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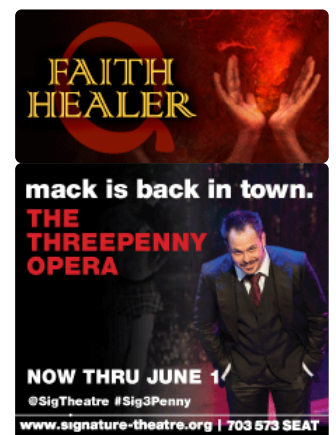
The Magic Flute a whimsical delight

May 5, 2014 by Susan Galbraith [Leave a Comment](#)

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When Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart wrote *The Magic Flute* as a fairy tale fantasy he was seeking broad popular appeal. Washington National Opera has followed suit with this production, including programming a free simulcast at Nationals Park as part of their series – Opera in the Outfield.

The work has been updated in many ways, from its fresh English translation by Kelley Rourke to the imaginative and charming stage and costume designs by Japanese-American artist Jun Kaneko. It's a



bankable show, a big boffo production whose expenses were undertaken and shared by several opera houses.



John Easterlin, Katheryn Lewek, Jacquelin Echols, Sarah Mesko, and Deborah Nansteel (Photo: Scott Suchman)

Kaneko undoubtedly is the star of the show. From the first beat of the overture, we watch his artistry and indeed his personality dominate the stage. A series of projected doodles, at first lines of bright color move across the great expanse of white backdrop. New lines emerge and criss-cross each other as if the artist returned repeatedly to follow and lay down each instrument's path.

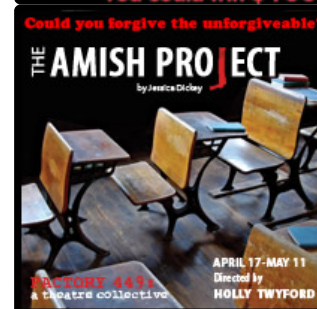
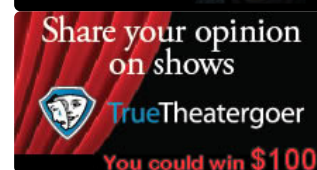
One canvas follows another as the opera begins. Now a white background has Dalmatian dots and pipe-cleaner lines link up with other lines. Moments later new grids appear with parabolas turning to other geometric shapes, especially triangles, which are then thickened into plaids and Burlington weaves, all in a fantastic child's play. For a time I hang onto trying to read Masonic symbology into the proceedings – hadn't I read long ago this was a whole shockingly bold aspect of Mozart's opera? — but soon I abandon making sense of the wildly colorful Kaneko universe.

Against this backdrop, the singers enter to pose in primary colored futurist garb, many with odd top knots, and remind me nothing so much as a cross between sci-fi "Trekkies" and Japanese anime figures.

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Jacqueline Echols, Sarah Mesko, and Deborah Nansteel as the three helper Ladies of the Queen of the Night might have also walked off runways as models in haute couture get-ups of the kind who-in-the real-world-would-ever-wear these. They valiantly sing and strut in these get-ups while killing a dragon and seducing a prone prince. All in a day's work.

When Kaneko's visual stylization supports character, it is absolutely charming. Papageno (Joshua Hopkins) is an emerald-green frog-like clown with two colorful-rimmed eyes. He carries a basket on his back with what looks like giant eggs. This bird-catching hunter makes complete comic sense, and his first encounter with a giant puffy bird is such a whimsical child's realization that the audience coos with delight. There are a couple of other bird "ballets" – one included small children encased as "chicks" in cylindrical body-suits, which limited the movement of these diminutive bodies to immature wing flaps, scurrying runs, and hops – which positively transfixed the audience with glee.



Joshua Hopkins, Ashley Emerson, and chicks (Phot

Another marvelous visual invention was the aerial entrances of the three spirits, a trio of children who floated high above the stage in colorful cones, dressed like three creatures from Oz. Their impact was augmented further by the most curious vocal blend of this trio I have ever heard in a *Flute* production, sounding less like children and more like Munchkins.



