

REVIEW

## Opera Tampa Stages Alluring, Evocative 'Boheme'

By KURT LOFT  
The Tampa Tribune

**TAMPA** — When the impoverished seamstress Mimi sighs her last breath and Rodolfo cries out in anguish, the curtain goes down on a story of love and loss that always merits revisiting.

"La Boheme" has yet to gather rust after more than a century in the world's opera houses, and despite its long run in popularity, Giacomo Puccini's masterpiece refuses to give up its place at the core of the repertoire. It proves resilient in this weekend's production by Opera Tampa, featuring a sparkling young cast, atmospheric sets and an alert orchestra under the baton of Anton Coppola.

Within the constraints of a \$320,000 budget, the company offered a convincing performance Friday night for an audience of 1,800 people at the Tampa Bay Performing Arts Center. Repeated today, the production succeeds in being restrained yet alluring and evocative, with each of the four acts framed in its own stylish mood.

The bohemians' garret in Act I and



Rob/Harris Productions

**Darynn Zimmer as Mimi and Gregory Schmidt as Rodolfo star in the Opera Tampa production of "La Boheme."**

the Café Momus are visually engaging, and when the curtain goes up on Act III on a cold Paris morning, the audience can almost feel the winter chill. A moonlit window in the final act creates a palpable sense of impending tragedy.

But "Boheme" lives through its characters, and Darynn Zimmer as

Mimi and Gregory Schmidt as Rodolfo offer sensitive, understated solos and duets, notably the ravishing "O Soave Fanciulla" in Act 1.

The vividly defined subcharacters inject plenty of verve into the action. The three bohemians — Guido le Bron as Marcello, Nat Chandler as Shaunard and Stephan Kirchgraber as Colline — sing, dance and joke with aplomb. A strong Musetta, played by Olga Chernisheva, steals outright the Café Momus scene with her vivacious stage presence and alluring vocals.

When Mimi brings the theme of illness into the lives of the carefree if desperate men, an unwritten responsibility bonds them together, and the opera takes on a deeper glow reflected in Puccini's emotive score.

Coppola caresses this music as if he owns it, and at age 90, his experience shows. On Friday night he drew sensitive and refined playing from his musicians, avoiding the temptation to be overly sentimental. The orchestra played with focus and agility, delicately underscoring the motifs

associated with each character and putting just the right energy into each crescendo.

In the final moments, when Rodolfo realizes his beloved Mimi has died, Coppola doesn't bang us over the head with resounding brass chords, but lets the music rise and fade into a dignified silence.

The chorus, especially the children, is a delight and adds a splash of color to the production, which runs just under three hours. The only glitches Friday night were a malfunctioning projector for the English translation in Act I, and a coat rack that fell over onto Marcello's easel in Act 4.

If "La Boheme" is timeless, it certainly has gotten more expensive. Tickets for the company's 1998 production were \$17 to \$46, and today the cheap seats go for \$60 and top out at nearly \$100. A second performance is at 2 p.m. today at the Tampa Bay Performing Arts Center, 1010 N. MacInnes Place, Tampa; (813) 229-7827.

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