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Capital Fringe Festival

Modest at Best, but No Less Operatic

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By Anne Midgette
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What is the difference between opera and musical theater? Some composers will tell you that it's an opera house. That's not the view of Opera Alterna, a small new company with a mission to bring opera to different kinds of spaces around the Washington area.

Example: the Capital Fringe Festival, where the company is offering a double bill, at the Warehouse mainstage, that is anything but grand. "The Women" and "Signor Deluso," both by Thomas Pasatieri, run well under an hour.

They are unmistakably opera, though, despite the small forces and the piano standing in for the original orchestration. One distinction lies in the way Pasatieri writes for the voice, and the way the performers sing. Opera is not amplified: no mikes here. Opera is also about conveying drama through music, and, even given the limitations of some of the young voices, the fact that Pasatieri knows how to make points in music comes through loud and clear.

Pasatieri is himself an illustration of how context can affect opera. These two pieces date from 1965 ("The Women"), when Pasatieri was at the start of what looked like a brilliant composing career, and 1974 ("Signor Deluso"), when he was being hailed as the next great thing in American opera. (The Washington Opera presented his "The Seagull" in 1978, with Evelyn Lear in the cast.) But the career returned to Earth; his works were seen as too tonal, facile and old-fashioned. By 1983 he had written 17 operas -- and left the field. He was making more money as one of Hollywood's most successful orchestrators, something he has been doing ever since: His credits include "The Shawshank Redemption," "The Little Mermaid" and, most recently, "WALL E."

In 2002, the Manhattan School of Music revived "The Seagull" -- which looked a lot better in an opera world now full of neo-romantic composers who are not so good at writing effectively for the voice. And Pasatieri found that he still had lingering traces of



The mother (Sarah Philippa, left) and the wife (Rachel Despina Toprac) of a man (Michael Weinberg) spar over who is most deserving of his love in "The Women." (Opera Alterna)

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the opera bug. A result, last summer, were two new Pasatieri operas: "Frau Margot" in Fort Worth, and "The Hotel Casablanca" for the 50th anniversary of the San Francisco Opera's prestigious Merola training program for young singers.

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Opera Alterna's double bill certainly showed that Pasatieri knows how to write opera. "The Women" is a miniature depicting a kind of purgatory in which a man's wife and mother fight over him and destroy him in the process. The blending and clashing of the three voices could have been quite powerful, had the voices in question been stronger.

"Signor Deluso" is an exuberant sendup of over-the-top comic opera plots, filled with effusive lovers leaping with alacrity to wrong conclusions in floods of extreme vocalism. The young lovers Celie and Leon have been separated for a year; Celie's father wants her to marry another; Celie worries that Leon may have forgotten her and faints; Signor Deluso, happening by, tries to revive her; Mrs. Deluso, spying them, decides they are lovers; and so on.

It is frothy and fun, and perfect for a young cast, though many of the exuberant arias were written for better voices than those available here. However, Daniele Lorio made a big sweet sound as Celie; Tad Czyzewski, a baritone, was a respectable Deluso; and Sarah Philippa, one of the company's two founders, was vocally apt, if a little clunky as an actress, as Deluso's wife and, in "The Women," the mother. Yufen Chou did yeoman service at the piano, holding it all together.

Incidentally, these works have some significant local connections: "Signor Deluso" had its premiere at Wolf Trap, and the first performance of "The Women," at Aspen, Colo., was conducted by a young contemporary of Pasatieri's named Leonard Slatkin.

These works will be performed again on July 26 at 9 p.m. and July 27 at 6:30 p.m.



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