

***Rigoletto*: Two Casts, Two Different Performances**

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Spain **Verdi: *Rigoletto***: Seville Symphony Orchestra, Maestranza Chorus, Pedro Halffter (conductor), Teatro Maestranza, 25 & 26.6.2013 (JMI)

Production Teatro Regio di Parma

Direction: Stefano Vizioli

Sets and Costumes: Pierluigi Samaritani

Lighting: Juan Manuel Guerra

Casts:

Rigoletto: Juan Jesús Rodríguez/Leo Nucci

Gilda: Mariola Cantarero/Jessica Pratt

Duca di Mantova: Ismael Jordi/Celso Albelo

Sparafucile: Dmitry Ulyanov

Maddalena: María José Montiel

Monterone: Miguel Ángel Arias

Giovanna: Ana Otxoa

Marullo: Fernando Latorre

Borsa: Manuel De Diego

Ceprano: Damián Del Castillo



Photo courtesy of Teatro Maestranza

Seville's opera season has come to an end with one of the most popular works in the repertoire, *Rigoletto*. It featured alternate casts, both of which had their strengths: on the one hand, a cast with stars such as Leo Nucci as Rigoletto, and on the other, three Andalusian singers in the main roles. It appears that the local artists were the biggest draw at the ticket office.

The production is the well-known one by Stefano Vizioli from Teatro Regio in Parma, which I had the [opportunity to see in 2008](#) ^[1].

The musical direction was in the hands of Pedro Halffter, who conducts Verdi operas infrequently; I can only remember him in *Don Carlo* a couple of years ago. His reading of *Rigoletto* was not exceptional, although he was always very correct in his approach. I found his conducting more delicate than dramatic, and at times it became somewhat flat, with a tendency towards slowed-down tempos on more than one occasion. He always supported the singers on stage, and the orchestra performed well under his baton. I didn't like his cutting of the second verses of the cabalettas and his choice of the simplest of the cadenzas in the duet of il Duca and Gilda, but the overall result was positive.

More than once I have referred to Leo Nucci as a true miracle. It is incredible that at 71 he can still offer such a fresh, exceptional voice. I would class him together with three other glorious veterans, Plácido Domingo, Edita Gruberova and Mariella Devia. Obviously, time has left its mark on all four voices, but all sound as if they had made a pact with the devil.

There have been and still are great performers of *Rigoletto*, but very few are so identified with the role as Leo Nucci. He does not play *Rigoletto*, he *is* *Rigoletto* from the moment he sets foot on stage. All phrases – even all the words and syllables – have a clearly defined intention. With such identification all that's required to have an unforgettable performance is that the voice be there, and Nucci's voice was there from start to finish. It's not the same voice as, say, ten years ago, but there is not much difference. I have seen Nucci in *Rigoletto* many times since the first time in Bilbao some 30 years ago, and I have to say that today he is much more convincing in the character, even in purely vocal terms.

In the alternate cast Juan Jesús Rodríguez repeated his excellent performance from last October in Valencia. Rodríguez is undoubtedly the most important Verdi baritone today in Spain – including Carlos Álvarez and Plácido Domingo – and again he proved his perfect suitability to the role.

Australian soprano Jessica Pratt was an outstanding Gilda. She is an excellent light-lyric soprano and reminds me of the young June Anderson, though her voice is weaker in the middle range and at the bottom. Her soprano is very attractive through the whole tessitura, and she sings with expressiveness and excellent technique. Her voice opens freely at the top, and she is an almost ideal interpreter of Gilda.

Mariola Cantarero in the alternate cast was a delicate Gilda. Her voice is not to everybody's liking, but her vocal technique is remarkable. Cantarero took the character to where she is more comfortable, offering attractive and beautiful pianos. Her Gilda was somewhat artificial, not pure flesh and blood, but I think it is the most intelligent way for her to handle the role. When she goes for more dramatic effects, as in "Si! Vendetta" or in the second part of her duet with il Duca, her top notes are out of control.

Celso Albelo has all the brightness in his voice and all the insolence in his interpretation to be a convincing Duke of Mantua. Today he is one of the most interesting Ducas, although his interpretation tends to be superficial. High notes are not a problem for him, and he proved it at the end of the cabaletta "Possente amor mi chiama."

In the alternate cast, Ismael Jordi's performance was somewhat disappointing. His voice is too light for the character, although he sings with unquestionable good taste. He was at his best in "Parmi veder le lagrime," while both the cabaletta and "La Donna é Mobile" fell short.

Russian bass Dmitry Ulyanov was perfectly suited to the part of Sparafucile. He has a sonorous voice, dark and threatening, coupled with remarkable diction and excellent breath control. María José Montiel was good in the character of Maddalena.

The house was sold out for the Andalusian cast and at about 90% capacity for the all-star cast. The singers were enthusiastically received, especially Leo Nucci. He offered an encore of "Si! Vendetta," which the audience rewarded with a standing ovation.

José M^a. Irurzun