

# Stars shine in a glittering Rigoletto

Fortin, Howard beautifully handle opera's demands

## OPERA REVIEW

### Rigoletto

**Presented by:** Edmonton Opera

**Directed by:** Henry Akina

**With:** Jason Howard, Lyne Fortin, Carlo Scibelli, Norine Burgess, Bruno Cormier

Edmonton Symphony Orchestra & Edmonton Opera Chorus

**Conducted by:** Mark Flint

**When:** Tuesday and Thursday at 7:30 p.m.

**Where:** Jubilee Auditorium

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*Rigoletto* is a near-perfect tragic opera. It still stretches your suspension of disbelief-o-meter pretty far — this is opera, after all. But a solid performance of the thing engages nearly every aspect of your being that an opera can reach.

At the core of *Rigoletto's* poignancy is the love between the father and daughter — Rigoletto and Gilda. Edmonton Opera's current production of Verdi's tragic gem, which opened Saturday night, shines as brightly as it does largely because of the casting of those two roles.

Individually, and especially in their scenes together, baritone Jason Howard and soprano Lyne Fortin make this one of the most satisfying Edmonton Opera productions of recent memory.

That Howard is making his debut in the title role is truly astounding. He is perfectly at home inhabiting the motley and the doom of the deformed jester. His voice is a rich and powerful instrument, with a remarkable consistency throughout its compass. Only a very top note or two

seemed reluctant to come out with the shape and colour of its fellows. His line had judgment and nuance. His acting never makes the music take second, though his performance in the demanding role is nearly thoroughly convincing.

As Gilda, Fortin once again shows Edmonton her versatility. A favourite on our stage, Fortin makes the utter, innocent blind love of her character believable. Her *Caro nome* was securely and beautifully sung, and had the entire hall in utter silence as her final unaccompanied run began. That aria, and Howard's fine *Cortigiani*, deservedly won the night's longest ovations.

Henry Akina, general and artistic director of Hawaii Opera Theatre, directs this production with insight — some obstacles notwithstanding. His inclusion of two voiceless children, a reference to their presence in the preface of the original Victor Hugo story on which *Rigoletto* was based, certainly had a lot in the hall guessing — and perhaps detracted, or distracted, rather than added to the central plot.

Elsewhere, Akina showed a deft hand. There were several antiphonal stagings on the night — with adversarial forces arrayed on opposite sides of the stage from each other, underscoring the gulfs separating them.

The set was just as decorative as it needed to be, and no more. At first, the lack of any backdrop seemed disappointing. But as characters constantly emerged and exited into black nothingness, that too became a dramatic telling point.

There were some strong supporting roles here, with Marc Embree (decent as Count Monterone, very good as Sparafucile) and Norine Burgess (as Madalena) particular standouts. Edmonton Opera chorus member Mavis Calihoo (as the governess, Giovanna) also deserves mention



Jason Howard, left, as Rigoletto, and Carlo Scibelli as the Duke of Mantua in the Edmonton Opera production of *Rigoletto*.

for holding her own, vocally and in character, on stage with the "pros."

Perhaps the night's single real disappointment was Carlo Scibelli as the Duke. While this is a singularly one-dimensional tenor lead role, Scibelli's stand-and-deliver mannerisms were stiff and almost expressionless to the point of near rigor mortis. He also seemed unwilling, or was perhaps ailing and unable, to really sell the big notes. Even *La donna*

*e mobile* seemed half-hearted.

Mark Flint got fine, if not always razor-sharp, music from the pit, and the opera chorus handled its parts nicely — the men's ensemble work in Act I especially.

It was Howard and Fortin that made the show what it is, however. Their tender scenes together were powerful not just in the beauty of their singing, but in the genuine sincerity with which they played out the doomed relationship.