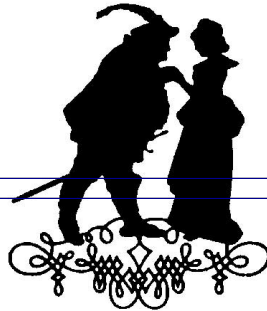


Opera con Brio

Richard B. Beams



Santa Fe Opera 2014

A Varied and Inventive Season

The summer of 2014 at the venerable Santa Fe Opera was unique in a number of ways: three inventive updatings of three familiar operas, *Don Pasquale*, *Carmen* and *Fidelio*; an unusual pairing of two less familiar works, Mozart's miniature spoof on rival sopranos, *The Impresario*, as a prelude to Stravinsky's intriguing charmer *Le Rossignol*; and the first ever opera in Chinese at Santa Fe, the American premiere of a work commissioned to celebrate the revered leader of China's cultural revolution, *Dr. Sun Yat-Sen*. Any linguist would have had a blast – a little Italian, French, German, English, Russian, and even a mixture of Mandarin and Cantonese. Opera lovers for the most part had a blast as well!

Fidelio: From Enlightenment to Holocaust

Perhaps the most successful of the three updated productions was Beethoven's *Fidelio*, the most eagerly anticipated venture of the summer. Santa Fe's first ever production of Beethoven's only opera, it was also the first production conducted by Harry Bicket in his new capacity as Chief Conductor of the company. Expectations ran high too with the esteemed director



The Santa Fe Opera House Photo: Ken Howard

Stephen Wadsworth back in town, who so often brings such a sensitive and humanizing touch to productions as varied as those of Handel (for example, in his well-traveled 1993 *Xerxes* in Santa Fe or *Rodelinda* at the Met) and Wagner (the recent critically acclaimed *Ring* in Seattle, Washington).

These high expectations were not to be disappointed, although many – audience and critics alike – found fault with Mr. Wadsworth's concentration-camp setting, claiming a trivialization of the horrific events of the

Holocaust. (Note, for example, the review of August 3, 2014, in the *New York Times*). But many, including me, felt otherwise. The audience was not inundated with omnipresent and oppressive details of the Holocaust, as with the emotionally draining production of Weinberg's *The Prisoner* presented recently in Houston and then again in New York this summer. Rather, carefully spaced details gradually drew us into this microcosm of omnipresent evil: guards with machine guns; barking dogs; prisoners with yellow stars; a picture of Hitler suddenly uncovered on an office wall. Like it or not, we were trapped uncomfortably within the horrors of the twentieth century, not Beethoven's Enlightenment-framed Spain.

The approach, it seems to me, mirrored in part the way Beethoven works. Leonard Bernstein, in one of his many insightful concert/lectures for children illustrating the expressive power of music, used the opening scene in *Fidelio* to demonstrate how Beethoven worked to draw the audience in from what might seem at first a jaunty family-friendly *Singspiel* to a music drama of significant power and depth. In no production I've ever attended of *Fidelio* (and I've attended many) has a director caught from the very opening two numbers the genuine plight and torment of the supporting protagonists - the jailor, Rocco (Manfred Hemm), who is "just following orders," his youthful daughter, Marzelline (Devon Guthrie), infatuated for the moment with Fidelio (alias Leonora), and his assistant, Jacquino (Joshua Dennis), frustrated at Marzelline's shifting emotions.

With Mr. Wadsworth's humanizing touches, this trio of characters took on an air of radiant warmth when Leonora joined them for the famous quartet ("Mir ist so wunderbar") that so eloquently caps this opening sequence. Mr. Bernstein found it (rightly) one of the most moving moments in all opera. So too it was in Santa Fe, and as Bernstein also points out, we thus enter an elevated plateau that signals this ennobling opera is about much more than trivial family squabbles. Soon, in the



Devon Guthrie as Marzelline; Joshua Dennis as Jacquino
Photo: Ken Howard

incomparable prisoner's chorus celebrating a brief moment of daylight (and hope), this elevated plateau returns, as it does again with the final chorus, an operatic "Ode to Joy." Such a finale is as fitting to this opera, and indeed to this particular production, as was Mr. Bernstein's cathartic performing of Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony* celebrating the collapse of the Berlin wall in 1990. Not trivial in the least!

