

RIGOLETTO IN RUINS: ROME'S TEATRO DELL'OPERA MOVES TO ITS SUMMER STAGE

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"Ora mi guarda, o mondo!"—"Look at me now, oh world!" exclaims the hunchbacked jester Rigoletto at the end of Verdi's opera of the same name, "Here I am a jester, and there lies a ruler!" The ruler in Rigoletto's proud declamation is an unnamed Duke of Mantua, whose murder Rigoletto has tried to arrange to avenge his daughter Gilda's ravishment at the Duke's callow hands. After a few more lines expressing his triumphant joy, however, Rigoletto suddenly hears the Duke somewhere in the distance singing from the opera's signature aria *"La donna è mobile."* "Is this a nocturnal illusion?" the jester asks himself before realizing that the Duke is very much alive. On further inspection, he sees that the corpse before him is not the Duke but Gilda's mortally wounded frame. Besotted with infatuation for her seducer, and aware of the assassination plot, she had used the cover of a raging storm to take the Duke's place and save his life at the cost of her own. Gilda lives long enough to comfort her father with promises to await him in heaven. When she expires, the anguished Rigoletto can only fulminate against a curse placed on him in the opera's first scene by the courtier Monterone, whom Rigoletto mocked after his own daughter was outraged by the Duke.

In August, Rome's opera theater programmed four performances of *Rigoletto* for its summer stage at the Baths of Caracalla, an ancient institution that survived the Fall of Rome and continued in use until it was despoiled in the 6th century. Rome's opera has been staging outdoor performances among its ruins since 1937, but its most famous incarnation came in 1990, when it hosted the "Three Tenors" concert, an internationally telecasted extravaganza featuring Luciano Pavarotti, Plácido Domingo, and José Carreras. The venue has its challenges, however. In 2001, the company had to install a movable

stage to avoid stress on the ruins, which are a major daytime tourist attraction. The open air format is pleasant on a Roman summer evening (performances usually begin at 9pm), but the lack of an enclosed space necessitates amplification of the singing—which not all operagoers enjoy—and limits what a stage director can do.

Damiano Michieletto is one of Europe's more creative opera directors working today and made the most of his opportunity. In his program note, he describes *Rigoletto* as a work with "all the characteristics of a perfect *film noir*." The opera has, after all, seduction and murder, anonymous identities, spooky nocturnal settings, casual violence, unapologetic brutality, and, when done right, some dark humor. Reading Michieletto's thoughts on Verdi's opera, one might have expected the shadowy 1940s stylings one commonly sees in opera. That dramatic decade still lingers in our cultural imagination as the most evocative idiom to express human depravity and desperation—to the point that one could say it is overused in stagecraft.

Michieletto avoided that trope at some cost by setting his *Rigoletto* in a debauched 1970s. The Duke is a low-end mafia hood who deals in stolen goods and loose women. Carla Teti's costumes dress his court in the louche outfits of that decade, while Paolo Fantin's sets revolve around its unfortunate selection of automobiles. Gilda's innocence is on display in a garish carousel that gets the occasional swing. Film projections alternate between close-ups of the characters as they perform their misdeeds and flashbacks to happier times (Filippo Rossi is credited for "live camera direction.") We thus see Rigoletto's late wife playing on a beach with Gilda as a little girl and Gilda sneaking out to party at some disco, where she first meets the Duke in his disguise as a poor student. Smoke clouds suggest a noir-ish dimension, but by the 1970s *noir* as a genre had yielded to the gritty realism of social critique. It is this latter quality that more closely defines Michieletto's production, whatever his original intentions may have been.

This was not exactly Michieletto's most dynamic staging. *Rigoletto* has been set in mafia-like surroundings plenty of times before. His work is often reinterpetive, but almost always in a way that respects the opera and finds new insights into its libretto. Here, for example, Rigoletto disperses the Duke's mocking courtiers by seizing one of their pistols

and driving them off stage. The effect added a resonance to their choral lines about the wisdom of being prudent, which has its roots in Renaissance ideas about the virtue of discretion. In the finale, he avoided the suspension of disbelief required to accept that Gilda can sing a comforting *scena* after being fatally stabbed (or, in this production, shot) and instead had her appear to her father as a ghost.

Verdi's *œuvre* is suffused with the futility of revenge. Characters who pursue it in his operas never end well and often inflict terrible—and usually inadvertent—harm on others. The theme meant so much to the composer that he initially titled his opera "*La Maledizione*"—"The Curse"—instead of *Rigoletto*, which is hardly a proper name but rather a stock stage name for a court jester who, like the Duke, remains fundamentally anonymous.

The range of feeling in the title character, however, overwhelms the opera's other significances and can lead one to forget that the censors Verdi confronted in Austria-ruled Venice compelled a resetting of the opera from the Kingdom of France, where the action takes place in Victor Hugo's original play *Le roi s'amuse*, to a politically less sensitive Italian duchy. A successful Rigoletto must be cynical enough to mock his betters at court and jaded enough to inhabit an atmosphere of fakery. He must also have the tenderness and vulnerability to protect his daughter from the world's cruelties and to honor faithfully the memory of her mother, who loved Rigoletto out of pity despite his deformity and poverty. Finally, he must be able to summon the wrath to pursue murderous revenge when wronged, a sentiment the character expresses to the rhythms of a military march. The veteran baritone Roberto Frontali was in full force at all of these moments, even if he resisted the interpolated high notes more ambitious singers take in Rigoletto's grandiose moments.

The young Czech soprano Zuzana Marková was unknown to me before this performance, but she delivered an impassioned Gilda. Occasionally, the technique was a bit wan, but she combined a soaring upper register with clever drama. Ioan Hotea replaced the scheduled tenor Piero Pretti as the Duke. Hotea's warm, golden sonorities delivered the role with an appealing lightness and marked a fine achievement in his burgeoning international career.

Bass Riccardo Zanellato and mezzo-soprano Martina Belli were a fine duo as the assassin Sparafucile and his accomplice sister Maddalena. Dario Russo's stentorian Monterone had the gravitas of a future Rigoletto. Riccardo Frizza led a praiseworthy performance that successfully competed with cicadas, airplanes, and a pop concert going on somewhere nearby.