

'Barber of Seville' gets an English makeover

Comic Opera Guild will bring new version of classic work to The Mendel

By **JEREMY D. BONFIGLIO**
Sight & Sound Editor

BENTON HARBOR — Opening night on Feb. 20, 1816, at the Teatro Argentina in Rome, did not go well for Gioachino Rossini's "The Barber of Seville."

In fact, it was disastrous with the audience hissing and jeering throughout. As it turns out, much of that audience were supporters of one of Rossini's rivals, Giovanni Paisiello, who played on mob mentality to provoke the rest of the audience to dislike the opera.

Luckily, for both Rossini and fans of comedic opera, the second performance met quite a different fate.

It's been 200 years since that unfortunate opening, and Rossini's "The Barber of Seville" remains a popular work in operatic circles. The Comic Opera Guild hopes to build on that success with an all new English language version of "The Barber of Seville," which will be staged Saturday at Lake Michigan College's Mendel Center Mainstage Theatre.

"One of the things we have noticed, as many companies have over the past decade or so, is that audiences are beginning to fail, so we wanted to find a way to reach out and build audiences," Comic Opera Guild producer Tom Petiet says. "The best way to do that was to take the most popular comic opera in existence, which is 'The Barber of Seville,' and to do it in English."

The story follows the attempts by the young Count Almaviva (Adrian Leskiw) to win the hand of the beautiful Rosina (Amanda O'Toole), and ward off the stuffy Doctor Bartolo (Frank Pitts), who wants to marry her himself.

Unsuccessful at getting past the doctor's home defenses to see her, he enlists the aid of the mischievous barber, Figaro (Chris Kendall), who considers himself the man to go to for practically anything in Seville.

He decides the count must use disguise to get near Rosina. The first disguise, that of a drunken soldier, is overdone by the count, resulting in a melee that ends



Photo provided

Figaro (Chris Kendall, baritone), left, agrees to help Count Almaviva (Adrian Leskiw, tenor) win the hand of Rosina in The Comic Opera Guild's production of "The Barber of Seville."

the first act.

In the second, he portrays a nerdy music teacher to give Rosina a lesson, but is eventually found out. Finally, Figaro and the count resort to elopement with the aid of a ladder. When that also backfires, Figaro is left to come up with a deus ex machina to achieve his ends.

"Part of the reason it's survived so long is it uses the classic stock characters from comedy and does it so well," director Mitchell Gillett says. "You have the young man in love who will do almost anything to get the girl. You have the very smart girl who can twist people around her finger. You have a servant who is potentially smarter than them all. You have the blind old man who thinks this young girl could be in love with him. They are used so well that you can't help but laugh. They are characters everyone

IF YOU GO

What: Comic Opera Guild presents Rossini's "The Barber of Seville"

When: 8 p.m. Saturday

Where: Lake Michigan College's Mendel Center Mainstage Theatre, 2755 E. Napier Ave., Benton Harbor

How much: \$25-\$30

Contact: 927-1221 or www.themendelcenter.com

Artist info: www.comicoperaguild.org

can associate with, and on top of that you have incredible music."

It's because of that music that this English version goes beyond a verbatim translation. In fact, many of the lyrics

had to fit into the same sound space of the original Italian.

"With a lot of translations, the words don't fall as well to the ear as they should and the jokes may not go over very well, so we tried to make this English production a version rather than a translation," Petiet says. "You can't just write to and fit the meaning, you have to do more than that. For the singers you have to also try to fit the sound of the language and that's what we try to do with these things. I think we've succeeded. It's like doing a new show."

"As a director it really made my job a lot easier," Gillett adds. "It was really using the English translation as a basis to build the farcical humor that's already in there, which has been a joy."

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