

RL THE LIGHT IN THE PIAZZA
Through 12/29: Wed-Sat 12/18-12/21, 7 PM, Sun 12/22, 1:30 PM,
Fri-Sat 12/27-12/28, 7 PM, Sun 12/29, 1:30 PM, Lyric Opera House,
20 N. Wacker, lightinthepiazzathemusical.com, \$35-\$219.

THEATER

bone—for a show so suffused with pain. “Joy is different than happiness,” she said. “Joy also comes from a depth of sadness, for me. It has to be in there to feel that sense of it.”

Torrence, who in addition to creating the piece also plays Robert Murray, the stage manager, believes his show is ultimately about hope. He drew attention to the discipline of clowning, with its built-in emotional seesaw, as context for his show’s blend of levity and tragedy. “Red-nose clowning is these highs and lows,” he said. “What do we do with horribleness?”

It’s the play’s obsession with technique—with “doing it right, this time,” as the comedian Eddie Foy (Ryan Walters) puts it—that keeps hope alive. That doesn’t change in its new staging, with its larger scope. A glorious singed colonnade, designed by Jeff Kmiec, now looms upstage; the actors talk to the Ruth Page’s real balcony for the heaviest scenes, those that address the fictional, doomed cheap seats at the Iroquois, which were the first to burn.

There is a small sense of lost magic, now that so much less of the play’s world is on you to imagine in the mind’s eye. Torrence told me that *Burning Bluebeard* was once performed at a flea market in Berlin, Ohio, Torrence’s hometown, inside an Amish barn, and in a way that scale suits the play better than its new one does. The upshot is a kind of charming bashfulness, like a kid in a too-big suit, which may wear off as the run continues. A big house does mean no buttons this year, sadly. (No, you can’t have mine.)

All gussied up, the play still lives and dies by its celebration of technical brilliance—I would trade all the proscenium stages in America for one pout, one perfectly-timed tilt of the eyebrow, from the great Pamela Chermansky, who plays Fancy Clown. I was reminded, watching her work, of something Chermansky said to me in rehearsal: “The audience is the partner with a clown.”

“By the way,” she added, after I told the cast about rediscovering my magic cotton ball pin, “have you ever looked really carefully at the side of the button?” I dug mine out for a closer inspection. In fine print along the metal edge, as if a fairy put it there without me knowing, it read: “NOT A WHOLE ONE, JUST A HALF.”

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The Light in the Piazza
LIZ LAUREN

REVIEW

The Light in the Piazza shines at Lyric

And it’s not just about Renée Fleming.

By DEANNA ISAACS

It’s a dangerous thing to marry a stranger: the beautiful girl passing through town; the impetuous boy taken with her at first sight. My parents discovered this, to their eternal regret. But that’s another story. The story at hand is *The Light in the Piazza*—a rental production of Adam Guettel’s rapturous musical adaptation (book by Craig Lucas) of the 1960 novella by Elizabeth Spencer in a holiday-season run at the Lyric Opera House. Thanks to Guettel’s soaring score, a fine cast, and a deceptively complex plot (not the simple love story you might expect), this production manages to transcend its positioning as a showcase for renowned soprano and Lyric creative consultant, Renée Fleming.

Fleming’s on show, of course, but not merely that. The diva melds almost seamlessly into the starring role of Margaret Johnson, an American on an Italian sojourn with her beautiful but—spoiler alert—developmentally disabled 26-year-old daughter, Clara. While her second-act solos are vocal high points, and will be thrilling to her fans, she’s convincing all the way through as the deeply conflicted mother, haunted by a tragedy and facing a moral dilemma. “I played a tricky game in a foreign country,” she tells the audience early on. Quite so.

There’s some casting against type here: Solea Pfeiffer is not the blonde Barbie we’ve seen as Clara in previous productions. She brings an acute sensitivity and strength to the role that rings true. Similarly, Rob Houchen is a surprise as her love-at-first-sight, Fabrizio (a role played in a 1962 movie version of the

novella by George Hamilton); his impassioned tenor quickly proves to be exactly right. Alex Jennings is spot-on as Fabrizio’s stereotypically traditional Italian father, and there’s a standout vocal and dramatic performance by soprano Suzanne Kantorski in the supporting role of Fabrizio’s embittered sister-in-law. Direction, by Daniel Evans, has the ensemble leaning to the broad side, but tolerably. A serviceable uni-set gives us one view of a statue when the action’s in Florence, another when it’s in Rome.

Guettel, who is the grandson of composer Richard Rodgers, writes his own lyrics (though he’s better at the music). In this story, about love without a shared language, they sometimes lapse—appropriately, even brilliantly—into sheer sound: “La la la la.” That made the biggest problem I had in a mid-main-floor center seat—the frequent indecipherability of the lyrics, in spite of amplification—less of an issue than it could have been, though I would have traded the microphones during those moments for supertitles. Nevertheless, it was wonderful to hear Guettel’s beautiful score played by 30 members of the Lyric Opera Orchestra, under the baton of Kimberly Grigsby.

The Light in the Piazza was not produced by Lyric, but it illuminates the future of American opera. **A**

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