

## POUR RAPPROCHER DE MARIE

"*I like silly opera*" opined the lady with the pearls two rows ahead, but I wonder if she didn't feel a bit silly herself at curtain-fall as this was in fact that rare bird, a *serious* staging of *La Fille du régiment*: seriously complete where the score was concerned; seriously funny where inventive comedy was concerned; seriously staged with no missing allusions (either political or sentimental or anything else) and above all seriously sung. The patrons of the ROH are no pushover (despite their amusing resemblance to the guests at the Marquise's party) but they surrendered instantly the music began, no tank was required to get them to cheer from start to finish. I am certain that Donizetti would have been enchanted by this deft treatment of his *opéra comique*, for one thing, it was a real *opéra comique*, with updated spoken-dialogue full of the kind of topical fantasy appropriate to the genre and moreover it was obvious to all that Monsieur Pelly had paid attention to every *nuance* both of text *and* music and had come to his own creative conclusions at every juncture. Stagings like this, particularly in this house where the despised lovechild of the Marquise has been mothballed since 1966 put a real term to the nefaste judgements of those twentieth-century moribund moghuls who believed they had the right to impose their bad taste upon operagoers everywhere, the twenty-first now insists, even where Donizetti's more frivolous *œuvre* is concerned, upon accurate, critical and concerned revivals, albeit in the vocabulary of the present. "*Silly*" operas take heed.

I myself relished the cameos that abounded throughout, the *répertoire théâtral* was rich indeed - especially the domestic accoutrements, saucepans, long-johns, potatoes and so on; the detailed encounters were very elegant and varied, especially vocally; the quite exceptional grouping of the coro, its massing, its imaginative usage turned it into a starring vehicle, and one adored the maps that turned into Tyrolean mountains. This *opéra* did not parody France but embodied it, from staging and colouring to the argot of a *prima donna*. There were some moments of pure joy, nowhere blemishes or *longueurs*.

In short it was successful, omnivorously comic with slapstick and stand-up yet made the very most of those heartache moments dear to the composer (and everyone else judging by the applause for 'Il faut partir'). The singers? No one is going to upstage Natalie Dessay, no one would want to, this "pocket *prima-donna*" of our day outperformed Lily Pons (this last lady being bent to dutiful deportment in the interests of patriotism) and anyway the Dessay virtuosity was simply astounding. A generous Marie, she found a real pair in Juan Diego Flórez whose engaging presence was compounded by the extravagant vocal ease we know so well and which brought the house down predictably. Alessandro Corbelli had a fine French profile to my surprise and completed an expert trio. I should imagine that Felicity Palmer thoroughly relished her Marquise, certainly we did, and the elevation (what else can you call it?) of Dawn French to the higher reaches of Debrett plugged a gap in Act II which I confess I had never noticed before.

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