

**J. Strauss II, Die Fledermaus (Premiere)** : Soloists, Estonian National Opera Chorus and Orchestra, Jüri Alpterten (conductor), Estonian National Opera, Tallinn 13.5.2010 (GF)

Stage Director and Designer: Michiel Dijkema

Costume Designer: Claudia Damm

Lighting Designer: Bas Berensen

Choreographer: Marina Kesler

**Cast:**

Gabriel von Eisenstein – Urmas Pöldma

Rosalinde – Aile Asszonyi

Frank – Mart Laur

Prince Orlofsky – Rauno Elp

Alfred – Oliver Kuusik

De. Falke – René Soom

Dr. Blind – Mart Madiste

Adele – Kristina Vähi

Ida – Kädi Kosenkranius

Ivan – Valentina Taluma

Frosch – Tõnu Kark

Cook – Koit Soasepp

'Õnne sa tunda saad, kui kõik mured unustad', (i.e. 'Happy is (anyone) who can forget, what you can't change). Those lines from the finale of Act I are written on the curtain at the Estonian National Opera – but upside down! What conclusions can be drawn from this? The literal message of the quoted lines is obvious and in *Die Fledermaus* each and everyone of the characters is dissatisfied with his or her life, but tries to forget it and create a new identity at Prince Orlofsky's party through imbibing as much champagne as possible. This is cleverly summarized in the short synopsis in the programme book:

**Act I** : Everybody has a problem

**Act II**: All problems are being drowned in alcohol

**Act III**: All problems reappear. Fortunately somebody is guilty: champagne!

But why upside down? Presumably the Dutch-German production team want to tell the audience that they will encounter a reading of the much-loved operetta which is something quite different from anything they have ever seen before. In his notes in the book Director Michiel Dijkema gives a couple of clues to his concept: 'Revenge is the motor of this story!' 'The search of erotic adventure is a main motive in *Die Fledermaus*'. He could have added 'Alcohol is a dangerous drug' although none of these statements are revolutionary readings of the libretto. What might possibly motivate the upside-down orientation of the motto on the curtain is what this is illustrated on the stage. Yet it is here that my objections start to creep in.

To me *Die Fledermaus* has always been the epitome of good humour, elegance, charm and playfulness. The characters may do silly things but deep inside they are rather happy-go-lucky, somewhat irresponsible individuals – people you can like. 'The revenge of the Bat', as the original title was, is there of course, but in my book Falke's aim is to play a trick on Eisenstein, between friends so to speak. In this production he walks about, in red tailcoat, like a Mephistopheles with diabolic expressions and laughter. Prince Orlofsky is a macho guy in black leather and bare chest, firing his revolver and beating the floor with a leather strap – *my* Orlofsky is a haughty, blasé, sexless individual whose boredom is his distinctive feature. This character is certainly turned upside down! The search of erotic adventure is of course omnipresent and no onlooker, however innocent, can be ignorant of this fact, however prudish a performance may be. Today however, over-sexification seems to be trendy and I lost count on how many times during this performance women lay on their backs with sprawling legs and men tried to get under the women's skirts. There was not a hint of understatement. Another tiring gripe – belonging in slapstick farce rather than operetta comedy – is the stumble-and-fall device. All right, if it happens once, and is done with finesse, it may be amusing but when it happens the umpteenth

time, then the producer has lost faith in the onlooker's intelligence and imagination.

And the alcohol? There is no secret that people drink, but I don't believe that an operetta performance at Estonian National Opera should be a social report on the deleterious effects of alcohol. Frosch is of course a boozier but in this production he belongs to the

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And the alcohol? There is no secret that people drink, but I don't believe that an operetta performance at Estonian National Opera should be a social report on the deleterious effects of alcohol. Frosch is of course a boozier but in this production he belonged to the most sober, even being able to perform two ballet pantomimes. Frank, however, threw up in the wine-cooler in Act II while one of the ballet girls vomited into the orchestral pit and Frank, upon arriving at his office next morning, had to do the same thing again – in his topper! This is as far from Viennese elegance as is possible to get.

To continue on this negative note I also reacted to the noisy delivery of the spoken dialogue. There was a lot of shouting, more connected with amateur theatre than professional operetta. The whole performance was hard-driven and over played and especially during the first act there was more laughter on stage than in the audience. My wife, who is a hardened theatre goer, actually left after Act II. Of course there were good things as well, but still much too much of everything. And let me hasten to add that no shadow should fall on the ensemble on stage and in the pit. All the singers and dancers were extremely professional, good actors all of them. The ballet sequences in the second act were a feast for the eye and the orchestra, which I have praised on many occasions, played with a precision and sonority that made me wonder if after all we had been transported to Vienna and was listening to the Philharmonic Orchestra there. The only missing ingredient was *charm*: the twinkle in the eye, the rhythmic lilt. But they played the insert number in Act II, *Unter Donner und Blitz*, at breakneck tempo with stunning precision. Speeds were rather swift generally in fact, which rhymed well with the production at large.

The stage picture was simple but effective: two rooms in white, the front one slightly askew to the right, the back one slightly askew in the opposite direction. In the front room a canopy, sometimes to the right, sometimes to the left. In the back room a grand piano, used in the first act as hiding place for Alfred – a brilliant idea – and in a couple of the musical numbers he moved the lid up and down in time with the music. It couldn't have been too comfortable a place to lie for so long!

What finally saved the production was the singing. Aile Asszonyi, a Rosalinde in rose outfit, was truly magnificent throughout, topping the performance with an exhilarating *Klänge der Heimat*, with a Hungarian cook in the background making goulash – spectacularly – but was it really necessary to drop a big rat into the soup? Kristina Vähi's Adele was also brilliant, especially in *Mein Herr Marquis*. Urmas Pöldma, for once a tenor Eisenstein, had the measure for the role though he took some time to warm up. Mart Laur's Frank was magnificent, acting as well as singing. Incidentally, he and Eisenstein were introduced not as Frenchmen, but as Finnish. Finnish and Estonian are rather closely related languages but different enough to give room for misunderstandings. Their introductory dialogue was obviously great fun but impossible to translate. However, in their duet towards the end of Act II they still sang *Merçi, merçi, merçi*, probably for the reason that *Kyllää* has the wrong stress. René Soom, as Dr Falke, has a truly superb voice and his *Brüderlein* was a vocal highspot in this performance. Oliver Kuusik was an agreeable Alfred and Rauno Elp, however idiosyncratic a portrait of Orlofsky he had to perform, stole the performance whenever focus was on him.

The weakness with *Die Fledermaus* has always been the third act which has very little music of any substance, apart from Adele's *Spiel ich die Unschuld vom Lande*, and a lot of spoken dialogue. Tõnu Kark was a virtuoso Frosch but I wish that some of the preamble had been cut. Instead, it was prolonged through the interlude being played three times, ever slower each time until everything fell apart the third time. This was actually great comedy, the faked motive was that the stagehands weren't finished with their work in time.

Bottom line then: great singing but questionable production.

**Göran Forsling**