Maestro Bicket's conducting was a great asset to this concept as well, always sensitive to the human interaction onstage, whether supporting the lighter moments at the



The final triumphal chorus

Photo: Ken Howard

opera's outset, or bringing out the expressive details of the wondrous quartet, or highlighting the power and sweep of the opera's great choruses. The two principals also helped to make this a compelling evening of human drama: the petit soprano Alex Penda, not a huge-voiced Leonora like many who assume the role, but a fierce and spirited, even heart-wrenching *Fidelio*; and tenor Paul Groves, not a prisoner with a booming voice (as is often the case), but one through whom we felt the angst of a man in pain even in his most lyrical moments. For a stentorian voice, the honor goes appropriately to bass-baritone Greer Grimsley as Don Pizarro, evil personified.



Alex Penda as Fidelio Photo: Ken Howard



Manfred Hemm as Rocco; Greer Grimsley as Don Pizarro
Photo: Ken Howard

Other details helped make for a cohesive updating to the concentration-camp context, especially a multi-tiered set from scenic designer Charlie Corcoran, and the deft and selective lighting of Camille Assaf. Juxtaposing domestic spaces and areas of the concentration camp, for example, Leonora's bedroom directly under Pizarro's office, allowed for a disturbing simultaneity of action.

This unit set, with occasion glimpses behind it at passing prisoners and village occupants, helped expand both the context and the audience's perspective. Was it necessary to shift this Enlightenment story of a brave woman, disguised as a man to free a political prisoner, to Nazi Germany? Of course not. But

it all helped bring immediacy to the current and seemingly endless dilemma of how ruthless tyranny continues to coexist in the world with ordinary domestic life. A final telling and unusual touch of the production was to have Rocco, Marzelline, and Jacquino all held accountable for their actions. Would that it were always so. I don't think the intent or result of this thoughtful production was to trivialize events that plague humanity still, but to encapsulate the essence of the spirit of Beethoven and the quest for freedom from tyranny and oppression.



The effective unit set

Photo: Ken Howard



Ana Marie Martínez as Carmen Photo: Ken Howard

A Sizzling Sixties *Carmen*

If the summer of 2014 brought the first ever staging in Santa Fe of Beethoven's only opera, the summer also brought no less than the seventh staging of the ever-popular *Carmen*. If the thoughtfully prepared *Fidelio* was the most anticipated and talked about production of the summer, *Carmen* certainly became (per usual) the most popular. If not particularly profound, it was at least thoroughly entertaining, especially for those of us in the audience whose formative years were in the 1950's and 1960's when such archetypal images as those of Elvis and Marilyn Monroe were all pervasive. No surprise then in this updated production that Escamillo would croon his famous "Toreador Song" with full Elvis flair and that Carmen in the final scene would don a showy platinum wig à la Marilyn Monroe as a preface to her demise at the hands of the overheated Don José.

All this may sound like the trivialization of a revered classic, but the overly familiar *Carmen* could take it. Indeed this updating, set in the relative proximity of the Mexico-US border, was also a cohesive and thoughtfully conceived production. Artfully directed by Stephen Lawless, it incorporated especially imaginative video projections by Jon Driscoll. These black and white "film noir" images, projected onto the grainy semi-circular

wood panels of designer Benoit Dugardyn, were a key to the production's cohesiveness and success, providing both a timeless quality but also a carefully juxtaposed link to the updated stage action. At the outset, for example, vintage clips of a bullfight flashed across the curved wall. An attentive bullring-audience ogled at the flashy matador and enraged bull, until the stunning first entrance of the ubiquitous "fate" motive on the brass heralded the brutal moment of truth. I'm normally not a fan of action on stage (filmed or not) that interferes with an orchestral introduction. But, like it or not, one knew then and there that the final José-Carmen confrontation would be staged as a bullfight, which it was, when the Marilyn Monroe wig (and ermine coat) went flying as well!

Throughout the evening, the production team used film infrequently but tellingly, a nice complement to the spare use of dialogue from the original *Opéra Comique* version. In the opening scene, animated children usually mimic the soldiers with a lively march of their own. In this production, ragged urchins merely sang the march, poking their heads out from large garbage containers. Yes, we missed the usual lively mock-march of the children, but this image of desperate vagabond children is reinforced later in the opera when the film shows them in their forlorn attempts to sneak across the Mexico-US border. Nor was there a grand parade for the bullfighters in the final act; rather, vintage clips of authentic festive parades projected on the wide semi-circle background did the trick. Shortly afterward, in stunning contrast, the focus became the onstage "bull-fight," the fatal José-Carmen confrontation.

