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ONE DOLLAR

ARTS & LIVING

Farcical Opera, Seriously



Ashley Bell and Stephan Ortiz star in a production of "La Serva Padrona."

CLEMENTE COLON PHOTOS

BY MICHELLE TRAURING

Bethany Caputo is a self-proclaimed "sucker for a farce."

Most recently, it was a vaudeville adaptation of Giovanni Battista Pergolesi's opera "La Serva Padrona" that caught her attention when Divaria Productions founder Ashley Bell asked Ms. Caputo to direct it.

Eager to make the opera her own, the decision to accept Ms. Bell's offer wasn't a hard one to make, Ms. Caputo recalled. The revamped, family-gear production will be staged by actors Sal Cacciato and Kyle Nunn, and singers Tyler Putna and Ms. Bell, on Monday, August 27, outside the South Fork Natural History Museum in Bridgehampton.

"It's a good, old-time, complete suspension of disbelief, slapstick, make-a-joke antics," Ms. Caputo said of the opera during a telephone interview last week. "And that, in my mind, is completely a farce. There's no part about it that should be taken as realism and within that—especially in the land of opera, which has already expanded beyond naturalism, realism—you have a lot of room for play. That's where these performers lived while rehearsing this. They really stretched their boundaries. They brought you something that can otherwise be very serious—opera—and brought to it a real sense of fun."

The story of "La Serva Padrona," which translates to "The Servant Turned Mistress," is simple. The circa-1733 opera revolves around a maid, Serpina, and her master, Uberto, who is unmarried and slightly intimidated by Ser-

pina because she rules the roost, Ms. Bell explained during a telephone interview last week. Serpina's aim, and her desire, is to be head of the household, so she plots with the servants, who are portrayed as archetypal clowns by Mr. Cacciato and Mr. Nunn, to take over—which she ultimately achieves, with some setbacks along the way.

"I can somehow relate to Serpina. She's extremely manipulative, much more than I am, personally," Ms. Bell, a part-time Southampton resident, laughed while discussing her character. "I feel she is this strong woman and she obviously knows what she wants."

That much the two women have in common. Last January, Ms. Bell founded the Manhattan-based Divaria Productions. She was just 26.

"We want to make opera accessible and approachable to all types of people, whether they've always

seen opera and love it, or people who have never seen opera in their lives," she said. "And we love that the audience in the Hamptons is sophisticated and relaxed, yet open to fresh ideas."

The hourlong production is full of twists on the classic Italian opera, Ms. Bell said, adding that she feared that just the word "opera" could scare off an audience—considering they are known to be done entirely in song rarely sung in English.

First, Ms. Bell translated the opera's "spoken singing" into English from Italian—in which she is fluent, not to mention Spanish, French and German—but left the arias intact so the audience could better understand the humor between them. Then, Ms. Caputo wove physical and vaudeville comedy into the production, most of which is acted by the two clowns.

*Human nature
provides fertile
ground for poking
light operatic fun.*



Actors, from left, Sal Cacciato, Stephan Ortiz and Ashley Bell star in a production of "La Serva Padrona."

"What's great about that is the audience gets to come and see these kind of grotesque characters and they get to identify with them because we're making fun of human nature," Ms. Caputo explained. "And that's the best way to laugh about human nature. It's so satisfying to take entitlement to the n-th degree or doubt to the n-th degree because if you can put a red nose on it and make a clown out of it—they don't really put on red noses, it's a proverbial red nose—you get to bring light to some element of humanity that's uncomfortable to deal with. If you get to make fun of it, it's fantastic."

The appreciation for physical comedy spans generations, Ms. Caputo said, noting that while growing up, she never missed "The Three Stooges" when they were on television. Though this opera's story is dated, the

clown characters, which Ms. Caputo likened to Charlie Chaplin and Buster Keaton, act as footbridges to a younger crowd, she said.

And Divaria Productions's approach to opera is a way to reach a more current audience, she said.

"I think of Ashley as pioneering not just the resurgence of opera, but as keeping opera alive," she said. "The world of opera, it's big, it's bold, it's got a lot of possibility. She's breathing life into it, breathing life into this art. And maybe a new life. A modern life."

Divaria Productions will stage a vaudeville adaptation of Pergolesi's opera "La Serva Padrona" on Monday, August 27, at 7 p.m. at the South Fork Natural History Museum in Bridgehampton. Admission is free. For more information, call 537-9735 or visit divariaproductions.com.