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Frost Opera Theater triumphs with ambitious world premiere of “The Leopard”

By Lawrence Budmen

(https://southfloridaclassicalreview.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/105-a€_The-Leopard22Opera3-2022-4.jpg)

Kim Josephson starred in Michael Dellaira’s *The Leopard*, presented by Frost Opera Theater at the South Miami-Dade Cultural Center in Cutler Bay. Photo: Mitchell Zachs

In an age when most opera composers write intimate works with small casts and modest settings, Michael Dellaira has dared to think big.

Dellaira’s *The Leopard* is an unabashedly grand opera with a large cast of characters set against historic societal upheaval. The world premiere of this ambitious work, seen Sunday at the South Miami Dade Cultural Arts Center in Cutler Bay, was a landmark production for the University of Miami’s Frost Opera Theater.

Based on the novel *Il Gattopardo* by Giuseppe Tomasi di Lamperdusa, the opera chronicles the life of Don Fabrizio Corbera, Prince of Salina. The impoverished aristocrat, who is known as “The Leopard,” is navigating a rising tide of populist forces in an attempt to unite disparate provinces into a unified Kingdom of Italy. In attempting to protect his family’s influence, prestige and very existence, he sacrifices the aspirations and happiness of his daughter Conchetta. The story was turned into an extravagant 1963 film by Luchino Visconti (with Burt Lancaster as Don Fabrizio). Dellaira collaborated with the late poet J.D. McClatchy on this adaptation.

Dellaira has largely succeeded in constructing an old school operatic pageant that veers from family saga to socio-political drama. McClatchy’s libretto is literate, intelligent conceived and, at times, emblazoned with wit. Dellaira’s conservative musical idiom embellishes the tale in extended arioso with set pieces (arias and ensembles) at crucial theatrical junctures.

The first of the opera’s two acts, which sets up the expository clash of opposing forces and tensions within Don Fabrizio’s family would be more effective with some judicious shortening of some of the six scenes. Ultimately the tragedy of Conchetta’s loneliness and Don Fabrizio’s valiant attempt to navigate societal change is deeply affecting.

The entrance aria for Angelica, daughter of the nouveau rich Don Calogero, is an unabashed florid showpiece, set against a lush orchestral backdrop of shimmering strings. There is an Italianate quality beneath the score’s textures, particularly in the haunting and sentimental waltzes of the ballroom episodes. The ardor of Conchetta’s solo of ill fated love for Tancredi (Don Fabrizio’s nephew and ward) flows in lines tinged with pathos.



In the epilogue, set in Palermo in 1910, her denunciation of Don Fabrizio’s portrait packs a dramatic wallop. Throughout the scenes of gaiety and tragedy, Dellaira’s orchestral writing sparkles in multihued expressive colors. Wisely, he does not overplay Don Fabrizio’s death scene, the distant sound of a guitar providing an effective underpinning.

The composer could not have wished for a better production. This presentation was a huge step forward for Frost Opera Theater. For the first time, the university’s opera department performed in a real theater with adequate stage and pit facilities. (Previous productions were staged at Gusman Concert Hall where compromises always had to be made in staging and musical values.) With a combined cast of faculty and students, the difference in venues was palpable. The theater’s excellent acoustic allowed the voices to shine and the playing space encompassed a series of striking stage pictures that captured the drama’s historical milieu.

As Don Fabrizio, Kim Josephson commanded the stage. Looking every inch the aging, pragmatic aristocrat, his robust baritone and outstanding English diction vividly conveyed the protagonist’s smiling face and inner turmoil. His resonant voice rose to eloquence in the Don’s second act aria “Sleep is what Sicilians want.” Stella, Don Fabrizio’s wife, is basically a character role, but Robynne Redmon’s opulent mezzo elevated it. There was throbbing tension between Redmon and Josephson as they argued about the future of their home, class and

family.

Margarita Parsamyan had the dusky timbre and dramatic projection to encompass Conchetta’s journey from star-struck lover to embittered tragic heroine. As Tancredi, Minghao Liu’s powerful tenor had ring at the top and he cut an ardent suitor as he danced with Yaqi Yang as Angelica. Yang exhibited a larger-than-life stage persona and gleaming high register in Angelica’s showcase aria.

Frank Ragsdale’s nimble character tenor and scene-stealing characterization made Father Pirrone’s every appearance eventful with his repeated sigh of “God help us!” Theandolwethu Mamba personified Don Calogero’s conniving political ambition in a powerful bass-baritone.

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Photo: Mitchell Zachs

Kevin Short’s entrance in Act II as Cavaliere Chevalley di Monterzuolo, an old school aristocrat who has survived the societal shift, brought his terrific, dark bass with the restless orchestral currents underscoring his lines. Nicholas Skotzko was a sonorous Don Onofrio, steward of the estate, and Kevin Gwinn a forthright Count Cavriaghi, Tancredi’s fellow revolutionary soldier. Other roles were capably sung by Abby Guido, Mia Flora, Leah Torres and Caroline Morales Mejia. The students were fully equal to their teachers, performing on a high professional level.

Gerard Schwarz brought out the full measure of Dallaira’s soundscape, drawing lustrous playing from the Frost Symphony Orchestra. His fine pacing and balance kept the voices to the fore while moving the drama forward. The excellent chorus sang with vigor as peasants and nobles.

Jeffrey Buchman’s staging fully conveyed the familial passions, class tensions and societal sweep of the drama. Rosa Mercedes’ graceful choreography in the ballroom sequences had a ghostly undercurrent, suggesting the twilight of an era.

Cameron Anderson’s backdrop of a window and curtains opened to picture a dead

horse, a huge portrait of Don Fabrizio and Sicilian landscapes. In a hunting and battle sequence, the blood red lighting by John Cuff portrayed the violence of a society in turmoil. Camillia Heath’s costumes were eye-filling and luxuriant.

Dallaira’s *The Leopard* deserves a future with repeated productions elsewhere. Opera has many faces and he has proven that epic musical story-telling can still be compelling in the 21st-century. Frost Opera Theater director Alan Johnson is to be applauded for his faith in Dellaira’s creation and one hopes that he will continue to utilize the Cutler Bay venue to present opera that challenges students and audiences alike.

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1. Posted [Mar 16, 2022 at 9:27 am \(#comment-335245\)](#) by [Jack M. Firestone \(http://www.firestonecapital.com\)](http://www.firestonecapital.com)

Bravi to all. This was a huge accomplishment for the Frost Opera Theater. Kudos to Alan Johnson, Jeffrey Buchman, and of course, Gerard Schwarz.

Thanks for bringing this great production to us.

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