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STYLE

Dulce Rosa: Theater Review

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Courtesy of LA Opera

THE BOTTOM LINE

Strong vocals and lavish visuals highlight the Broad Stage production, a first-time opera presentation for the venue.

Based on Allende's short story, the opera had its world premiere at the Broad Stage in Santa Monica, marking the first time a fully-staged opera was performed in the hall.

In 1987 the Chilean feminist writer, **Isabel Allende**, penned a crystalline short story, *Una Venganza (An Act of Vengeance)* in which the pampered, beautiful daughter of a wealthy landowner, Dulce Rosa, has her idyllic world shattered during one horrific night of unspeakable violence and rape. For 30 years she is haunted by the spectre of the guerilla fighter "with the hands of a pirate" who violated her and killed her father, all the while plotting her ultimate revenge. But when their paths finally intersect captor and captive discover their perverse obsession for one another has been transformed into mutual love. The Stockholm syndrome personified.



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note-worthy event, since it represented the first time a fully staged opera was performed in the hall.

Created as a co-production with Los Angeles Opera, *Dulce Rosa* (which runs through June 9) features an impressive roster of talent led by **Plácido Domingo** who conducts a vocally powerful cast, members of the L.A. Opera chorus (under the direction of **Grant Gershon**) and 35 members of the Los Angeles Opera orchestra.

The imaginary Latin American setting is enhanced by a dazzling visual scheme conceived by set designer **Yael Pardess** and based on photographic projections (designed by **Jenny Okun**) that transform the limited stage space into digitally collaged vistas of palatial haciendas, stained glass churches and vine-covered jungle. It proves that full-scale opera can be presented at the Broad Stage. Whether *Dulce Rosa* is financially successful and will lead to future co-productions remains to be seen.

Any time a production -- be it an opera or a movie -- proclaims the words "based on" in its credits, you can assume that major alterations to the original material have taken place. And in the present case Sparks' libretto takes liberties with Allende's material that significantly chronologically truncate her time frame of vengeance and the manner in which that vengeance transpires.

Allende's clean-lined precision is turned into operatic melodrama that ebbs and flows on the gushing tide of Holdridge's old fashioned, chromatically over-stuffed score. It certainly does not possess the orchestral quality and elegance of **Daniel Cátan's** *Il Postino* (premiered by L.A. Opera in 2010) though both works bow down at the alter of Puccini.

Holdridge, who has numerous television themes (*One Life to Live*), pop music arrangements (for **Neil Diamond**) and movie scores (**Jonathan Livingston Seagull**) to his credit, writes music that is competent, calculated, well crafted and guaranteed to offend no one. He will never be accused of advancing the form of modern opera.

The crucial role of *Dulce Rosa* is sung by the strong-voiced Uruguayan soprano, **Maria Antúñez**, who has made a reputation portraying heroines like Mozart's male-victimized Donna Elvira. Would that she brought the nuance of that role to her *Dulce Rosa*. Instead, her characterization consists of looking lovely and winsome in act one and stiff as a board in act 2. Her voice, however, is a flexible, dynamic, darkly shaded instrument that carries dramatic weight and blends well in her duets and ensembles.

One of L.A. Opera's reliable veterans, tenor **Greg Fedderly**, plays Rosa's overpowering father, a man who would kill his daughter to spare her from disgrace. It is only when she convinces him the vengeance is sweeter than a bullet, that he lets her live. Then he haunts her from beyond the grave reminding her of her revenge-seeking oath like Hamlet's ghost — "Remember me!"

Allende describes the rebel fighter, Tadeo Cespedes, as a man that grew up fighting with a gun in his hands and the stench of gun smoke in his nostrils. Love and the niceties of life were not part of his experience. The night of the violence, when he finds and rapes Rosa (a scene that his handled with PG conservatism in the opera) the event scars him for life.



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capable of carrying out the carriage Allende describes in the story, but never appears on stage.

The strangest insertion is the character of the politically conscious student, Tomas, who does not appear in the original story. He and Rosa are to be married. And her father approves because Tomas is the “right” kind of revolutionary, the kind that leaves home to go to college in California. U.C. Berkeley? Odd as this insertion may be, the role is ably sung and acted by L.A. Opera newcomer, **Benjamin Bliss**.

I won't give away the ending and the way it involves this character. But I will say it has nothing whatsoever to do with the story as envisioned by Allende.

Craig Colclough plays the sleazy political opportunist, Aguilar. And Rosa's girlfriend/ confidant, Inez, is sung with graceful elegance by mezzo-soprano **Peabody Southwell**.

Blame for the opera's melodramatic tone lies with Sparks who in addition to writing the distorted libretto, directed the production. The “*Evita*-esque” costumes are by **Durinda Wood**. The set design is by **Yael Pardess**. The lighting is by **Anne Militello**.

And then there is Domingo. As a lover of the romantic opera repertoire, he is totally comfortable conducting Holdridge's score. He allowed the music to flow and the vocal lines to blend. And with the intimate setting of the Broad Stage, the music certainly filled the hall.