Rourke has become a familiar collaborator with Artistic Director Francesca Zambello's interest in popularizing opera for Americans. Opening night the audience responded with chuckles mounting to guffaws at her clever hit-the-mark updating of Emanuel Schikaneder's libretto. Rourke boldly scrambles far from the original to make contemporary connections. "I shall not tweet untruth," the frog-mouthed Papageno promises. Most appreciated by this heavy donor Washington set, was when hero Tamino arrives at never-never land to save Pamina from the clutches of the supposed evil Sarastro and muses "If the arts receive support here, I will find a civilization both noble and kind." This got a big round of applause.

The problem, dare I say this, is that somewhere in all this delight, Mozart gets lost. Don't mistake me, opening night the singers were solid enough. Joseph Kaiser as Tamino delivered his tenor arias and duets with clear ringing tones, and if he was a little stiff, it worked for his Galactica-superhero dimensions and costume. Maureen McKay as Pamina cleared almost every soprano hurdle of the evening with grace and looked fetchingly dewey and tiny like a fairy-tale princess in-need-of-saving should as she stood next to her tall and stalwart hero-prince.

Kathryn Lewek as Queen of the Night hit those marvelously famous vocal runs out of the ballpark. (And remember, now, there were hordes out at the ballpark watching this event.) Most especially, Soloman Howard as Sarastro conveyed both the dignity and the mysterious, awesome power of this enlightened leader in iconic stances and compellingly rich bass sound.

In some inevitable way, the clowns carried the day in this childlike, you-gotta-love-opera confection. The loveable Papageno usually does and, in this production, Hopkins has crafted a winning comic character and is happily allowed to break out of the heavy stylization that threatens to overly box in the other characters. The loveable Ashley Emerson as Papagena pranced and sang as if this whole "opera thing" were a ball and she were having the time of her life. Then there was John Easterlin who made my jaw drop with his bold flair—his hairstyle drawn from a Kabuki-gone-glam rock star and his movements, which could only be described as British comedian Eddie Izzard on acid.

But in the final analysis, to my mind the singing receded into the background, its operatic preeminence overwhelmed by the dazzle of color and projections.



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Washington, DC 20566

2 hours, 45 minutes with 1 intermission

Tickets: \$25 – \$305

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Also, I never thought I'd say this, because like Zambello I am usually "down" with English translated opera and updated libretti but I will reluctantly confess I missed the German. Perhaps because I don't understand German, I have always been unimpeded by linguistic sense of the libretto and able to focus on the mixed emotional tone of Mozart's opera— especially the witch-like scariness of the Queen and the mysterious awesomeness of the wizard leader Sarastro. Here, all the mystery went pouf, and what was left of the story was, well, pretty silly.

It did not help that director Harry Silverstein did not find staging solutions for this fantasy of projections to help make active and clear the hero's quest. When Tamino and Pamina go hand-in-hand upstage to struggle through trials during a long musical passage, it felt like two performers walking through basic blocking. Too many times, the staging felt just that, blocky, and the building of relationships were not fully realized. Maybe everyone thought that against all the color and curly-cues no one would notice. Philippe Auguin has impressed me enormously with his musical sensitivity, but there were several times in the evening the orchestra drowned out the last word in a cadenced line.

Remembering Mozart wanted to delight and saw this piece as a fun evening of entertainment, I recognize that it was indeed that. When Jun Kaneko joined the creative team on stage for the curtain call, this diminutive figure looked as whimsical and joyful as the world he had created on stage. His irrepressible joy and playfulness suffused the sometimes stuffy and oppressive feeling in the opera house. I couldn't even growl disapprovingly at those naughty Washingtonians dashing once more for their cars before the final curtain fell.

Family friendly? You betcha, but it wasn't totally Mozart. Nonetheless, this just may be a *Magic Flute: the Next Generation*.

The Magic Flute . Music by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart . Original Libretto by Emanuel Schikaneder with a new English translation by Kelley Rourke . Stage Direction by Harry Silverstein . Conducted by Music Director Philippe Auguin . Co-produced by Washington National Opera, San Francisco Opera Association, Opera Omaha, Lyric Opera of Kansas City, and Opera Carolina . Reviewed by Susan Galbraith.



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5 6 7 8 9 10 11

12 13 14 15 16 17 18

19 20 21 22 23 24 25

26 27 28 29 30 31

« Apr

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