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San Francisco Chronicle

The San Francisco Chronicle (California)

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FINAL Edition

Opera whips up frothy, warming 'Elixir of Love'

BYLINE: Joshua Kosman, Chronicle Music Critic

SECTION: Datebook; Pg. E1

LENGTH: 836 words

From "Simon Boccanegra" to "Boris Godunov," this has been a dark and tragic season at the **San Francisco Opera**. Who couldn't go for a bright ray of sunshine right about now?

The sunbeams arrived on cue Wednesday night with the company's delightful new production of Donizetti's "The **Elixir of Love**." Beautifully sung and staged with a deft balance between romantic tenderness and physical comedy, this is an entertainment perfectly designed to chase away any lingering shadows.

And no, this frothy bauble doesn't have a serious thought in its head, which is the whole point. It's saucy, it's sweet, it's a stream of laughs and lovely melody delivered with the gentlest possible touch. Some nights you just can't ask for more.

"The **Elixir of Love**" also known as "L'Elisir d'Amore" to many opera buffs, though for some reason not to the Opera's marketing arm on this occasion is lighter than air under any circumstances. Its two lovers, the dim-witted bumpkin Nemorino and the brainy and beautiful Adina, are never separated by more than a tissue-thin set of obstacles, mostly centered on the momentary attraction of Belcore, a macho self-regarding recruiting sergeant.

For comedy, the opera relies on the old archetype of the traveling snake-oil salesman, in the person of Doctor Dulcamara. His ploy to take Nemorino for his few remaining coins by selling him a bottle of wine as a **love** potion prompts the piece's most overtly vivacious moments.

The trick, then, is to whip these few elements into a musical and theatrical meringue, without leaning on it too hard or letting the ingredients harden before they're ready. And that's what director James Robinson, with the help of a nimble cast, does to perfection.

The decision to set the action in the Napa Valley during the days leading up to World War I is a nod to local sensibilities, and it's flattering, I suppose, although it doesn't add anything particularly essential to the proceedings. What's more telling is the brightly colored cartoon sensibility that infuses the evening.

It begins with the lovely illustration on the drop curtain, a WPA-style picture of rolling green hills and rural roads, and it continues with Allen Moyer's vivid set - dominated by a cheery white gazebo and Nemorino's inviting ice-cream truck - and Martin Pakledinaz's gingham-and-denim costumes. The result is like Thornton Wilder set to an Italianate musical track.

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Best of all is Robinson's feathery touch with comic business. He works the laughs in at unexpected moments, but he keeps them short and unobtrusive - a small pratfall here, a little burst of physical herky-jerky there - and mostly makes sure that they stay out of the way of the music.

The effect is to bring out the ebullience and allure of Donizetti's score by interweaving it with the staging, and by keeping the laughs integral to the performance.

None of which would matter if the musical values weren't so high. In particular, tenor Ramón Vargas gave a ravishing performance as Nemorino - his tone bright and fluid, his technique effortlessly precise and his comic presence winning but unobtrusive.

Practiced hands know to look forward to "Una furtiva lagrima," the lyrical showpiece that Nemorino sings shortly before the final curtain, and Vargas' rendition didn't disappoint - it was marked by lustrous sound and generous, arching phrases, as well as a dazzlingly long-held approach to the final cadence.

But he staked his claim to greatness right from the start, bringing out the unquenchable ardor of the opening "Quanto è bella, quanto è cara" and lavishing sumptuous lyricism on the two Act 1 duets with Adina. And although Vargas can sometimes be a little stiff onstage, he turned that quality to winning comic effect.

Adina was Albanian soprano Inva Mula, making an appealing company debut full of fire and temperament. Her voice occasionally sounded a little heavy for the role, but that only served to emphasize the character's strong will, and she reined in her power at critical junctures to infuse the performance with tender sympathy.

Baritone Giorgio Caoduro was a vigorous and attractive Belcore, and bass-baritone Alessandro Corbelli made his company debut as Dulcamara, showing dexterous comic mastery and singing with robust tone and a sublime indifference to key. When he sang in the same key as the orchestra, the results were commanding; at other times, not so much.

The **San Francisco Opera** Chorus turned in yet another in a series of knockout performances, singing with delicacy and verve. What has director Ian Robertson been putting in their Wheaties this season? Whatever it is, it's working.

Rounding out the cast was Adler Fellow Ji Young Yang, giving a sweet performance as Giannetta. The only weak point was Bruno Campanella's workaday conducting, capable and tireless but never as fizzy as what was happening onstage.

San Francisco Opera: "The Elixir of Love" plays seven more times through Nov. 26 at the War Memorial Opera House. Tickets: \$15-\$290. Call 415 864-3330 or go to www.sfopera.com.

