



PHOTOS BY KEN HOWARD

L'ubica Vargicová (above) is Gilda, Arutjun Kotchinian (right photo, on left) is assassin Sparafucile and Lado Atanelli sings the title role in San Diego Opera's "Rigoletto."

'Rigoletto' is grand opera at its grandest

By CHARLENE BALDRIDGE | VILLAGE NEWS

San Diego Opera (SDO) mounted a lovely new production of Giuseppe Verdi's "Rigoletto" March 28, and once again allowed patrons to see the set change between Act I and Act II.

The huge, realistic sets and costumes, both designed by Carl Toms, were purchased by artistic and general director Ian Campbell from New York City Opera and refurbished in SDO shops. The first scene features what may be the largest kitsch sculpture of Bacchus on the planet.

An assiduous talent scout, Camp-

bell is also responsible for engaging Slovakian soprano L'ubica Vargicová, who made her SDO debut as Gilda. The impresario heard the diva nine years ago in Bratislava, and due to her busy international career (she sang at Los Angeles Opera last season) it took this long to get her here.

Vargicová is impressive. Physically, she is slim and graceful and quite convincingly portrays the cloistered, virginal girl who falls hopelessly in love with a royal cad (the Duke of Mantua, sung by Albanian tenor Giuseppe Gipali). Vargicová's voice is not the usual coloratura. It has great amplitude and beauty in the middle registers, then soars with mostly pinpoint accuracy into the stratosphere. Her "Caro Nome" was a highlight of the evening, as was the high note she nailed while sliding down her father's leg after she is raped. One longs to hear her Lucia one day.

She and Gipali are not well matched in timbre or musical phrasing in their Act I, Scene 2, duets, which feel as if Maestro Edoardo Müller were dragging them along. One misses quintessential, Italianate phrasing and vocal blend that is so required of Verdi singers.

The handsome Gipali has been

singing the Duke and Puccini's Cavaradossi, but his voice seems light, nonetheless, in the 3,000-seat Civic Theatre. He's got the requisite edge that allows for clean runs, but his voice fails to arch over into certain above-the-staff notes, resulting in inaccurate pitch.

The evening's exemplary Italianate singing is that of Georgian baritone Lado Atanelli, in the title role of the deformed Rigoletto, father of Gilda and court jester to the Duke. Atanelli, who sang Simon Boccanegra here in 2005, has a luscious voice, a beautiful, strong top, and all the fatherly tenderness one could hope to see. Atanelli and Vargicová's Act I and Act III duets are highlights of the production. But then, Verdi did his best writing for fatherly figure and soprano.

Also handsome, disarming, scary and wonderful to hear is Armenian bass Arutjun Kotchinian as the assassin for hire, Sparafucile. As Sparafucile's whorish sister, Maddalena, Kirsten Chavez is alluring vocally and physically. She, Vargicová, Gipali and Atanelli sang absolutely the best Quartet in memory on opening night. It was accurate and beautifully modulated, a real example of collegial excellence. Lighting designer Michael Whitfield's marvelous storm and the



magnificent playing of San Diego Symphony punctuate that scene.

Under the direction of Timothy Todd Simmons, the men's chorus turns in a great sounding, grand looking Act II account of Gilda's abduction for the Duke's pleasure. Toms' costumes for the Act I costume ball are a treat, with commedia dell'arte masks and feathered headdresses.

This is grand opera at its most thrilling — big, rife with melody and spectacular to behold. Three performances remain: 8 p.m. Friday, April 3; 2 p.m. Sunday, April 5; and 7 p.m. Wednesday, April 8, at the San Diego Civic Theatre, Third Avenue at C Street. For tickets (\$35-\$200), visit www.sdogera.com or call (619) 533-7000. ■