

Giuseppe Verdi
San Diego Opera: Rigoletto
Verdi's *Rigoletto*, a showcase for superb baritone Lado Ataneli



Lado Ataneli
Photo © Ken Howard

Giuseppe Verdi described the character of Rigoletto as “outwardly ridiculous and deformed, inwardly filled with passion and love,” a synopsis that captures the conflicting elements at play in the tragic man who unknowingly contributes to the violent death of his beloved daughter. Francesco Maria Piave adapted the libretto from Victor Hugo’s 1831 play “Le roi s’amuse” (The King Is Having Fun), changing the name of the hunchback to Rigoletto, a name derived from the French word “rigoler” meaning to joke or tease, to laugh at. Rigoletto is trapped by the public’s disgust for his deformities; people laugh at him and treat him cruelly and the only way he can find a place in society is to become a buffoonish character who pokes fun at the shortcomings of others and says what the noble people are thinking but dare not speak aloud. Comparing himself with the assassin Sparafucile he laments, “My weapon is my tongue and his, the dagger. To be deformed and ridiculed by men has made me wicked. I cannot have anything other than laughter, I cannot have my tears.”



Giuseppe Gipali e Lado Ataneli
Photo © Ken Howard

Rigoletto has been part of the standard opera repertoire since its hugely successful debut in 1851. Stories of social outcasts committing vile acts or being the victims of cruel fates and naïve young girls sacrificing themselves for morally questionable men often appear in literature. The strictness of Renaissance court life provides ample atmosphere for these themes to play out, although *Rigoletto* and other works have been successfully presented with the action occurring in more contemporary time periods, thus reinforcing the timelessness of these human dramas.



In this San Diego Opera production, the sets were traditional, perhaps overly so. In addition, there were some elements that did not make sense with the story, such as the design of Rigoletto’s house. It was pretty and pristine, which is inappropriate for the character since he is of low socioeconomic status, certainly not a middle-class gentleman who would live in such a home. Rather than having a generous-sized courtyard with a fountain it would have been more believable as a humble cottage in an alley behind the castle. Another disturbing element was that before each act a screen appeared in front of the stage and a brief description of the upcoming action was displayed upon it. While this technique was a poignant use of quoted dialogue from Cervantes’ early 17th century novel in SDO’s production of *Don Quixote* this season, in this case it was merely a synopsis written as an anonymous opinion that offered an editorial bias on the characters. It came across as condescending for the audience to be told where the next scene was taking place or that Rigoletto is afraid for his daughter because, “being evil himself, he knows what harm could come to her.” The audience should be trusted to at least glance at the program in order to be familiar with this frequently-performed opera.

Giuseppe Gipali e Lubica Vargicová
Photo © Ken Howard



Arutjun Kotchinian e Lado Ataneli
Photo © Ken Howard



Lado Ataneli e Lubica Vargicová
Photo © Ken Howard

Lotfi Mansouri's direction was basically static. The action in the first act was minimalized and even felt rushed so that there was little time to be shocked by the lecherous philandering Duke; he barely touched the Countess Ceprano in their brief "flirtatious dance." Rigoletto had such little interaction with the courtiers that it tested plausibility to accept their desire to take vengeance on him for his mistreating them. There are many ways a prankster could mock people – peering down a woman's bodice, tipping a man's hat off his head, engaging in pantomimed mimicry of someone as they walk along – any of those would have effectively conveyed Rigoletto's relentless teasing, but instead we saw only shaking of the jester's stick with its bright colors and hanging bells. The effect of the subdued stage direction was that much of the action throughout this production lacked sufficient dramatic impact. There were occasional moments of intense emotion, as in Gilda's embarrassed defense of herself and the Duke to her father in Act II and Rigoletto's horrified grief at the discovery of his dying daughter at the end of Act III, but unfortunately the story was blandly portrayed overall.

In the title role, georgian **Lado Ataneli** delivered the full depth of his true Verdian baritone to the delighted San Diego audience. His voice was velvety smooth - even, rich and warm, with no weakness across his range or in emotional expression. Clean diction and mastery of vocal dynamics rounded out a wonderfully satisfying performance. While the tall, well-built Ataneli conveyed the physical deformities of Rigoletto as well as he could, the hunchback's frailness would have come across better with more haggard-looking hair and make-up to portray him as looking older and weaker than he did.

In her SDO debut, Slovak soprano **Lubica Vargičová's** bright, lively voice accurately presented Gilda as the young, naïve girl that she is. Her slim figure and fragile beauty were perfect for this role. Her voice blended well with Ataneli's and the emotional rapport of their characters was engaging. A drawback was that she often put too much volume into her high notes, interrupting the smoothness of her vocal line. While her "Caro nome" in Act I was lovely, we were disappointed that she didn't treat us to her well-known coloratura. We were expecting floating pianissimi in the opera's final scene and although she skillfully delivered Gilda's sadness and resignation to her fate, her voice did not quite convey the fading strength of a dying woman.

The Duke of Mantua was performed by Albanian tenor **Giuseppe Gipali** in his SDO debut. He had good phrasing and a pleasant sound in an authentic Italian style. However the audience struggled to hear him, as if he were only using half the volume of his voice. The voice was constrained, as was his acting. His Duke was curiously detached, lacking charisma and appearing to be observing the action rather than actively participating in it. He warmed up somewhat in the last act, managing to put some vitality into his "La donna è mobile" and he was enthusiastically amorous with Maddalena.

Sparafucile was portrayed with circumspect craftiness by Armenian **Arutjun Kotchinian**. Kotchinian has a powerful, resonant basso voice.



Giuseppe Gipali e Kirstin Chávez
Photo © Ken Howard

His Sparafucile was convincing as a casually violent man who has principles; when Maddalena convinces him to spare the Duke, he insists that he is a killer not a thief and will not keep Rigoletto's money without presenting him with a dead body. His tall, thin frame enhanced the menacing nature of this character.

Kirstin Chávez was attractive and played the role of Maddalena with the right dose of seductiveness and cunning. Her voice was seamless, with nothing out of place. **Joseph Hu**'s Borsa was clear and energetic, **Scott Sikon**'s Count Monterone effectively delivered his contemptuous pronouncements to Rigoletto and the courtiers, and **Malcolm MacKenzie**'s Marullo communicated the gossip about Rigoletto's secret lover with appropriate glee. The men's chorus, under the direction of Timothy Todd Simmons, was erratic in their presentation in the first act, but at the beginning of Act II when they described how they abducted Rigoletto's lover, they were crisply focused and cohesive.

Conductor Edoardo Müller kept the music moving nicely. The renowned quartet in Act III, "Bella figlia dell'amore" was well-executed, allowing sufficient room for the expression of each voice.

Olga Hirsch