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LANGUAGE: ENGLISH

GRAPHIC: Ramon Vargas and Inva Mula bring the right light touch to the lead roles in Donizetti's opera. Terrence McCarthy
Alessandro Corbelli shows comic mastery in his **San Francisco Opera** debut as Dulcamara in Donizetti's "The **Elixir of Love**." Terrence McCarthy

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Contra Costa Times (California)

November 5, 2008 Wednesday

Taking the Kids: S.F. Opera's "**Elixir of Love** for Families"

BYLINE: By Jackie Burrell Contra Costa Times

SECTION: LIFESTYLE; Features

LENGTH: 346 words

WHY IT'S COOL: Opera is a dazzling spectacle, but between language issues and sheer length, it can be a daunting experience for newbies. Enter the **San Francisco Opera** and a certain **love** potion. The opera has transposed its "**Elixir of Love**," Gaetano Donizetti's fun-loving opera, into a pair of two-hour matinees styled especially for families. They're in English for one thing, with supertitles for those of you who like to read along. The tickets are specially priced. Plus, **love** potions, football players and quacks what's not to like?

THE CLIFFSNOTES VERSION: A lovestruck young peasant, Nemorino, tries to woo the wealthy and beautiful Adina, who's having none of it. So he gets a little help from the neighborhood quack, a doc who whips up fake **love** potions. This being opera, the potion eventually does the job, but only after spurned advances, unfortunate gossip, a war, a wedding and much singing. But the **San Francisco Opera** version has moved the setting to a Napa Valley county fair in 1915, and thrown in leatherhead football players and a Model-T truck to boot.

WHAT KIDS LIKE: There's just something about opera's grand spectacle that entralls, but this winsome, comical tale gets an added boost from its lead, the charming goofball Nemorino, and his innocence. Plus, the songs are downright hummable. Suitable for kids 6 and older.

WHAT PARENTS LIKE: Singers from the **San Francisco Opera** Adler Fellows program, family matinee, cheaper tickets "... all good. Even better: getting your kids hooked on opera early means you'll have a concert buddy for life.

AFTERWARD: Head up the street to Max's Opera Cafe for Flowerpot Sundaes chocolate dirt, vanilla ice cream and gummy worms or a sandwich.

PARKING TIPS: There's pay parking in the garage around the corner on Grove, as well as in small pay lots nearby, but why bother with a car? The Opera House is just a few blocks from Civic Center BART.

Jackie Burrell, www.sfopera.com.

More Family Fun

Check out the weekly "Fab Five for the Weekend" list on our aPARENTlySpeaking blog at www.ibabuzz.com/aparentlyspeaking .

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Taking the Kids: S.F. Opera's "Elixir of Love for Families" Contra Costa Times (California) November 5, 2008
Wednesday

GRAPHIC: Alessandro Corbelli is Dr. Dulcamara and offers people of a small Napa Valley town a **love** potion in the **San Francisco Opera** production of The **Elixir of Love** opening at the War Memorial Opera House in San Francisco, Calif. on October 25, 2008. (photo by Ron Lewis)

Swaggering Army recruiter Belcore, played by Giorgio Caoduro, admires Adina, played by Inva Mula in the **San Francisco Opera** production of The **Elixir of Love** opening at the War Memorial Opera House in San Francisco, Calif. on October 25, 2008. (photo by Ron Lewis)

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Sacramento Bee (California)

November 15, 2009 Sunday
Correction Appended
METRO FINAL EDITION

Director Condemi gives 'Elixir' some Napa flavor

BYLINE: Edward Ortiz eortiz@sacbee.com

SECTION: LIVING HERE; Pg. I3

LENGTH: 1155 words

There's no mystery why opera director Jose Maria Condemi is a rising star in the opera world.

His recent productions at major opera houses in San Francisco and Chicago are marked by a crisp, theatrical feel. And no trend is more hot right now in opera than the marriage of singing and theater.

Given Condemi's reputation, the Sacramento Opera's upcoming production of Gaetano Donizetti's "**Elixir of Love**" should display some high theatrical wattage.

"I don't make the distinction that opera is one thing and theater is another," said Condemi. "The craft is the same. It's no different from directing Mamet or Chekhov."

A savvy theatricality is never a bad thing when employed in a bright and buoyant bel canto opera like "**Elixir**." The opera begins a three-night run at the Community Center Theater on Friday. Its cast includes soprano Katrina Thurman in the role of Adina, tenor Igor Vieira as Dulcamara, baritone David Small as Belcore and Dinyar Vania as Nemorino. Music director Timm Rolek will conduct.

In Sacramento, Condemi will update "**Elixir**" from its original setting of a Basque village in the late 19th century to Napa Valley in the 1940s.

"We felt this was the right time period," said Condemi. Central to that decision was that it localizes the setting for Sacramento audiences, and the setting also mirrors the small town outside of Buenos Aires, Argentina, where Condemi grew up.

Condemi comes to Sacramento fresh from directing a new Chicago Lyric Opera production of "Ernani." Condemi drew rave reviews for that production, and the accolades were many for his direction of the **San Francisco Opera's** production of "Tosca" last June. Next summer, Condemi will direct that company's revival of Gounod's "Faust."

For Rolek, snagging Condemi to direct in Sacramento was like reaching for prized fruit. It turned into a game of perseverance. He first saw Condemi's work with the Merola Opera program several years ago and has been after him ever since.

"I thought his comic work was brilliant; it was very specific and physical," Rolek said.

