sense of visual wit never fails her, making *Kiss Me Kate* feel fresher than its 60 years would imply. Like the scene where Vroman's Lilli/Kate shoots at the men with a gun filled with colored tennis balls. Bella and Samuel Spewack's book for the show began as an elaborate in-joke on the off-stage lives of former theater legends Alfred Lunt and Lynn Fontanne while simultaneously being a life-imitates-art send-up of *The Taming of the Shrew*. In this effervescent restaging it feels far in advance of its time. Incidentally, the program lists Brad Little's hometown as Syracuse and Lisa Vroman's as Watertown.