At times the film clips showed moments that normally the audience never gets to see but only hears about. Particularly moving during the Prelude to Act III were the filmed shots of Micaëla tending to Don José's mother, a character we hear much about from Micaëla but never see on stage. Equally effective was a later shot of his mother's funeral on a barren hilltop, with José staring blankly into the swiftly moving clouds overhead. Micaëla notices, aware his angst involves not just his deceased mother, but also his toxic fling with Carmen. A favorite opera quip is that mothers in opera (Italian opera

especially) are always absent, dead or dying, and usually prayed to. Had they been present, we'd have no opera! The filmed vignettes, intended or not, reinforce the notion that José's slide into the abyss is inevitable and unavoidable at this point.



Ana Marie Martínez as Carmen; Roberto De Biasio as José
Photo: Ken Howard

All of this aside, however, it was the fine musical forces that really carried the evening, which is as it should be. Leading the way was the exciting Carmen of soprano Ana Marie Martínez who, as scheduled, took over the role from mezzo Daniela Mack at midsummer. With no slight to Ms. Mack (whom I did not hear), I'm told that Ms. Martínez further energized this already fast moving production, with her dynamic portrayal of this eternal *femme fatale*. With a rich lower register (necessary for this role) complementing her radiant soprano, she captured both the sultry and fiery qualities one has come to expect in Carmen, especially in the action scenes in which her rich lower register cut through with dramatic effect. Complementing her was the clarion, radiant singing of Canadian soprano Joyce El-Khoury as Micaëla, a joy to listen to in some of the most mellifluous vocal lines Bizet ever penned. The bonus was that she came across as a much more fulsome character than the rather bland and naïve waif we often get.



Joyce El-Khoury as Micaëla
Roberto De Biasio as José
Photo: Ken Howard



Kostas Smoriginas as Escamillo Photo: Ken Howard

As for the men, hefty Italian tenor Roberto De Biasio had all the power to project spine-tingling confrontations, yet also exhibited an exquisite pianissimo to close out the famous "Flower Song." His portrayal certainly gave a compelling sense of José's degeneration from loving son and loyal soldier to angst-ridden maniac; the final scene was riveting. By contrast, bass-baritone Kostas Smoriginas was less persuasive as the virile bullfighter Escamillo, although he certainly looked the part. It didn't help that the director had him enter Lillias Pastia's tavern drunk atop a large mechanical bull, before he then recovered for his raunchy Elvis interpretation. At any rate, he was probably upstaged by Carmen's earlier sixties-style floorshow with her backup singers, Frasquita (Amanda Opuszynski) and Mercédès (Sarah Larsen).



Ana Marie Martínez as Carmen; Sarah Larsen as Mercédès;
Amanda Opuszynski as Frasquita Photo: Ken Howard



Behind the chain-link fence Photo: Ken Howard

Not all scenes worked perfectly. It was an interesting variation to place Act III at a Mexico-US border crossing, a scene usually in some smuggler's mountain-hangout. A big chain-link fence provided the dramatic opportunity for illegal children to scamper up and over, but having the rest of the scene played behind the fence proved an annoying hindrance to dramatic viability. That Michaëla enters from the American side of the fence didn't make much sense either. But there's little point to dwelling on this and other such incongruities in a production that basically caught fire with its sixties flair. Surprisingly, I didn't really miss the colorful genre scenes that so pepper the score, thanks to the innovative mix of film and vibrant stage action. Was the updating, necessary? No more so than with *Fidelio*, but for sheer entertainment, which is much of what *Carmen* is about, it was a sure bet.

