

British Theatre Guide

News, reviews, features and podcast on theatre across the UK

The Love for Three Oranges

Sergei Prokofiev

Opus Arte

(2006)

Strictly speaking the title should be *L'Amour des Trois Oranges*, for De Nederlandse Opera's spectacular production - directed by Laurent Pelly, who also designed the costumes - uses Prokofiev's French translation of his original Russian libretto. This was the version in which the opera first saw the light of day in 1921, and to quote the sleeve notes it's "a pertinent choice which has the advantage of accentuating the common ground shared by Prokofiev and Les Six".

The libretto, like that of Puccini's *Turandot*, was inspired by Carlo Gozzi's eighteenth century collection of fairy tales. All is not well in the King of Clubs' domain - his son is dying of melancholia and his niece, Princess Clarice, is conspiring with Prime Minister Leandre to take over the kingdom. There is only one solution: the Prince must be made to laugh. Both factions have supernatural helpers, the wizard Tchelio protecting the King and the witch Fata Morgana assisting Leandre. The two play a game of cards (the staging of which is a real *coup de théâtre*) and Fata Morgana wins.

She ensures that the jester Trouffaldino's attempts to amuse the Prince are in vain, but her personal appearance at the palace ends in disaster when she inadvertently makes the Prince laugh. Outraged, Fata Morgana dooms him to fall in love with three oranges. With the help of Tchelio and Trouffaldino the Prince embarks on a quest to find the mysterious fruit. After further adventures involving a demon, a monstrous cook, a giant rat and a beautiful princess, order and happiness are restored to the Kingdom of Clubs.

Although even the most fervent fan of *Oranges* would have to admit that the opera is not exactly overflowing with hummable tunes (except for the famous March), there is never a dull moment in Pelly's lavish production. Alain Vernhes' lugubrious King, Martial Defontaine's baby-faced Prince and Anna Shafajinskaja's grotesque Fata Morgana head a first-rate cast. Sir Willard White lends his imposing presence to the comparatively small role of Tchelio and Richard Angas, almost unrecognisable in a fat suit and ginger wig, is obviously having a whale of a time as the ladle-wielding Cook.

The casting of Sandrine Piau as Ninette, the only survivor of three princesses who emerge from giant oranges, is a little surprising, but although she is best known as a singer of Handel and Mozart she proves to be equally adept in twentieth century music. The Rotterdam Philharmonic orchestra acquits itself splendidly under conductor Stephane Deneve, who is occasionally drawn into the action as it spills from the stage into the orchestra pit.

Chantal Thomas' spectacular sets and most of Laurent Pelly's magnificent costumes are inspired by playing cards. Comparisons with *Alice in Wonderland* inevitably spring to mind, and the fact that the Prince wears pyjamas throughout the opera suggests that the whole thing may well be a dream. Fata Morgana is certainly the stuff of which nightmares are made - her figure-hugging

scarlet dress and bald head evoke memories of Divine in his Pink Flamingoes period - and the overall effect is of a surreal collaboration between John Tenniel and George Grosz.

This outstanding production, recorded last year in Amsterdam, is a welcome addition to the ranks of contemporary opera available on DVD. Admirers of Prokofiev will need no encouragement to avail themselves of what must surely be the most inventive stagings of the work for many years.

Reviewer: [J. D. Atkinson](#)