

The Arts

Reviews

Don Gregorio Wexford Festival Opera

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A tall crane looks down over the building site that once housed Wexford's Theatre Royal. And while the new theatre is being built, the Wexford Festival is relocating, this year to the Dún Mhuire theatre, next year, in June, to Johnstown Castle.

Dún Mhuire has been transformed for the

occasion by designer Joe Vanek. The rather claustrophobic seating under the balcony has been closed off. Raked seats now rise from the floor to the balcony, and, with no pit available, the orchestra plays on the floor in front of the stage. Even with a brightened-up foyer and extra bar space, the venue remains something of a mish-mash, but a perfectly viable one. When the lights are down the focus is on the stage and the still somewhat tatty surroundings fade.

The first of this year's two operas opened on Wednesday, and marks a revisiting, unusual for Wexford, of a work first staged there in 1973. But it's not an exact revisiting. 1973 saw a production of Donizetti's *L'ajo nell'imbarazzo*, this year is bringing a production of *Don Gregorio*, a revised version of the same work, which Donizetti prepared for Naples in 1826, two years after its Roman premiere.

Unusually in this comic opera about protective parental restrictions, it's his two sons, Enrico and Pippetto, that the conservative Don Giulio aspires to keep away from the outside world, and in particular the attractions of the fairer sex. Without his knowledge, his youngest son has fallen for an older maid, and his elder son is in fact married and already a father.

Donizetti had a sharp way with this kind of knowing comedy, and director Roberto Recchia has devised a responsive, fast-paced production that updates the work by a century and is unfailingly inventive in

adding to the joke quotient. Ferdia Murphy's costumes are as colourful as his set is classically reserved, but behind the gray facade it's equipped with amusingly contrived drawers (yielding a bed and a wardrobe) and alcoved statuary which comes to life and enters the action.

The star of the show is the Don Gregorio of Italian baritone Paolo Bordogna, a man who goes, sometimes manically, through many transformations yet retains a sense of musical and vocal poise whatever demands are made on him.

Italian bass-baritone Bruno Taddia's Don Giulio is suitably firm-spined, though even he gets dragged into the second act's frenzy of cross-dressing. His two tenor sons, Spaniard Vicenc Esteve as Pippetto and Italian Danilo Formaggia as Enrico, are nicely contrasted, the first all coltish energy, the second more careful and circumspect, and, though vocally agile, not always entirely pleasant in tone.

Georgian soprano Elizaveta Martirosyan is a feisty presence as Enrico's wife, Gilda, and she makes the most of her opportunities for vocal fireworks. Italian mezzo Sabina Willeit's maid, Leonarda, oils some of the wheels of the plot with relish.

The Irish-sourced Orchestra of the Wexford Festival Opera plays with sharpness and style under Michele Mariotti. His pacing in this work, full of effects that Donizetti essayed more successfully elsewhere, keeps things moving nicely.