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2003-04 Theatre Season Reviews

OPERAPLAY

by Martin Denton · September 10, 2003

Operaplay is a sentimental romantic comedy about a brilliant and famous tenor who has stopped singing, much to the consternation of his manager and his staff. Umberto Ecarazzi is supposed to do a live radio broadcast of *Turandot* on June 4, but with five months to go he is pouting in his hotel room, putting on weight, and pining for a sexy woman named Lucia. Ecarazzi's valet Fazio believes that she's the only one who can motivate him to sing for the broadcast. With Umberto's manager, the impresaria Vittoria, he hatches a plan whereby Lucia will pretend to love Umberto and coax him to lose weight, in exchange for an eight-night stand starring as Violetta in *La Traviata*. The wrinkle is, Lucia detests Ecarazzi—and she can't sing. The plan proceeds anyway, *Operaplay*'s first act at least being shaped like a farce; it backfires, of course, but there's a happy ending, one that involves Umberto's devoted maid Peppina, who has been doing some silent pining—she's mute—of her own.

It sounds improbable and a little trite, but a likable and energetic cast under Steven Petrillo's peppy direction make it work. And to his credit, playwright Rick Eisenberg provides plenty of humorous dialogue and a quintet of appealing characters, this despite the formulaic box he has built for himself with his sitcom-y premise.

The cast's three women fare best. Dee Dee Friedman is lovable as waiflike Peppina, not to mention quite funny in the first act, miming exasperation, disgust, and a host of other exaggerated emotions as the mute maid. Gerriane Raphael charms as the commanding manager/producer Vittoria. And Catherine La Valle comes close to stealing the show as the over-the-top, talent-free diva from hell. Her rendition of one of Violetta's arias sets opera back several decades: we miss her when she disappears from the story early in Act Two.

Peter Farrell ultimately has the least to do as valet Fazio. John D'Arcangelo is the cast's weak link, lacking the spectacular, gargantuan presence that Ecarazzi needs (he also slips out of his cartoonish Italian accent rather more often than desirable).

A luxurious hotel suite (belying the off-off-Broadway location) is supplied by set designer Peter Barbieri; the appropriate, lovely costumes are by Isabel Rubio.