But conflicting schedules always got in the way of a booking, until a small opening in Condemi's schedule coincided with the Sacramento Opera's performance schedule this year.

Director Condemi gives 'Elixir' some Napa flavor Sacramento Bee (California) November 15, 2009 Sunday
Correction Appended

"**Elixir**" tells the lyrical tale of the farmer Nemorino, who is in **love** with Adina, a rich landowner. The drama and comedy unfold when Nemorino, who wishes to enchant Adina, purchases a **love** potion from Dulcamara, a charlatan doctor.

Condemi knows the work well. He made his professional directorial debut with "**Elixir**" in 1999, when he directed it for Opera San Jose. Last year, he reconceived and directed the **San Francisco Opera** production of "**Elixir of Love** for Families."

"He brought an '**Elixir**' production for families down to a two-hour length and he staged it in English rather than Italian," said **San Francisco Opera** general director David Gockley. "And I thought he did very well with that."

So well, in fact, that Gockley signed him to direct "Faust" in June, and will likely tap him again for a production in the 2010-11 season.

"What he's doing is creating the theater component of opera," Gockley said.

For "Faust," Condemi will direct a Frank Corsaro production from the Chicago Lyric Opera. But Gockley feels that Condemi is ready to take a step up in his career.

"The goal is for a guy like that to get to the point where people are willing to give him the opportunity to create newly conceived and newly designed productions," Gockley said.

The cast of "**Elixir**," which just finished its first week of rehearsal, is sold on Condemi's directing style.

"A lot of times, what you get in opera is kind of like a wash of staging and direction," said soprano Thurman. "But Jose really tries to take the time to have specific human emotions and reactions built in. ... There are few directors that do that."

To hear singers talk about his direction is to realize that Condemi is an "actor's director."

"He has this way of directing that I like. He gives you an idea and lets you explore it," said Vieira. "And if that doesn't work with the production, he steps in and gives you new ideas and tries to work with you. For a performer, this is important as it makes you feel as if you're part of the production."

Condemi grew up in the small agricultural town of San Andres de Giles, an hour northwest of Buenos Aires. He studied the piano from age 6 and was involved in theater productions growing up.

Upon graduating from high school, Condemi's professional inclination was the pursuit of a medical degree. However, an obsessive **love** for opera was just about to blossom. It happened at age 18, when he first heard the final duet from a recording of Bizet's "Carmen" playing at a record store.

"I got the CD, which were excerpts, then I got the whole opera, and that sort of multiplied into hundreds and hundreds of recordings. Opera soon took over my life," he said.

That obsession was key to Condemi's choice to quit medical school, which he had been attending for three years.

"That was not an easy decision to make," he said.

He enrolled in the undergraduate degree program in opera stage direction at Buenos Aires' Teatro Colon -- Argentina's closest equivalent to our Metropolitan Opera.

"I really didn't know what I was getting myself into," said Condemi. "I didn't have an idea what an opera director did. I just knew I had to do it."

Condemi spent five years in the program, which is an adjunct to the opera house and its productions.

Director Condemi gives 'Elixir' some Napa flavor Sacramento Bee (California) November 15, 2009 Sunday
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When he graduated, Condemi realized that opportunities in Argentina for a fledgling opera director were few. He soon emigrated to the U.S. to pursue a graduate degree in directing from the University of Cincinnati College Conservatory of Music. It was there that he forged his interest in combining theater and opera.

Upon graduation, Condemi's star rose quickly, with acceptance into the **San Francisco Opera's** Merola Opera Program in 1999 and an Adler Fellowship in stage direction in 2001 and 2002.

That fellowship had never before been offered to anyone but singers.

"I was the first and last director. ... They've never offered it to any director since," Condemi said.

As a result, he got to direct many Merola productions and served as associate director to the company's mainstage productions.

This, in turn, has given Condemi a solid framework from which to draw a crisp theatrical vision of a bel canto opera like "**Elixir**."

"Sometimes there's a prejudice against the bel canto repertoire," Condemi said. "But I never felt that way. Yes, '**Elixir**' is a simple story, but that does not mean it's not an interesting one."

"I find that if you scratch a little under the surface of this work you'll find a lot of truth within."

ELIXIR OF LOVE Sacramento Opera When: 8 p.m. Friday; 2 p.m. Nov. 22; and 7:30 p.m. Nov. 24.
Where: Community Center Theater, 1301 L St., Sacramento Tickets: \$18-\$130 Information: (916) 808-5181
or www.sacopera.org

Call Bee arts critic Edward Ortiz, (916) 321-1071.

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CORRECTION-DATE: November 17, 2009

CORRECTION: A caption for a photograph accompanying a story about the Sacramento Opera "**Elixir of Love**" on Page I3 Sunday misidentified Dinyar Vania as David Small.

GRAPHIC: MICHAEL ALLEN JONES / mjones@sacbee.com
David Small, left, Katrina Thurman and Igor Vieira star in "**Elixir of Love**" for the Sacramento Opera.
Director Jose Maria Condemi has set "**Elixir**" in Napa Valley in the 1940s.

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