

Broad Street Review

'The Merry Widow' in Wilmington



BY: Steve Cohen
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After a century, how does Lehár's *The Merry Widow* hold up? This Wilmington production recalled Broadway's post-World War II golden age, propelled by broad humor, energetic dancing and a blissful absence of mechanical amplification.

The Merry Widow. Music by Franz Lehár; Marciem Bazell directed; Steven Mosteller, conductor. OperaDelaware production closed May 7, 2011 at The Grand, 818 N. Market St., Wilmington, Del. www.operade.org.

Pedersen: Thrill of the high B.

The good old days (before microphones, even)

STEVE COHEN

Franz Lehár's *The Merry Widow* was the *Les Miz* of its time, a music-theater megahit with long runs throughout Europe, the U.S. and Australia. But that was a century ago. How does it hold up now?

I hadn't seen the operetta in a few years, and that was in Germany and Hungary. So I was skeptical about how *The Merry Widow* would fare in an English translation in front of a 21st-Century audience in Wilmington.

The fact that the story deals with a mythical European monarchy is no problem; the public still cares about that subject, whether in Shakespearian productions or in TV coverage of royal weddings. Lehár's music is melodious, cut from the same luxurious cloth that contemporary audiences find in Andrew Lloyd Webber.

Recalling Cole Porter

European productions tend to emphasize the plot's nostalgic elements, trying to evoke the regretful elements that Richard Strauss later used in his *Der Rosenkavalier* and Noel Coward in *Bittersweet* and elsewhere. This production used an approach more like Broadway during its golden age from the 1940s to the 1960s: Broad humor and energetic dancing propelled the story.

Fortunately, Laura Pederson and Daniel Neer as the romantic leads were convincing actors who kept the audience involved in their travails. Sniping at each other to hide their deeper feelings, they recalled Alfred Drake and Patricia Morison in Cole Porter's *Kiss Me, Kate*.

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There's one other way that this production reminded me of that 1948 show. The sound was unamplified. The singers possessed legitimate voices that projected easily over the large orchestra. That's how the music should be heard. You can't beat the thrill of the high B pianissimo ending to "Vilia" when that sudden change from loud to very soft is achieved by a natural human voice. Such effects would be lost if you had microphones and speakers.

Intimate house

The Merry Widow differs from opera in that much of the story is told through dialogue. Some opera singers have trouble being heard when they speak, and they try to compensate by over-articulating and by exaggerating their projection. This cast didn't suffer this problem, because the Wilmington Grand Opera house is an intimate place, with a capacity of about 1,100 and just one balcony.

A house of this size is ideal for operettas like *The Merry Widow*— more so than a large opera house like the Met. I hope OperaDelaware will program more pieces like this.

Other notables in the cast were Kelly Curtain, Aurelio Dominguez, John Dooley and Daniel Pantano, artistic director of Philadelphia's Concert Operetta Theater, who sang and acted a comic baritone role.

Marciem Bazell directed the large cast (40 were on stage during the big numbers), Steven Mosteller excellently conducted the orchestra, and elaborate sets based on Tiffany and Alphonse Mucha were designed and painted by Cynthia DuPont Tobias.