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Bristol Riverside Theater Review: 'A Comedy of Tenors'

By Neal Zoren

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Bravo Beppo! Beppo is a purposely unbilled character in "A Comedy of Tenors," and his entrance, which contains a happy surprise, breathes new and needed life into Amy Kaissar's production of Ken Ludwig's farce at Bristol Riverside Theatre.

For that matter, brava Racon! Tatiana Racon is another character, this time expected, who makes a significant difference in how the non-stop gags, verbal acrobatics, and downright slapstick antics inherent in Ludwig's play are received at Bristol.

Kaissar's production is a tale of two acts. The first includes snappy lines and plenty of chances for rollicking laughter to ensue, but somehow it plays flatly, rarely realizing the potential with which Ludwig endowed it. All of the right literary and farcical elements are in place, but nothing or no one lights a spark to ignite the proceedings enough to create the brand of comic clockwork on which this show depends. You see what's supposed to be funny and why it might rate laughs, but in execution all remains static and inert.

The second act is like an entirely new show even though the same actors are continuing their performances from the first. The difference is Beppo, a bellhop in a Paris hotel where opera singers, their impresario, a jealous wife, and a secretive daughter congregate before presenting an all-star concert to an audience of thousands.

A Venetian and former gondolier, Beppo, still unseen, is heard beautifully crooning "O Sole Mio" as he guides luggage toward a star tenor's room. The sound puts ideas in the head of the impresario, who has lost one tenor, and possibly two, of the three he needs to entertain the Parisian multitudes as advertised.



From left, Michael Padgett, Jef Canter, and Benjamin Lurye in 'A Comedy of Tenors' at Bristol Riverside Theater through March 27. Photo by Mark Garvin.

Beppo finally appears to a big laugh, thanks to the surprise I mentioned earlier, and suddenly, Kaissar's production begins to work as intended.

Timing that was missing the first act is established or restored. There is a transformation, especially in the actor portraying Beppo, that sets the show's motor purring and moving at a speed and precision that reveals "A Comedy of Tenors" in all of its glory.

As if Beppo and his exuberant sunniness isn't enough, Kaissar's second act is helped by the introduction of that other character, the feline Russian soprano, Tatiana Racon. Through gymnastics and insatiable romantic appetite, she enlivens "Comedy of Tenors" and ups the level of its cylinders, all of which are miraculously popping at once.

The miracle is easy to explain. It comes from the actors playing Beppo (Jef Canter) and Racon (Oakley Boycott). They revolutionize Kaissar's show with energy, wit, and a sense of sheer fun that was previously absent despite attempts of another actress, Barbara McCulloh, to get the first act rolling.

The disparity between the two acts at Bristol illustrates how acting, and different approaches to the same material, can influence a production.

The first begins in high dudgeon, with characters screaming and in a dither about what seems like petty nonsense exaggerated to anxiety rather than real problems. The opening characters seem too hysterical, even for farce. They go into top gear before they establish the nuances of Ludwig's escapade. There's a lot of noise and temperament but no comedy. It's drowned out by the mayhem.

Jim Shankman, as the impresario, is particularly guilty of overdoing his part and misunderstanding that his character, once the artistic director of an opera and former mayor of Cleveland, should therefore have finesse and polish to temper his tantrums and make them more acidly sarcastic and less frantically burlesque.

The frenzied opening gives the next characters to enter no place to go, no way to escalate the missed perceptions and unfortunate coincidences that lead to the comedy. The production becomes dull and mechanical. It doesn't help that a young couple allegedly in passionate love, and acting out flagrante delicto under a blanket as others populate their love nest, seem more abashed and innocent than romantic or consumed by pheromones.

It looks as if this “Comedy of Tenors” is going to be a wash until, presto, there’s Canter’s Beppo. His lightness and cheerfulness obliterates the errant tone of the first half and propels Kaissar’s cast, Shankman included, into delightful second act that sails flawlessly and earns both genuine belly laughs.

As indicated, Boycott also plays a big part in the transition. Like Beppo, her Racon exudes spirit and surefire knack for getting what she wants, and her slithering lithely across the hotel room sofa, now a panther, now a cobra about to strike, is a production in itself. Boycott’s Racon is the picture of purpose, not only a girl who can’t say no but one who won’t take no for an answer, especially where intimacy is concerned.

Barbara McCulloh may fight to excite the first act but triumphs with Boycott and Canter in the second. That includes her interesting take on Maria, a singer’s oft-betrayed wife.

Benjamin Lurye is an amiable Max, both opera star and belittled factotum to the impresario, also his father-in-law. Lurye, Canter, and fellow tenor Michael Padgett have the magnificent voices needed to convey three stars of international opera. Their “Libiamo” (Let’s Drink) from “La Traviata” is a stunner. They light up the Bristol stage any time they vocalize, and when Canter has Beppo belt solos.

One delight upon entering the Bristol auditorium is the hotel room Jason Simms fashioned with plush furniture, art deco touches, and a view of the Eiffel Tower that makes one yearn for Paris.

Linda B. Stockman does generally well with wardrobe choices, especially for the women, but the combination with which she dresses Padgett’s youngest tenor, is both ludicrous and atrocious. Sleeves may be recommended for the ingenue’s blouse. And, lastly, Natalie Robin and Michael Keck do a fine job with lighting and sound, with Robin flooding Paris in inviting sunlight.

A Comedy of Tenors, Bristol Riverside Theatre, 120 Radcliffe Street, Bristol, Pennsylvania. Through Sunday, March 27, Wednesday and Thursday, 7:30 p.m. , Friday and Saturday, 8 p.m., Wednesday and Saturday, 2 p.m., and Sunday, 3 p.m. \$43 to \$50. 215-785-0100 or www.brtstage.org.

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