

Don Procopio
Perth

Australia's arts scene is in crisis after a devastating government funding cut in May left 62 companies without funding. In this climate it is a miracle that the nation's most innovative opera company LOST & FOUND continues to flourish. The company performs rarely heard repertoire in unusual venues, employs outstanding West Australian freelance singers and engages a much wider audience demographic than traditional opera. LOST & FOUND'S hilarious, thought-provoking and theatrical production of Bizet's *Don Procopio* on June 14th was a compelling argument for the vital role of small arts companies in Australia.

Bizet's early *opera buffa* (composed in 1859 and borrowing heavily from *Don Pasquale*) demonstrates an easily facility with patter, *brillante* ensemble numbers to rival Mozart and a knack for musical characterisation. The libretto follows the antics of Bettina as she rails against an arranged marriage to the wealthy elderly Don Procopio. Bizet didn't (as far as we know) provide recitatives which leaves plenty of room for interpretation.

Director Thomas de Mallet Burgess rented the suburban Italian VASTO CLUB and enlisted a group of nonne from the nearby retirement village to lend an organic feel to the chorus. Conductor Chris van Tuinen arranged the score for an eight-piece ensemble with accordion adding cabaret flavour. Sally Phipps' wedding set and costumes were awash in pink from balloons to wigs and even pink waistcoats for the orchestra.

In Scene One the wedding had already begun (with audience members participating in the banquet) and Bettina's uncle and aunt were part-dressed and mid-argument. 'Go on, protest and burn your bra, the wedding will proceed as planned,' shouted Don Andronica (a blustering Paull-Anthony Keightley), in de Mallet Burgess' witty translation. The wedding did indeed proceed and just as quickly unravelled with the help of Bettina's aunt (a hilarious Stephanie Gooch), brother Ernesto (a flamboyant Perry Joyce) and rockstar boyfriend Odoardo (Alasdair Kent with a glorious refined tenor voice).

Don Procopio arrived on a gopher, quickly concluded that 'money is best enjoyed alone' and spent the rest of the opera trying to escape Bettina's crazy family. Michael Lewis sang Procopio with perfect diction and pacing, plodding around bewildered as Bettina (Claire Condipodero dressed in Couture tracksuit and ugg boots) literally performed back flips around him. The petite, pouting Condipoderos nailed the gymnastics but her coloratura was patchy. It did improve as the night progressed, shaping into a bell-like, agile soubrette. The highlight was her touching Act Two duet *Pour moi*, her voice dovetailing beautifully with Kent's as they crooned rock-style in front of microphones.

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