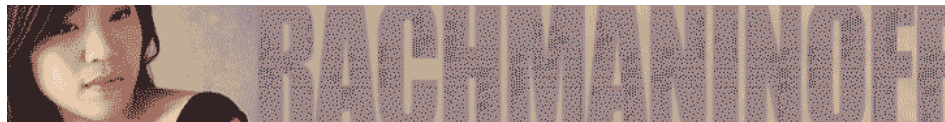




FOOTLIGHTS



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Skylight's singing and comedy trump crisis |

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Gregory Schmidt and Katherine Pracht (Katherine Behl photo)

The Skylight Opera Theatre, in economic crisis and coming off a summer of strife, needed a great show to open its anniversary season. Friday night, the company got just that in Rossini's *The Barber of Seville*. It's hilarious and sophisticated, but also warm-hearted, and blessed with spectacular singing and comic acting of a high order.

Van Santvoord's setting is lovely and utterly conventional. Director Bill Theisen asked nothing outrageous of his talented cast. This is not affected "director's theater," just a normal production in which every element is spot on.

The opening scene, Almaviva's bumbling serenade under Rosina's window, was a little slow, but it always is.

The show took off when tenor Gregory Schmidt's Almaviva gets together to hatch his plot with Andrew Wilkowske's clever Figaro. Those



Almaviva (Gregory Schmidt) and Figaro (Andrew Wilkowske) hatch their plot. (K. Behl photo)

yards of speedy recitative rolled trippingly off their tongues. Blessedly clear English diction and purposeful phrasing and pacing allowed the plot to come through without supertitles, and that's not easy. These two excellent actors felt no need to impose the usual buffa shtick. They were entirely believable as a couple of guys at home in their own skins, sizing each other up and quickly, recognizing their mutual interests and coming to enjoy each other's company.

The whole cast meshed in this way, right down to Bryce Lord in the mute role of the servant Ambrogio and the superb Kathy Pyeatt, a star-quality singer, who gave her all to the tiny role of Berta.



From left: Daniel Klein, Gregory Schmidt, Katherine Pracht, Andrew Wilkowske, Jason Budd and Kathy Pyeatt: K. Behl photo

Theisen's bright idea and organizing principle, in terms of acting, was to make the three central character's — Almaviva, Figaro and Katherine Pracht's Rosina — unaffected in every way. Their antagonists, Jason Budd's fussy, effeminate Bartolo and Daniel Klein's oily, serpentine Basilio, are over-the-top affected in comic ways. The clear contrast in personalities drives the conflict and helps a crazy story make a little sense. Crucially, they all deliver the words, which in this canny translation sound a great deal like Neil Simon dialogue and are funny in a Neil Simon way.

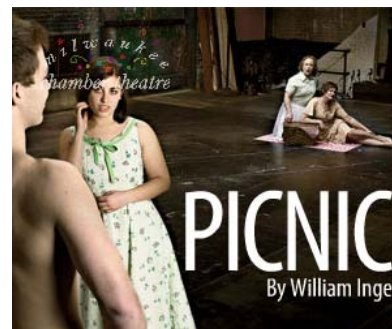
On top of all this, the cast delivered glorious singing. Schmidt's clear, focused, effortless tenor impressed. Wilkowske's ease with rapid-fire patter was only the

beginning of his vocal charm. He made the singing sound easy, which it's not. Figaro is a natural, he's got life all figured out; Wilkowske's utter confidence as a singer conveyed Figaro's essence.

And Katherine Pracht — oh my. Her voice has developed into an instrument of extraordinary beauty and boundless



WHAT IS ANABA?



agility. What a great pleasure to hear pitches and rhythms fall exactly into place within a warm, expressive flexibility, and to hear a voice so smooth and seamless and full throughout its range. You can't tell, within the friendly confines of the Cabot Theatre, whether Pracht's voice would play in a big house, but at the Cabot it is perfection.

I love the way the music informs her acting. The role has no dancing per se, but Pracht makes little dances of each aria and recitative. She phrases common gestures, facial expression and practical movement in ways that both explain the moment and complement the music. Her baseline movement is soft and pliant and completely charming. When Rosina goes to war with Bartolo, Pracht's little body turns hard and pointed as a crossbow bolt, and the contrast is very funny.

I was at first concerned about the orchestra, which as always was reduced to fit the Skylight's small pit. The overture sounded anemic and the strings ill-tuned. But the little band got better and better throughout the show, and conductor Pasquale Laurino had everything to do with pacing that made every line feel right.

The Skylight Opera Theatre's *The Barber of Seville* runs through Oct. 4 at the Broadway Theatre Center. Call 414-291-7800 for tickets.

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