A Topsy-turvy *Don Pasquale*

The trend for updating continued with Donizetti's ever popular and always scintillating *opera buffa*, *Don Pasquale*. The production was in the capable hands of director Laurent Pelly and his usual scenic designer, Chantal Thomas. The innovative French team, responsible for the controversial but compelling *La Traviata* of recent Santa Fe seasons, brought a similar surreal touch to this ever-green opera. Continuing with their trademark jagged and boxy structures, Pasquale's spare house appeared with eccentric angles and multiple doors and windows. Paralleling the topsy-turvy shift in Pasquale's fortunes, the house itself literally turns upside down in the second act, with Pasquale's favorite lounge chair dangling from the ceiling, and the chandeliers

protruding from the floor. With a rotating set, and the many doors and windows and ladders and such, the whole evening was appropriately a little off kilter. It was not until the second encounter with *Traviata* that I warmed up to Pelly's take on the work, thanks in part to a slight rethinking of the production and also to the fact that the expressive soprano Brenda Rae had taken over the role in 2013, avoiding all the excessive antics of Natalie Dessay in 2009. But it took no time at all to warm up to this innovative *Pasquale* concept.



The upside-down set

Photo: Ken Howard

As it turns out, the casting for Pasquale's usually charming nemesis, Norina, was a rather topsy-turvy affair as well. The scheduled Norina, Romanian-American soprano Laura Tatulescu, had to withdraw at the outset of the run due to severe allergies. Talented second year apprentice artist Shelley Jackson took over the role on opening night (and other performances) to great audience and critical praise. Brenda Rae gamely took over performances in the middle of the run, including the one I attended on August 4. Alas, Ms. Rae's Norina, although sung beautifully and skillfully, was so hard edged that one never felt the "wink" which let us in on the secret that her manipulation of Pasquale was all a game. Her exaggerated antics, as the sweet Norina turned shrew, seemed to undermine the integrity of the role, and she was too much caught up with herself even to admit to a moment of sympathy for poor Pasquale in her crucial duet of Act II confronting him. Perhaps this was a director's choice, but her role as realized was not Donizetti's Norina.

Be that as it may, the production was a charmer, and each in the fine supporting cast was an engaging, well-defined and vocally secure character. Best was the Pasquale of British baritone Andrew Shore. Given the hard-edged Norina of the production, I found it somewhat of a surprise to have such an endearingly human and sympathetic Pasquale. But that he was – his pain was palpable at times – and he balanced all this with some terrific buffo clowning as well. Juxtaposed against him was his blatantly irresponsible and often disheveled nephew (and rival), Ernesto, a notoriously difficult lyric

tenor role. The athletic young American tenor Alex Shrader handled the role with great flair and panache; vocally he possessed all the grace and ease of high notes necessary for the role, especially for the most well known aria in opera, “Una furtive lagrima.” On stage, he was perhaps the most athletic performer I have ever seen, now and then flipping boyishly. In the gorgeous penultimate scene with Norina, he scrambles impetuously up a ladder, a nice



Alex Shrader as Ernesto;
Andrew Shore as Pasquale
Photo: Ken Howard

complement to Pelly’s boxy shack. Doctor Malatesta, the instigator of the plot to outwit Pasquale, effectively rounded out the quartet of principals. He too was a delight, a slightly more sympathetic character than usual, played with calm assurance by another American, bass-baritone Zachary Nelson, the previous season’s engaging Figaro. His buffo duet with Pasquale as they scheme like two schoolboys to trap the young lovers was the hit of the evening.



Zachary Nelson as Doctor Malatesta; Andrew Shore as Pasquale
Photo: Ken Howard



Shelley Jackson as Norina; Alex Shrader as Ernesto
Photo: Ken Howard

All in all, the clever production, with a nice balance of the real and surreal, supported by the well-paced orchestra led by Italian conductor Corrado Rovaris (from Donizetti’s hometown, Bergamo) made for a delightful evening at the opera. My only wish was that the Norina of Donna Rae was less caricature and more character. Still, I think overall that Donizetti was well served with this vibrant take on his most popular and frequently performed opera.

An Imperfect Grafting: The Impresario and Le Rossignol

This enticing double bill presented two works neither popular nor frequently performed. As such this was another of the much-anticipated events at Santa Fe this summer. Alas, this turned out to be a largely disappointing pairing, mostly because the tiny curtain raiser, Mozart’s *The Impresario*, suffered from trying to graft it as a prelude onto the more substantial but completely unrelated masterpiece by Stravinsky. The idea seemed intriguing, to take Mozart’s charming “occasional music,” written for a 1786 gala event at Schönbrunn Palace, and link it to *Le Rossignol* by having

The cast of *The Impresario*

Photo: Ken Howard

an impresario (à la Diaghilev with his 1914 Ballets Russes) struggling to present a quality work, despite numerous road blocks. As Director Michael Gieleta explains, the production thus explores the argument “over whether companies should be presenting high art to their usual standard or, because times are tough, they should be doing something more populist.”

