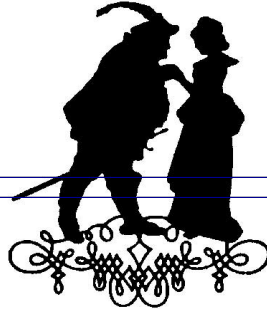


# Opera con Brio

Richard B. Beams



## A Vibrant *Falstaff* at Berkshire Opera Festival, 2021 A Fitting Commemoration

Against all odds, the 2021 Berkshire Opera Festival capped its 6<sup>th</sup> season with yet another jewel - Verdi's evergreen final opera *Falstaff* performed as its mainstage production in the final weeks of August at the Mahaiwe Performing Arts Center in Great Barrington, MA. Given the unsettling circumstances of the last year and a half, this was no mean achievement for the ambitious company, not just for coming up with such a captivating performance, but simply for succeeding with a live performance at all. As Julian Budden has written of *Falstaff* in his famous three-volume study of Verdi's operas, "For an artist to blaze a new trail in his 80<sup>th</sup> year is no mean achievement." The same might be said of the trail blazed by the Company's co-founders, Brian Garman, now Artistic Director, and Jonathon Loy, now Director of Productions. By all appearances, after years of efforts and uncertainty, opera in the Berkshires seems finally here to stay.

I thought of this after entering the historic theater's lobby, donning both face mask and a bracelet certifying my Covid vaccination. There I ran into Rex Hearn, a good friend I'd known since 1985 when he had founded Berkshire Opera Company in nearby Lee. His tireless vision and struggle to bring opera to the Berkshires

finally ended in 2009 when hardships from the Great Recession following 9/11 caused it to close. His vision was certainly much like that of Mr. Garman and Mr. Loy, who organized a new Berkshire Opera Festival in 2016 to fill the gap. For each company, all roads led eventually to the Mahaiwe, a 700-seat jewel box of a theatre built in 1905 for vaudeville with near perfect acoustics.

Sitting in the Theatre on August 21, 2021, I remembered a memorable gala performance hosted by Rex that I had reviewed twenty years ago, almost to the day. After forays in numerous other venues, his company had just purchased the run-down Mahaiwe, and restoration of merely a single pillar on the left had given a glimpse of what the fully restored theatre might again become. Rex had opened the evening with the words, "Opera is alive and well and has a new home in the Berkshires." With *Falstaff* on August 21, 2021, in the now exquisitely restored theater, opera is still very much alive and well in the Berkshires. What a welcome return too from the lingering pandemic! And happily the indomitable Rex Hearn, now on the Advisory Committee of Berkshire Opera Festival, could be there as well to enjoy the sequel to his landmark enterprise.



Alice Ford, Tamara Wilson; Sebastian Catana, Falstaff  
Photo: Ken Howard

With that, it's time to give credit to Mr. Garman and his team for the fabulous performance of this ensemble-rich opera, which had all the panache and brio the work warrants. This began where it should, with his conducting of the large orchestra, given ample room with the first three rows of the auditorium removed. He also kept in mind how much the orchestra is the embodiment of character and action, from the many familiar melodic kernels, oft repeated, of Mistress Quickly's contrived greetings to the fat knight, to the trills as wine trickles into the knight's belly after he has been dumped into the river, to all the many details that keep the opera flowing seamlessly. Meanwhile, experienced director Joshua Major followed suit; he adopted the old adage "less is more" by letting the music do the work, without allowing the comic piece to slip into camp or a mere collection of buffo antics.

Equally effective was the production itself from scenic designer Stephen Dobay that harkened back to Elizabethan theater with most of the action on an elevated platform stage. Although not equipped with trapdoors, Shakespeare's favorite stage trick, the stage allowed for fluent movement at the front and sides. Trap doors wouldn't have done for the big, fat knight anyway, but a rear window served well for his ignominious dump into the river. Scenes were of the simplest sort with few props, and changes of scene were quick and efficient, especially so with the shift to the final nocturnal scene in Windsor forest as the silhouette of a giant Hearn's Oak

eased its way from above onto the stage. A placard at stage right identified each scene, and carefully wrought Elizabethan costumes by costume designer Charles Caine added further to the authenticity of time and place. Especially breathtaking was the outlandish garb for Falstaff as a feathered Elizabethan lothario as he prepared for his clandestine rendezvous with Alice Ford.



