



Countess Maritza

by Imre Kálmán, directed by Guillermo Silva-Marin

Toronto Operetta Theatre, Jane Mallett Theatre, Toronto

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by Christopher Hoile, Principal Reviewer for Stage Door

Waltz Your Worries Away

“Countess Maritza” by Imre (or Emmerich) Kálmán is one of the greatest of all Silver Age Viennese operettas. Lovely melody follows catchy tune in uninterrupted succession. When one sees it play so effectively on stage as in the Toronto Operetta Theatre’s latest production, one can only wonder why such a marvelous work, a repertory work in Central Europe, is not as well known in North America as “Die Fledermaus” or “The Merry Widow”. Yet, because of the TOT, Toronto is well acquainted with “Maritza”. This is the TOT’s third production of it in twenty years. How lucky Toronto is to have the TOT to keep such joyous works alive!

“Maritza” became a worldwide hit following its première in 1924. Maritza, a wealthy land-owner, is constantly besieged with proposals of marriage by impoverished noblemen. Knowing that all they are interested in is her money, she has become wary of all men and announces her engagement to the fictitious Baron Koloman Zsupán (a character from Johann Strauss’s “Der Zigeunerbaron”). To Maritza’s surprise and consternation a lovelorn baron of that very name turns up to claim Maritza as his fiancée. Meanwhile, Maritza is falling in love with one of her staff, the bailiff Bela Törek, who is in reality Count Tassilo, an impoverished nobleman who has taken on the work to pay off his father’s debts and amass enough money for a dowry for his sister Lisa. The barriers of wealth and class are compounded by suspicions on each side as to the real intentions of the other, giving the work a complex psychological dimension not always found in operetta. Nigel Douglas’s new English version is especially good at finding witty equivalents for the lyrics.

The chief glory of this production is the performance of Elizabeth Beeler in the title role. She has previously showed a great flair for comedy in the TOT’s productions of “The Chocolate Soldier” and “Die Fledermaus”, but here she combines a striking stage presence with beautiful singing and highly nuanced acting to make Maritza more than a typical operetta heroine but also a sympathetic and intriguing character. Beeler carefully delineates Maritza’s changing attitude toward Tassilo from disdain to fascination to love, disappointment and jealousy with a number of points in between where these intermingle. She has a bright, crystalline soprano that shines through in ensembles but that she is also able to give an affecting air of fragility. It is Beeler’s ability to communicate conflicting feelings such as in Maritza’s play-acting at love with Tassilo in “Waltz Our Worries Away” that give the production its depth.

As Tassilo, Kurt Lehmann as an expressive, beautifully cultured voice that brings out the emotion on such hits as “Play Gypsy!” This makes it all the more surprising that this sensitivity and grace do not extend to his acting or dancing. He is fortunate to be paired with Beeler, who frequently has to do the acting for both of them. As Lisa, Rachel Cleland-Ainsworth has a clear soprano and a pleasant demeanour but is not quite as engaged with her character as she could be.

On the other hand, both Curtis Sullivan and Keith Savage light up the stage whenever they appear. Sullivan is the domineering Prince Popolescu, who is one of Maritza’s more aggressive suitors. One wishes his role gave him more chance to sing. Savage makes the befuddled Baron Zsupán into a richly comic character who has a inner puppylike nature beneath his outward pose of egotism. He is so fleet of foot one wishes he had more chance to show off his dancing.

Margaret Maye is much better as the gypsy fortune-teller Manja than as Tassilo’s wealthy aunt Princess Bozena. While she somehow expunges the clichés from the first role, the second really requires a star turn from a comedienne (like Denise Ferguson in 1991) if it is to succeed. Viennese operettas have a strange penchant for coming to a complete halt in Act 3 for an interlude of spoken comedy (e.g., the jailer Frosch in “Die Fledermaus”). In the absence of just the right comedian, it would be better to excise the scene entirely and head straight for the conclusion. Sean Curran has to try rather too hard to be funny as the Princess’s theatrical companion Penizek. In minor roles Christopher Blair is very effective as Tassilo’s friend Karl Stephen as is Saemi Chang as Maritza’s friend Ilka.

As usual the operetta is directed by TOT General Director Guillermo Silva-Marin. While his choreography is not always successful, his emphasis on the psychological interplay of the characters, so well expressed by Beeler and Savage, gave an intelligence to what is so often dismissed as “light” entertainment. TOT scenic designer has become an expert at creating elegant sets that suggest much without ever seeming minimal, enhanced as always by Cameron A. More’s sensitive lighting. Conductor Wayne Strongman led the 16-member orchestra in a lively account of the score, particularly good at picking up the jazzy influences of each of Zsupán’s numbers and at bringing out the sensuousness of the waltzes.

The virtues so outweigh the flaws in this production that anyone unfamiliar with this lovely work should make sure to see it. Those already familiar with the score will enjoy it all the more on stage. ©Christopher Hoile