

# British Theatre Guide

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## I Vespri Siciliani

Giuseppe Verdi, libretto by Eugène Scribe and Charles Duveyrier

Teatro Regio di Parma

Released 13 May 2013

On Easter Monday in Palermo in 1282, the Sicilians massacred the French invaders. There were over 2,000 dead and it led to an uprising all over the island. This historic event is the basis for Giuseppe Verdi's *I Vespri Siciliani*.

The opera had its première in 1855 in Paris and ran for 50 performances. Its popularity, however, was short-lived and it has rarely been performed since. I remember seeing it performed by ENO and not liking it and coming out of the theatre feeling it was a Verdi opera I didn't need to see again. Eugène Scribe's libretto is a mess.

35 years on, I am seeing a production, directed and designed by Pier Luigi Pizzi and conducted by Massimo Zanetti, which was performed in 2012 at Teatro Regio di Parma, the theatre which has an annual Festival of operas by Verdi.

Arrigo, a young Sicilian patriot, finds himself in a difficult situation when Elena, the woman he loves, wants him to kill Monforte, the infamously brutal French Governor, an act of revenge for his murder of her brother. Just after he has agreed to do it, Arrigo learns that he is Monforte's illegitimate son.

Pizzi's production has a clean and spare look. The action has been updated to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Act 2 now ends with French soldiers raping Sicilian girls, the historical incident which led to the massacre.

There is much to enjoy in the music. Monforte has one of the finest arias Verdi wrote and Leo Nucci wins the greatest applause. His reunion with his son is a high spot. Fabio Armiliato and Daniela Diessi, as Arrigo and Elena, have some fine duets; and, when they are joined by Giacomo Prestia, they have some fine trios.

Prestia is cast as Procida, an elderly patriot, returning from exile, and he has a moving aria which expresses his love for Sicily. There are two exciting ensembles for the climaxes of acts 3 and 4.

One of the major problems for any opera director is what to do with the chorus; and the larger the numbers the greater the problem. Pizzi's solution is to put the chorus at the back of the stalls and in the aisles round the auditorium and on the steps up to the stage, which means that viewers can see the inside of this beautiful theatre but it can't be good for the actual audience.

Pizzi also has the lead singers singing some of their arias in the stalls, which is definitely not a good idea dramatically. The big disappointment is the opera's exceptionally abrupt ending and cutting short on the massacre and uprising.

Reviewer: [Robert Tanitch](#)