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Spoletto Festival U.S.A.: From Moral Challenge to Frothy Comedy

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The Spoleto Festival U.S.A. traveled light-years in 24 hours. After the opening performance of “Amistad,” the musically and morally challenging opera about slavery composed in the 1990s, on Thursday, the festival introduced a production of Rossini’s frothy opera “La Cenerentola” on Friday night.

The world here was opera buffa set in the late 18th or early 19th centuries, with a sensibility bordering on commedia dell’arte. Instead of the wicked stepmother, a buffoonish Don Magnifico (Tim Nolen) holds sway over Angelina, the Cinderella of the story (Sandra Piques Eddy). He is trying to marry off one of his noxious daughters to Don Ramiro (Victor Ryan Robertson). Ramiro sends his servant, Dandini (Bruno Taddia), to check out the pair (Jennifer Check as Clorinda and Laura Vlasak Nolen as Tisbe) dressed as Ramiro. Hilarity ensues.

The director, Charles Roubud, organized the slapstick well, with lots of sisterly mugging. The production’s main feature was a huge video projection above the stage that showed film of carriages arriving or fountains spouting and water rippling with a wave of a hand. That hand belonged to Alidoro (Paolo Pecchioli), Ramiro’s tutor and the deus ex machina figure, with a distant kinship to Don Alfonso in Mozart’s “Così Fan Tutte.”

One glitch drew gasps: a large architectural flat being lowered crashed down on a fireplace being wheeled across stage. The servants moving the fireplace got things into place.

Mr. Nolen was an energetic and elastic Magnifico; the Italian baritones, Mr. Pecchioli as the grave Alidoro and the long-faced Mr. Taddia as a hilarious Dandini, were top of the line. Mr. Taddia especially: a pitch-perfect fop, a Leporello lite. The brightest sparkle belonged to Ms. Piques Eddy, a swan-necked mezzo with fine technique, a range of colors from honeyed to bright and charm to burn.

Matteo Beltrami, a young Genoan, conducted ably, although some of the quicksilver ensemble passages that go a mile a minute occasionally ran off track.