

The wedding singers

Bizet's comic opera *Don Procopio* gets ideal setting, writes **Stephen Bevis**

Lost and Found continues its innovative approach to opera with its latest production presented in a wedding hall with a chorus recruited from an aged-care centre.

For baritone and self-confessed "old fart" Michael Lewis, the opportunity to perform in the Australian premiere of Bizet's early comic opera *Don Procopio* is too good to resist.

"I haven't been on stage here for quite a while and I'm looking forward to it," says Lewis, who was last seen in Perth in his signature role of *Rigoletto* with WA Opera in 2007. "It calls for an old dude and I am quite glad to be playing this part."

The Sydney-based performer returns next month in the title role of *Don Procopio*, joining a local cast that includes young soprano Claire Condipodero as the poor girl facing an arranged marriage to his penny-pinching old coot.

"She's a pocket dynamo with a cracking voice," Lewis says. "We have a really big duet together which is a lot of fun, a lot of vocal fireworks for her."

The English translation of the Italian libretto and a reorchestration that includes a folksy piano accordion is a world first for *Lost and Found* directors Thomas de Mallet Burgess and Chris van Tuinen, who reinvigorate little-known "lost" operas by staging them in "found" places.

Past performances have been in a hotel room, a sports car in the Perth Cultural Centre, an old asylum cell at the Fremantle Arts Centre and a synagogue in Menora.

"I love the concept of this company," Lewis says. "They have clearly done some brilliant stuff since they formed. It's always something with a twist or a quirk in a place that pertains to the style of the piece and I think that's fantastic. The bigger opera companies would never dream of doing something like this."

This time, Balcatta's Vasto Club and function centre will host the 1859 two-act "opera buffo" about the shenanigans that break out when miserly old Don Andronico tries to marry off his niece Bettina to his equally stingy friend Don Procopio

because he is worried that a younger man will spend all her money. Bettina, of course, is in love with a handsome soldier and enlists her brother and aunt to thwart the old men.

Audiences will have the option of joining in the wedding as dinner guests, with food from celebrity chef Maurizio Di Ciano, the chef of choice for Pavarotti when he toured to Perth.

De Mallet Burgess and Van Tiernan have been running workshops and rehearsals with residents at the adjoining Myvista aged-care centre for southern European migrants, who will make up half the chorus at the Vasto Club.

"That a wedding takes place in the opera makes the choice of venue ideal and the themes of age and ageing make our partnership with Myvista on multiple levels particularly poignant," De Mallet Burgess says.

Lewis has been a mainstay of Australian opera for more than 40 years with his credits including 35 major roles with Opera Australia and many international performances including at the English National Opera, Opera North and La Fenice in Venice. After a long association with Verdi, he took on an offbeat production of *La Traviata* staged at Belvoir Street Theatre by Melbourne theatre duo Sisters Grimm last year.

"I've got to the stage in my career where I get more of a buzz from these sorts of projects than I do in a grand opera at the Sydney Opera House or around the world," he says. "These jobs have a different sort of integrity to them and they are fascinating to do. It is an intimate environment to perform in and there is nowhere to hide. You have got to be on your game because the audience can see right through you from close range."

"We are doing it in a suburban Italian wedding reception place so it is going to have a real Italian wedding feel to it with all the chaos that you can imagine occurring in that sort of environment."



Michael Lewis and Claire Condipodero ham it up ahead of their performance of *Don Procopio*. Picture: Grant Taylor

Don Procopio is at the Vasto Club, Balcatta, from June 14-18. Tickets \$50 (or \$95 with dinner). Details: lostandfoundopera.com.