

Critic's Notebook

In a Vivid Dream, the Old Folks Home Bristles With Life

Verdi's 'Falstaff' at the Salzburg Festival

By ANTHONY TOMMASINI



Ambrogio Maestri, center, in "Falstaff" at the Salzburg Festival in Austria. The director has set the opera in the present-day Casa Verdi, a rest home for singers and musicians in Milan.

Published: August 6, 2013

SALZBURG, Austria — In the early 1890s, while working with the librettist Arrigo Boito on "Falstaff," his final opera, Verdi was immersed in a plan to build a retirement home in Milan for singers and musicians who had fallen upon hard times. The architect was Camillo Boito, the brother of the librettist.

"Falstaff" had a triumphant premiere at La Scala in Milan in 1893, when Verdi was 79. Construction of the retirement home, Casa di Riposo per Musicisti, was completed in 1899. The place came to be known as Casa Verdi and is still operating, which would surely gratify him.

That Verdi was swept up in building the home while composing "Falstaff" struck the Italian director Damiano Michieletto when he was envisioning a new production of this comic masterpiece for the 2013 Salzburg Festival. He visited Casa Verdi and, naturally, found the residents full of stories about their old days in opera.

Mr. Michieletto came up with the idea of setting "Falstaff" in the present-day Casa Verdi, and the production opened on July 29 at the Haus für Mozart. I attended a performance here on Saturday that offered an appealing cast and Zubin Mehta conducting the Vienna Philharmonic and Chorus. Mr. Michieletto's concept works beautifully in this charming and poignant production, which was broadcast on Austrian television.

At first, before the music starts, we see a video of the actual Casa Verdi facade with cars passing through a traffic circle out front. Then we are taken on stage, where the

set by Paolo Fantin depicts the main sitting room of the home. Some residents are gathered there reading magazines and chatting. One gentleman plays the piano softly, including snippets of "Falstaff" and tunes from other Verdi operas.

One resident is napping on a couch, the formidable Italian baritone Ambrogio Maestri, who is 6-foot-6 and of Falstaffian heft. The opera is presented as his dream, as he imagines that he is again performing his signature role of Falstaff. When the residents are called to dinner, many of them use walkers to leave the room. Mr. Maestri keeps on sleeping.

Then the characters of the opera, wearing casual modern clothes, burst in through the windows as Verdi's music begins. The segue is perfect since the first lines are from Dr. Caius, who storms in upbraiding Falstaff for the havoc done to his home by the good-for-nothing Bardolfo and Pistola, Falstaff's followers. With that first shout of "Falstaff!" Mr. Maestri is jolted awake and the dream-opera begins.

The choristers, costumed to look old and gray, portray the residents at the home. But there are also some elderly actors who sometimes appear in the background as the opera is performed. The activities of the rest home keep getting mixed into the work. When the blustery Falstaff calls for the owner of the tavern where he hangs out to bring more to drink, a couple of nurses appear with rolling trays. In an endearing, profound touch during the fleeting romantic episodes between Nannetta, the daughter of Alice Ford, and the smitten young Fenton, we see a parallel silent love story taking place in Casa Verdi. An elegant old woman and a portly gentleman who is shaky on his feet snatch a moment when the lobby is clear of other residents to hold hands and exchange intimacies.

As a directorial concept, it's-all-a-dream can easily seem glib and lazy. Not in this inspired production. Still, because it's a dream, Mr. Michieletto can play loose with the libretto's stage directions. In the opera's last scene, set in Windsor Park at midnight, Nannetta, disguised as a fairy queen, summons nymphs and sylphs (played by townspeople teaching Falstaff a lesson). Here, Nannetta's attendants simply blow bubbles over Mr. Maestri's Falstaff, who is sitting up on the couch, enchanted.

In the climax of the Windsor Park scene, Verdi's Falstaff is supposed to be pinched and poked by townspeople pretending to be goblins. What would be an equivalent nightmare for an old singer at Casa Verdi? Mr. Michieletto again has a brilliant solution: Mr. Maestri's Falstaff, cowering on the couch, imagines his own funeral taking place. Black-clad mourners stick him with umbrellas while covering him with bunches of flowers and shovels of dirt.

The concept might not have seemed so rich had the performances not been so fine. Mr. Maestri, a renowned Falstaff, has played the role in 19 new productions so far; he will sing it in a Metropolitan Opera premiere production opening in December. His physique is just right for the part, as are his powerful voice, flair for drama and feeling for the Verdi style.

The soprano Fiorenza Cedolins as Alice Ford, the mezzo-soprano Stephanie Houtzeel as Meg Page and, especially, the rich-voiced mezzo-soprano Elisabeth Kulman as Mrs. Quickly were wonderful individually and in the intricate ensemble scenes. The baritone Massimo Cavalletti was vocally robust and fittingly short-tempered as Ford, who foolishly suspects his wife is actually interested in Falstaff's overtures. The lyric soprano Eleonora Buratto brought a sweet, clear voice and youthful spark to Nannetta; the melting tenor Javier Camarena was her adoring Fenton.

Many conductors draw out the gossamer delicacy and lithe textures of this magical score. Mr. Mehta brought more weight and depth to the music and reined in the tempos. Though it is not the way I think of the piece, I was fascinated to hear his

approach.

And it is always a thrill to hear the Vienna Philharmonic. Over a 28-hour period, the orchestra had quite a workout. On Friday night it played at a performance of Wagner's "Meistersinger von Nürnberg" under Daniele Gatti at the main festival hall. Late Saturday morning, on the same stage (now set up for a concert), the Philharmonic played an orchestra program, with Pinchas Zukerman the vibrant soloist in Mozart's Violin Concerto No. 3 and Mr. Mehta leading an organic, intense account of Mahler's Fifth Symphony. Then Mr. Mehta and the players reported late that afternoon to the Haus für Mozart for "Falstaff."

I was happy to go along on this immersion experience with this storied orchestra at the jampacked Salzburg Festival.

The final performance of Verdi's "Falstaff" at the Salzburg Festival is on Wednesday; salzburgerfestspiele.at.

A version of this article appeared in print on August 7, 2013, on page C7 of the New York edition with the headline: In a Vivid Dream, the Old Folks Home Bristles With Life.