

Mozart's 'The Magic Flute'

By **GEORGE WALKER**, November 16, 2009

The IU Opera Theater's production of Mozart's "The Magic Flute," *Die Zauberflote* is a wonderfully colorful evening of cleverness, wit and whimsy that doesn't sacrifice a note of the music, the weighty messages that the Masonic Mozart include, or the humanity of his characters.

The new sets and costumes from David Higgins vary from the spectacular to the simple with lots of clever little variations. His costumes use a variety of color palettes, styles and textures to separate the characters and the groups clearly just as Mozart varied music does.

Friday night's resolute though stiff Tamino was Mark Van Arsdale. Mark Davies was an audience favorite as his comical side kick Papagano the bird catcher. Shannon Love was both motherly and majestic as the Queen of the night. Alyssa Cox, Kerriann Otano and Kelly Glyptis were a spirited trio as the Queen's Ladies. Jacqueline Brecheen was lovely as the love interest Pamina. Hirotaka Kato was dramatically low voiced and supportive as the Temple Spokesman. Joseph Beutel lacked the truly low notes for the part of Sarastro the High Priest, but his middle and upper voice were strong. The opera's genies, CeCe Underwood, Ben Johnson and Elsa Shelton were charming versions of the balloon boy as they floated in and out to comment and help with the story

Throughout "The Magic Flute" stage director Tomer Zvulun has worked to see that the characters aren't just stick figures who sing. There were nice little personal touches. The prince feels challenged and has his doubts. The bird catcher is a comic, but one with all too human concerns. The Queen of the Night is perhaps a misguided villainess, but she's also a caring mother. There was plenty of action throughout. At the same time, Zvulun didn't hesitate to stage a quintet with all five of the singers lined right up across the stage in a formal array.

Right from the first notes of the overture it was obvious that conductor Mark Gibson was looking for a performance that would exploit all of the variety and contrast in Mozart's music. The different sections of the orchestra played against and with one another. Strings countered winds, percussion made its points and the whole was nicely propelled by the rhythm. The same was true of the different vocal elements and there was careful balance throughout.

One of the highlights of this production is the bird and animal puppets created by Lisa Sturz. They are wonderful whimsical creations and some of the best acting in the show comes from the feathered folk. They fly about, comment on the action, bill, coo, scrap and even eat out of the bird catcher's hand. Later the menagerie is expanded with a giraffe, a kinkajou and just the cutest little porcupine that you can imagine. Parents or grand parents who're looking for a first opera for a child might want to think about the first act of "The Magic Flute" as a wonderful introduction. The singing is in German, but the dialog and most of the humor is in English, it's very active and the puppets are great.

