

For Love or Money

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Manon (Heli Veskus), here with Carlo Barricelli as

Des Grieux

(Photo: Courtesy Rahvusoper Estonia)

Giacomo Puccini's "Manon Lescaut" by the Estonian National Opera, December 9, amounted to an enjoyable melodramatic diversion.

Manon Lescaut has a problem. Her enchanting beauty is a magnet for men, but what kind of men? An old well-to-do lecher and a penniless young romantic vie for Manon's affections in Giacomo Puccini's opera named for the lady who must make the fatal choice between her heart or her head, banal material comfort or soaring Eros.

Well, this being Puccini we know the choice will be love with all the attendant tragic consequences. The cherubic Heli Veskus was Manon in Friday night's performance of "Manon Lescaut" from the Estonian National Opera. Though no classic *femme fatale*, hers was the night's shining effort.

Some ambitious liberties were taken with Puccini's original. Puccini's opera was based on the 1731 novel by Abbé Prévost and was set in France and New Orleans in the late 18th century. The Estonian National Opera and Latvian stage director Andrejs Zagars have moved the action forward to the south of France in 1968, a turbulent year of student protests and anti-government actions.

The milieu of hipsters, bohemians and hedonists that comprise the social world of the opera made for enjoyable viewing. Latvians Renate Lorence and Kristina Pasternaka (Latvian National Opera) as set and costume designers respectively provided a marvelous and fun interpretation of the time and place. One could see the influence of 1960's French cinema being channeled in this "Manon Lescaut". The backdrops for each act were massive photographs. Vibrant colors in costumes and sets were delightful to behold.

The swank pad of Manon's rich, aging lothario, Geronte (Mart Laur), in Act II was especially pleasing, more so after it was taken over by a mob of nice-looking brightly plumed partygoers. A brilliant piece of ensemble singing, a madrigal, "Sulla vetta tu del monte", is performed for Manon's amusement.

Alas, Manon's vapid life of shoe collections, kept woman status and acedia aren't cutting the mustard without her true love Des Grieux, wonderfully done by Mart Madiste. As the party disperses, Manon is left alone and Des Grieux enters. They sing the duet "Vieni! Colle tue braccia stringi Manon che t'ama". Both performers

here were at their best. After trumped up charges of theft and murder (Geronte dies in a tussle at his flat as the gendarmes arrive) Manon and Grieux end up, in Puccinian fashion, in jail.

Acts III and IV run together without intermission, but with a set change. Joined in the hoosegow by a group of rebel students, Des Grieux gets his hands on a submachine gun and a singing Mexican standoff ensues; not something you see every day. Des Grieux is, however, outgunned. A cry for mercy follows and amidst high-fives from on-looking hippies, the couple is deported.

This isn't necessarily such a good thing. Act IV finds the lovers in a desert waste in Africa. Veskus's desperate and passionate singing and acting at the opera's conclusion was excellent musical theater.

Puccini's Italian libretto was cobbled together by commission and it shows; the storyline is thin and boils down predictable but entertaining clichés. The musical score, ably reproduced by the Estonian National Opera Orchestra and conductor Jüri Alperden, was also nothing out of the ordinary. This "Manon Lescaut" added up to visual pleasantness with some fine singing; less a piece of high art, than an enjoyable melodramatic diversion for a snowy evening.

Review by Mike Amundsen

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