

MET OPERA REVIEW

You Don't Have to Be Italian to Play *l'Italiana*

By ANTHONY TOMMASINI

There was little doubt that the tenor Juan Diego Flórez, the new prince of bel canto opera, would excel in the role of Lindoro when Rossini's buffo classic "*L'Italiana in Algeri*" returned to the Metropolitan Opera's repertory on Friday night. But the casting of the Russian mezzo-soprano Olga Borodina as Isabella, the Italian girl of the title, seemed a questionable call.

Ms. Borodina's earthy voice and smoldering stage presence have ideally suited her to powerhouse roles like Verdi's Princess Eboli and Saint-Saëns's Dalila. But did she have the right comic touch for Isabella, as well as the vocal agility to toss off Rossini's brilliant coloratura roulades?

Did she ever. Ms. Borodina has given some splendid performances at the Met since her 1997 debut in Mussorgsky's "*Boris Godunov*," but this captivating Isabella may be her best work to date.

With Mr. Flórez in fine voice, a strong supporting cast, James Levine conducting a tender and lithe account of a score he clearly loves, and Jean-Pierre Ponnelle's fresh-looking 1973 production, with its fanciful evocation of a creamy-colored, latticed Algerian palace, this "*L'Italiana in Algeri*" may be the sleeper hit of the Met season.

The key to Ms. Borodina's comic success is that she takes the story seriously. There is nothing wrong with any man anywhere, the opera's moral suggests, that can't be remedied by a nice, hardy Italian girl.



Baris Krutitskiy/The New York Times

From left, Juan Diego Flórez, Olga Borodina and Earle Patriarco in "*L'Italiana in Algeri*" at the Met.

Mustafa, the bey (or governor) of Algiers, has grown bored with his wife, Elvira, and wants a replacement, a new Italian wife. One day a candidate turns up among the captives Mustafa's soldiers routinely snatch from the sea: the sassy and desirable Isabella. Mustafa decides to pawn Elvira off on Lindoro, a

young Italian who has been forced to become his personal slave, not knowing that back in Italy Lindoro and Elvira were lovers.

Ms. Borodina vibrantly conveyed Isabella's unflappable self-confidence. True, after her capture she spent a few requisite moments bemoaning her difficulty in the grandly

lyrical cavatina "*Cruda sorte!*" But in the fleet, dazzling cabaletta that followed, she unleashed streams of defiant coloratura, singing with sumptuous sound and breezy control. You don't doubt she will find a wily way out of this fix, especially when Mustafa falls for her at sight. And

Continued on Page 5

You Don't Have to Be Italian to Play That Nice Italian Girl in Algeria

Continued From First Arts Page

who wouldn't? Mr. Flórez, a limber and boyish Lindoro, admirably light on his feet during some dancing bits, sang with more technical security than in his recent New York recital. With his light yet vibrant lyric tenor he shaped lovely legato phrases and relished the ringing top notes. And as always, the sheer exuberance of his singing was matched by his physical energy.

The stage director, David Kneuss, has

worked out some deadpan antics for the cast. In the first act finale one of those typical Rossini ensembles in which everyone stops cold to express bewilderment at the confounding mess they're in, there were shades of Gene Kelly and Donald O'Connor as the six main characters inched across the stage in a jumbled choreography of hand slaps to reeling heads and impotent air punches.

Given the current tensions in the world, it was hard not to wince at the comic premise of the opera: an uptight, totalitarian Muslim

leader is loosened up by an easygoing, liberal-minded European woman. The only gag that may have crossed the line into ethnic stereotyping came when Mustafa, emerging from a steam bath, was shown to have an upper torso matted front and back with thick black tufts of hair. Still, how could anyone not be disarmed by the charismatic, vocally robust Mustafa of the veteran Italian bass Ferruccio Furlanetto? The soprano Lyubov Petrova as Elvira and the baritone Earle Patriarco as Taddeo, an older Italian pining for Isabella, were also standouts.

In the madcap final scene Lindoro admits the increasingly gullible Mustafa to a select order of Italians called the Pappataci (a ragtag bunch of Italian captives). They introduce Mustafa to the most sacred rite of the Pappataci: a dinner of pasta and Chianti. When Taddeo tries to warn Mustafa that Isabella and Lindoro are about to escape, the Algerian bey, digging into his spaghetti like a true Italian, tells the old man to relax, sit down and eat something.

There are eight more performances of "*L'Italiana in Algeri*" through March 17.