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Review: With 'Dulce Rosa,' L.A. Opera takes its show on the road

May 20, 2013 | By [Richard S. Ginell](#)

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This review has been updated. See below for details.

While the proposed “subway to the sea” may be decades away if it ever comes, Los Angeles Opera isn’t waiting for it to happen.

The company is making the trek from downtown right now, launching L.A. Opera Off Grand on the Broad Stage on Friday night with an evening-length, world-premiere opera, “Dulce Rosa.”

L.A. Opera’s tireless general director Plácido Domingo was in the pit, vigorously lending his prestige and drawing power. This is good — bringing fully-staged opera to people who can’t, or won’t, navigate the mess that east-west Los Angeles traffic has become.



Benjamin Bliss, left, Maria Antunez and Alfredo Daza are featured in "Dulce..." (Lawrence K. Ho / Los Angeles...)

PHOTOS: LA Opera through the years

Yet this opera, though brand-new, is not exactly a leap into the unknown. Composer Lee Holdridge and librettist/director Richard Sparks are a solid, established team, having done five previous shorter projects for L.A. Opera, and Holdridge’s ties with Domingo go back to 1982 when they worked with John Denver.

“Dulce Rosa” reflects that comfort zone — in the ease in which the music, with more than a dash of melodic rhetoric derived from TV and film, serves the words and woos the mainstream opera audience that still flocks to “Tosca” and “Butterfly.”

Sparks takes Isabel Allende’s wonderful, concise short story “Una Venganza” and draws it out with a lot of expository invention while compressing 30 years into several months. The setting is an unnamed South American country in the grip of civil war, bent under the ever-present threat of violence and the traditions of the Catholic Church.

Sparks fleshes out Allende’s three characters — the retired Senator Orellano (Greg Fedderly), his doting daughter Rosa (Maria Antúnez), and a guerrilla leader Tadeo Cespedes (Alfredo Daza) — and adds three more: Rosa’s wise au pair/advisor Inez (Peabody Southwell), Rosa’s childhood sweetheart/fiancé Tomas Chacon (Benjamin Bliss), and conniving bureaucrat-turned-politician Juan Aguilar (Craig Colclough).

PHOTOS: Arts and culture in pictures by The Times

Then there is the controversial notion of Rosa falling in love with her rapist, Tadeo. Allende’s short story doesn’t explain why, but the opera tries to do so by having Tadeo tell his back story as a victim in a big aria as Holdridge’s melodies bloom without overloading the emotions. The rape and its immediate aftermath are tastefully handled — and Holdridge permits himself a dissonant string cluster as an effective recurring revenge motif.

The absorbing libretto gets us to ponder the trauma of rape, the Stockholm Syndrome (victims bonding with their oppressors), and the shifting politics of the region. But alas, these thoughts are scuttled by the opera’s ending, which descends into crude, melodramatic verismo. Allende has repeatedly said that she prefers her short story’s quite different ending, and I agree. Perhaps there is even a third way that can be devised.

Ultimately, the production’s biggest attractions are Yael Pardess’ (scenic designer) and Jenny Okun (projection designer) stunning video content — lush, often wildly colorful, changing almost imperceptibly, extending the capabilities of fluid, cost-effective, virtual scenery that came of age with L.A. Opera’s production of “Fidelio” in 2007. The cast, especially Antúnez’s evolving, powerfully-acted Rosa and Fedderly’s virile Orellano, is strong — and most could be understood in the Broad’s rather dry acoustics.

This space works for chamber opera, and may there be more westward excursions to come.

[For the record May 23, 10:46 a.m. This review has been updated to credit scenic designer Yael Pardess.]

ALSO:

['Dulce Rosa': An Isabel Allende tale turns operatic](#)

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L.A. Opera Off Grand: "Dulce Rosa;" The Broad Stage, 1310 11th St., Santa Monica; 7:30 p.m. Saturday, May 28, June 3, 6; 4 p.m. June 9; \$75-\$150; (310) 434-3200 or www.thebroadstage.com.

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