Sebastian Catana, Falstaff Photo: Ken Howard

A few years back in 2016, the year of the founding of BOF, I had written that another enterprising young company, Opera Delaware, had come up with a perfect *Falstaff*, "one of the best I had ever encountered." Now I find myself saying the same thing again, especially with the fine cast across the board. First and foremost was the experienced Romanian-born Verdi baritone Sebastian Catana, a commanding but sympathetic presence, vocally secure and always human, avoiding excessive buffo antics. His Sir John became the kind of lover Shakespeare certainly envisioned in his play *The Merry Wives of Windsor* as did Verdi's librettist Arrigo Boito, who inspired Verdi to write, in his own words, "a lyric comedy unlike any other." That is, something more humanistic, not merely a *commedia* character type in the old Italian buffo tradition of Rossini's Bartolo. Mr.

Catana was just that as an elder Sir John whose mini-aria “Va, vecchio John” reflected not just inflated self-satisfaction but a poignant, nostalgic lament as well. He was endearingly sympathetic, not just comic, from beginning to end. The humanity of another leading male role also came through with Falstaff’s nemesis, Ford. Baritone Thomas Glass sang his big aria, the one archetypal Verdian *serioso* number, with assertive vigor but without vengeful hyperbole.

The two objects of his affection, formidable Verdian soprano Tamara Wilson as Alice Ford and the young mezzo-soprano Joanne Evans as Meg Page, were a delight. Each projected aptly the lively demeanor of this merry pair, and together, with well-matched voices, they clearly relished their plotting to befuddle Falstaff. Filling out the quartet of women were two contrasting vocal standouts, earthy contralto Alissa Anderson as a wry, understated Mistress Quickly and light, clarion soprano Jasmine Habersham, the perfect embodiment of a youthful, love-struck Nannetta. To Ms. Anderson’s credit, she let the music do the work since Verdi’s musical ideas so carefully match verbal tags, as when a deep curtsy is so built into her greeting of “Reverenza,” pandering to Falstaff. As for Ms. Habersham, her lovely voice added just the right sparkle to the ensembles – and indeed to the opera as a whole, from her fleeting duets with Fenton, nicely coupled with tenor Jones Hacker, to her magical aria in the last act as the Fairy Queen, “Sul fil d’un soffio etesio.”



Jasmine Habersham, Nannetta; Jones Hacker, Fenton  
Photo: Ken Howard



Joanne Evans, Meg Page; Alice Ford, Tamara Wilson; Alissa Anderson, Mrs. Quickly; Jasmine Habersham, Nannetta  
Photo: Ken Howard

Of course the ensemble is really the thing in this opera, as Verdi himself had noted to Boito. The famous “nonet” in the first act, the quintet of men cursing Falstaff juxtaposed against the quartet of women plotting to dupe him, were performed with all the nimble brio these ensembles merit. So too with the final ensemble in Windsor Forest, where Maestro Garman beautifully captured the delicate scoring of Verdi’s ethereal last scene. Here adult choristers, given Covid restrictions, substituted for gleeful children as fairies. But this played to advantage for what became fittingly the highlight of the opera, the ebullient double fugue, “Tutto nel mondo è burla,” which Mr. Major set not with the singers stretched out in a line at the edge of the stage with fairy children behind them, but with the full adult company clustered around the indefatigable Falstaff in a communal pack radiating good will. It was all genuinely uplifting, forgiving, and hopeful. “Tutti gabbati” enjoins Falstaff. Let’s all laugh and live while we can.

Harking back to my original thoughts on both the Berkshire Opera Festival’s return to live performance at the Mahaiwe with *Falstaff* and, twenty years earlier, Berkshire Opera’s Gala reopening of the Theatre on August 18, 2001, it is a poignant irony to recall that this date was just days before the heart-wrenching, catastrophic events of 9/11 itself. Coincidentally, we

may regard Verdi's two monumental late masterpieces, the Requiem Mass and *Falstaff*, both as fitting memorials. Recently on September 11, 2021, the Metropolitan Opera, having been closed for 18 months, broadcast its live performance of Verdi's *Requiem Mass* nationwide in commemoration of the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of 9/11. Its life affirming "Sanctus" and inward "Libere me" brought the mighty work to a close of deep consolation

and peace. And *Falstaff*, Verdi's final statement to mankind, stretches the message yet further, a fitting commemoration as well. As Julian Budden concludes in his great study of Verdi: "The final message of the secular Verdi is one of tolerance, comprehension and humor. If we cannot all agree we can at least laugh with each other and at ourselves. It is a message of hope."



Sebastian Catana, Falstaff; Jasmine Habersham, Nannetta; Members of the Chorus  
Photo: Ken Howard