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Small is beautiful Boheme

OPERA

La Boheme

Freeze Frame Opera
Camelot Theatre, Mosman
Park

REVIEW **WILLIAM YEOMAN**



Just outside the entrance to the theatre I noticed a bill poster with the words “Cane Smarrito” and a photograph of a forlorn-looking dog on it. “Poor thing,” I thought, wondering, though, why “Lost Dog” was written in Italian.

It quickly became apparent the poster was all part of the immersive experience that was innovative small company Freeze Frame Opera’s first full opera, Puccini’s La Boheme.

Well, not quite full, as there are some cuts. Neither do the often hilarious surtitles always aim at accuracy or completeness. But this was in keeping with the spirit of this terrific production, a masterly blend of stripped-back opera,

sexy cabaret and grungy street theatre that honours Puccini’s sublime score and his mastery of verismo, or realistic, depiction of life.

Come to think of it, it feels more like a club or pub gig than an opera, not just in the rawness and energy that emanate from the stage but the action that also spills from it.

Which is one of the benefits of performing in a small theatre such as the Art Deco Camelot, which seats about 150. At one point, for example, with a disco ball spinning overhead, Musetta (Naomi Johns) hands out flyers for her next show to audience members.

Johns’ captivating performance often borders on outrageous, such as when Musetta empties the contents of a champagne bottle over herself during the famous Musetta’s Waltz, in which she cheekily tries to get the attention of her former lover, Marcello (Sam Roberts-Smith). A wet T-shirt

moment indeed.

We first encounter Marcello together with fellow bohemians Rodolfo (Paul O’Neill), Colline (Paul-Anthony Keightley) and Schaunard (Lachlann Lawton), here four lads in a messy flat sharing pizza and beer.

When Rodolfo’s companions go on ahead into the night, the stage is set for one of the most celebrated first meetings of lovers in operatic history, as Mimi (Harriet O’Shannessy) appears. She’s hoping Rodolfo can literally light her flame but the metaphorical implications are soon fully realised.

With piano accompaniment by the irrepressible Tommaso Pollio, direction by Rachel McDonald, design by Robbie Harrold (who also has a non-singing part as a venue manager) and lighting by Geoff Glencross, everyone is firing on all cylinders in this outstanding production. But at the risk of being invidious, you can’t go past O’Neill and O’Shannessy



Paul O’Neill and Harriet O’Shannessy. Picture: John Marshall

for chemistry or sheer technical and artistic bravura.

In terms of Freeze Frame Opera’s ability to attract opera newbies: most of the audience in this sold-out Thursday opening night performance

started clapping before O’Neill and O’Shannessy had sung the beautiful off-stage ending to O Soave Fanciulla.

These audience members’ first La Boheme? If not, they’ll never forget it.