A timely argument indeed, especially given the regrettable trend today for opera companies to “popularize” for audience appeal. For the most part with *Le Rossignol* we had “high art” at its captivating best. However, unfortunately, the excessive shenanigans of the “prelude” followed the populist route, turning Mozart’s charming twenty-minute comic vignette of two arias and two ensembles into a sixty minute muddled *pasticcio*. Doing so negated what could have been perhaps a cohesive coupling. Again, the idea seemed enticing, in Gieleta’s words, to include some of “the lost arias by Mozart that never get performed because Mozart did not live long enough to include them in an opera.” The extra music itself was not the problem. It’s just that so encumbered was the music with frantic stage antics, and grossly caricatured performers, that one could hardly enjoy the music, for all its artistic merit. An endless new English libretto (by Ranjit Bolt) that attempted to link the two works didn’t help either.

The trouble began immediately with the staging of the familiar overture. Dancers warmed up and practiced steps and lifts in the impresario’s crowded office as a parade of grossly exaggerated opera characters entered – Salome drooling over the head of John, the Baptist, Tosca aghast at her bloody knife, and more not to be mentioned. One was too distracted by all the goings-on to even hear the overture. Afterwards the competing divas soon enter the cluttered office. Madame Herz (Mrs. Heart) and Mademoiselle Silberklang (Miss Silvertone) in the original became Vlada Vladimirescu and Adellina Vocedoro-Gambalunghi (“Goldenvoice-Longlegs”). But who could enjoy the showpiece aria of the former, Donna Rae again, as she mugged and wiggled incessantly with a blue boa, or the brilliant coloratura of Erin

Morley as the latter with all the attendant sight gags. Perhaps Ms. Rae’s hyperactivity as an over-the-top diva carried over to her busy portrayal of Norina, but happily not to her straightforward take on the Cook in *Le Rossignol*. Happily, too, Ms. Morley’s sparkling coloratura as the unencumbered voice of the Nightingale would soon make the whole evening worth it.



Brenda Rae as Vlada Vladimirescu Photo: Ken Howard

Saving us from the mayhem and boredom of the first sixty minutes, Director Michael Gieleta finally gathers his cast into a frozen comic tableau that releases the gag-weary audience for its long awaited intermission. Alas when the audience returns, the same ragged assortment of characters is still poised right where we left them in the impresario's office. I had a fleeting thought of returning to the bar as one of Stravinsky's most magical *pianissimo* orchestral tableaux was ruined by having these characters scurry around the stage, change costumes, and prepare the new set. All this, including a trio of unnecessary dancers, dwarfed the exquisite fisherman's song sung by lyric tenor Bruce Sledge from a piano-turned-boat with all the suave assurance and delicacy that would equally have served Ernesto in his nocturnal scene. Alas, in this production, no such ethereal, nocturnal mode could take hold.



Bruce Sledge as the Fisherman Photo: Ken Howard

The remainder of the evening, however, was pure magic and more than worth the stay. Freed from the relentless grip of the impresario, the nightingale's exotic world emerged amidst a succession of projected images from the work of such contemporaries of Stravinsky as Picasso, Matisse, Miro and others. Later the Nightingale perches on a mobile-like tree, letting Erin Morley transform her Mozartian coloratura into an ecstatic, delicate trail of radiant melismas, bringing to



Projected images define an exotic world; Brenda Rae as the Cook; Dancers Photo: Ken Howard

the Emperor at last his lesson in humility (more subtly rendered than Pasquale's comeuppance). Another fine touch was to have the contralto Meredith Arwady portray death through a gap in a cubist painting. Only at the end, when the comic tableau that had left us hanging at intermission returns to frame the evening, did we remember, alas, that all had not been so captivating in the evening.



