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Excellent 'Figaro' shouldn't be missed

Cinnabar's take on classic opera blends passionate arias, low comedy for nearly flawless performance

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By **DAN TAYLOR**
THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

Figaro's life looks good. The former barber of Seville has a new career as the local count's right-hand man.

There's just one little problem. Figaro plans to marry his sweetheart Susanna, but his boss loves her, too.

Mozart's "The Marriage of Figaro" premiered in 1786, but it deals with a timeless dilemma: How do you save your marriage and keep your job at the same time? Opera's all about the singing, of course, but a classic story can't hurt.

Petaluma's Cinnabar Theater has assembled a cast of fine singers, backed by expert live musical accompaniment. "Figaro" would excel as a straight concert, but shrewd comic acting and professional-level production values make it an exceptional evening of music and theater.

The sold-out crowd greeted Cinnabar's opening-night performance with jubilation, and even though a four-act, three-and-a-half-hour opera is bound to induce some posterior paralysis, nobody seemed to mind. It's easy to understand why. This evening of high-class culture, spiced with low comedy, simply could not be more fun.

With music by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart and libretto by Lorenzo da Ponte, "The Marriage of Figaro" adapts the play of the same name by Pierre-Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais. It was the sequel to the playwright's "The Barber of Seville," which later became famous in Antonio Rossini's 1816 opera.

Music director Nina Shuman and stage director Elly Lichenstein, collaborators for two decades at Cinnabar, have a track record for

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making beautiful music together. Their outstanding achievement here is that the acting never stops just because the singing begins.

In the arias, soloists sing with power, passion and considerable humor, and the intricate duos, trios and quartets sound effortless. The recitative, or sung dialogue, provides its own delights beyond simply telling the story and linking the arias. Sung in English with precision and crisp diction, the recitative -- trimmed significantly to tighten the pace -- is as easily understood as spoken dialog.

Figaro himself (baritone Jason Sarten) sets the standard in the first act, singing to a seamstress' dummy as if it were the lascivious count. Spinning the stand-in villain about the stage while jauntily challenging him to a battle of wits, Sarten not only sings powerfully and gives a believable characterization, but he also looks like he's having the time of his life.

As the two leading heroines, sopranos Shawnette Sulker, as Figaro's fiancée Susanna, and Bharati Soman, as the wife of the cheating count, bring both charm and wit to their characters, plotting to help Figaro and humble the count. The crystal purity of their respective solos place their arias among the production's high points.

In the third act, when the Countess laments the loss of her husband's love, Soman's singing takes "Figaro" well beyond comedy -- and even romance -- to wistful drama.

The fourth-act garden scene, resolving a tangle of criss-crossed romantic assignations, offers Sulker a particular chance to soar. Susanna knows a jealous Figaro is spying on her and slyly sings a song of passion to an unnamed lover, to taunt her fiancée.

As the count, baritone Martin Lewis makes a dashing would-be adulterer, striking enough to be a credible threat as a wolf, and sings with power and precision while maintaining his character with every phrase. Even his recitative asides during a scene full of court intrigues advance the count as a villain we love to loathe.

A sizeable supporting cast meets the standard set by the leads.

Kathleen Moss, cross-dressed as the amorous page boy Cherubino, who in turn disguises himself as a girl, is bound to become a crowd favorite during the run of this show. When Cherubino is sent off to the army, wearing a pan as a mock helmet, Moss mugs and prances like a born clown.

Other standouts include Bonnie Brooks as Marcellina, who claims Figaro is betrothed to her, and Miguel Evangelista as one of the Count's co-conspirators. In her solo opera debut at Cinnabar, Morgan Harrington makes a lively appearance as Barbarina, who fancies Cherubino.

John Bonnoitt, as another of the count's allies, was a bit stiff opening

night, in a role he only was cast to play twice, with Razvan Georgescu scheduled to play the part starting tonight.

Detailed, often ornate costume designs by Lisa Eldredge did every bit as much to define the characters as the actors did, and helped set the scene just as much as the dignified and attractive set design by Patrick Kroboth.

Absolutely forced to find fault with the opening-night performance, a dedicated nitpicker might mention the count's loose wig or a single flat horn note, but both flaws are so easily corrected it hardly matters.

Live opera, supported by an 11-piece live orchestra that can make the almost obligatory overture a happy event, is a rare treat north of the big city and south of the next big city. It shouldn't be missed.

THEATER REVIEW

"The Marriage of Figaro"

Where: Cinnabar Theater, 3333 Petaluma Blvd. N., Petaluma

When: 8 p.m. Fridays and Saturdays through April 16; 2 p.m. April 10; 7:30 p.m. April 13

Tickets: \$28-\$30

Contact: 763-8920, www.cinnabartheater.org

Bottom line: Fine voices, consistently impressive comic acting, excellent live musical accompaniment, lavish costumes and an attractive set add up to a rare evening for local opera fans.

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