

During our trip to Poland in April 2003 we saw **Mozart's Don Giovanni** by the National Opera at Teatr Wielki. It was a new co-production with the Los Angeles Opera, supervised from the US by LA's Artistic Director Placido Domingo. Stage design, costume design, choreography and stage direction were all by Poles or artists working in Poland, so I hope that LA's part of the "co" was to pay the bills. The collaboration came about when Domingo was impressed by a Warsaw production of Madama Butterfly which was staged a couple of years ago by the Washington Opera, of which he is also the A.D.

The singers, all Polish, were unknown to me, but they ranged from good to spectacular. All three female roles were sung outstandingly, which is rarely the case – typically one soars above the others, or another drags down the quality, but not here. Even the secondary role of Zerlina was gloriously sung by a dazzling soprano who gave up nothing to the leads. The men were less spectacular, esp. the singer in the title role was a little light, more on the scale of a tenor than a baritone. Leporello and Don Ottavio were good but not memorable, but then these are not demanding roles (because Mozart couldn't find top-notch singers for the premiere in Prague).

But the highlight of the show is the staging. Stage design is like the Elizabethan Globe, very bare. It seemed a waste for this vast stage with its advanced technical capabilities going unused, but as in Shakespeare, the action proceeds quickly and scene changes are very fluid and immediate without waiting for furniture or sets to be moved. Quite a contrast to the traditional static stage design of opera. The action is as if directed by Rene Magritte, with some totally off-the-wall visual non-sequiturs. Leporello walks out trailing a red fiber optic, which then disappears, hoisted into the flies. Several times, a small ballerina (with the proportions of a child, not a dwarf) traipses about the stage en pointe, totally ignored by the singers. The ball in Don's castle is partly in the garden, where the trees (represented by dancers hidden in narrow green pyramids, somewhat reminiscent of how characters are costumed in theme parks) join the guests in dancing.

The cemetery scene does not show the Commendatore, only his disembodied voice is heard - that is a bit of a letdown. When he shows up at supper, he is dressed not in the traditional armor or regal cape, but only in boxer shorts! The climactic dragging of Don into the pit is one spectacularly picturesque piece of stagecraft. It takes a singer with some athletic ability to pull off – anyone with the gravitas of Luciano Pavarotti need not apply (quite apart from the difference in vocal range).

The production is now playing in LA until June 22. I highly recommend it to anyone who can make it out there.

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