Erin Morley as the Nightingale; Anthony Michaels-Moore as the Emperor Photo: Ken Howard



The final scene: Joseph Dennis as Dr. Sun; Corinne Winters as Ching-ling
Photo: Ken Howard

Sparking a Revolution: *Dr. Sun Yat-Sen*

The final offering this summer was another “occasional piece,” the orchestrally vibrant, but dramatically leaden, first opera by the talented Chinese born American composer Huang Ruo, written to celebrate the life of the revolutionary doctor who spearheaded the epic struggle to overthrow China’s ancient monarchy and establish the modern Chinese republic. It was to have had its premiere in Beijing in September of 2011 to celebrate the occasion of the centennial anniversary of Sun’s revolution, which established the Republic of China in 1912. For reasons unknown, officials yanked permission for these performances, and the premiere took place in Hong Kong the following month, in a modified version. The Santa Fe production restores the full version, using a mixture of Western and Eastern instruments, but, again for reasons not entirely clear, the tenor (and impresario) Warren Mok, who both commissioned the work and sang the premiere, suddenly withdrew.

Considerable speculation has surfaced amidst all this. Perhaps the authorities assumed a subversiveness in Mr. Ruo’s work (à la Shostakovich) with all its adulation of Dr. Sun, especially given the final scene in which a huge full-bodied seated statue of Dr. Sun is surrounded by camera-toting fans. They wave banners (in Chinese) filled with slogans such as “The world belongs to all

people”; “it is hard to construct, but it is easy to destroy”; “The Revolution has not yet been accomplished. All our comrades should continue to work towards the goal.” I leave the speculation here, although the controversial issue certainly peaked further interest in the work. Meanwhile, American tenor Joseph Dennis, a second year apprentice, admirably filled in for the title role but was unable to save the work from its inherent tedium, rooted for one thing in a kind of vocal writing that begins sharply on an accented pitch and then trails off to endless vocal melisma and monotone. I label it a kind of Chinese recitative, which rarely, if ever, really soars.

Certainly there was some attraction in hearing a work rooted in traditional Chinese singing, and indeed to hearing the work in the original language. There was some interest too in the frequent pulsing, captivating rhythms, especially with Chinese percussion instruments. But the larger problem lay elsewhere. The libretto, in Mandarin and Cantonese, by Candace Chong, basically spans the period 1910 to 1918; yet the spare plot and minimal character development make it hard to follow the ups and downs of the revolution let alone the budding relationship of Sun and his supportive young second wife, Ching-ling, a figure evidently idolized too by the Chinese today. The static scenario does not go a long way for engaging any but those for whom these characters, and this period, are a compelling reality. Long monochromatic speeches don’t do the trick; ennui sets in.

That said, Santa Fe gave it its best shot, especially given the work’s lack of theatricality. The performance and production itself were certainly first rate. Allen Moyer’s set of bamboo scaffolding suggested a nation in progress, and James Schuette’s period costumes at least effectively conveyed the transition from pre to post revolution rule. Esteemed conductor Carolyn Kuan led a crisp and idiomatic performance, which highlighted the varied orchestral textures, and the cast was uniformly excellent, especially soprano Corinne Winters as Son’s



Joseph Dennis as Dr. Sun; Corinne Winters as Ching-ling
Photo: Ken Howard

idealistic and supportive second wife. A pivotal figure, her poignant lament after a miscarriage was one of the few lyrical highlights, as was her extended Pucciniesque duet with Sun. Complementing this lead pair was the fine mezzo MaryAnn McCormick, the estranged first wife by a forced marriage, with a glowing and equally moving aria of renunciation. But neither such isolated moments, nor engaging dance interludes effectively choreographed by Sean Curran, could save the work, nor make it more palatable to this American audience.

Looking Ahead

In the upcoming 2015 season, the world premier of *Cold Mountain* by Pulitzer Prize-winning composer Jennifer Higdon will certainly be more palatable for an American audience. Another highlight should be Harry Bicket leading a fine cast (including Heidi Stober, Susanna Philips and William Burden) in Mozart's rarely heard early comic jewel, *La Finta Giardiniera*. Strauss returns to Santa Fe with *Salome*, and Alex Penda should be as compelling a lead in that scorching opera as she was in *Fidelio*. Two antithetical Italian opera staples complete the season: Donizetti's lively comic opera *The Daughter of the Regiment* and Verdi's powerful and ever-popular melodrama *Rigoletto*.

Just three languages on stage next year; one need not be a linguist to savor what looks like an enticing season at Santa Fe. Added to this, an ambitious program of renovation will provide audiences of the 2015 season and beyond with an impressive array of new amenities including an expanded covered picnic and dining area, expanded bars at two locations, nearly twice as many lavatories, and a gift shop double the current size. Still, I expect that what's on stage will most entice people again.

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