

A Night at the Opera: *Il Postino* at the Music Center

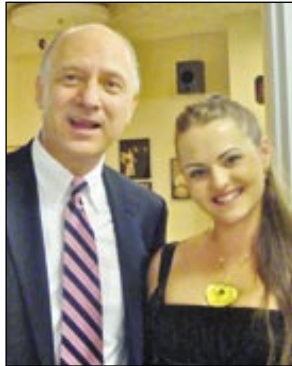
By **Robert F. Adams** / Special to CASA

IL **POSTINO**, by composer Daniel Catán, opened the Los Angeles Opera's 25th season at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion in downtown Los Angeles. This is an ambitious new work and world premiere which will move on to Vienna in December and will play in Paris in June of 2011.

The work is based on the 1994 Italian film directed by Michael Radford, which starred the late *Massimo Troisi* as the hapless postman, Mario Ruoppolo. I recently watched the 1994 film to rediscover the nuanced performances, set on an isolated Italian island.

Interestingly, in the opera the landscape scenery from the film is replaced by landscapes of words, actually projected onto a scrim backdrop, revealing the major thematic element of poetry as the fulcrum of intellectual transformation. The opera shines a light on the need for learning, as the quest for literacy lifts up the daily lives of the main characters in this small fishing village.

Catán's opera has a Spanish-language libretto from a book by Chilean author Antonio Skarmeta. The story is fictional but derives from Pablo Neruda's real-life political exile from Chile.



Catán and Yulianna backstage

The music has contemporary characteristics; composer Catán studied progressive music theory at Princeton. Musically, the film had a lightweight and comical personality. Fortunately, the opera's score has depth, illustrated by soaring tempos and dark undercurrents. Grant Gershon, the conductor, with the LA Opera orchestra, succeeds in playing music that highlights the wrenching realities of the Italian working class amidst the disadvantages they faced in post-war Italy.

A credit to the director, Ron Daniels, the performances are superlative, and the physicality of the characterizations succeed within the contemporary tempos of the music. The portrayal of postman Mario Ruoppolo, played by tenor Charles Castronovo, deftly captures the sense of an impoverished man, unsteady in his quest for intellectual growth and the rewards that come with it. Castronovo's performance is phenomenal and in some ways eclipse that of the 1994 film.

A gentle and authoritative performance is wrought from Plácido Domingo, the legendary opera star, as poet Pablo Neruda. With ease, the famous tenor sings the role with passion. Mr. Domingo continues to



Il Postino Bar Scene

Photo by Robert Millard

amaze as the character marks his 134th operatic role, even in his late-career. He provides romantic heft in the arias and duets in this opera.

Backstage after the performance, I spoke with soprano Amanda Aquiteiri, who delights as the young bar maid Beatrice Russo, the love interest of the postman. "Daniel (the composer) gave me the impulse to generate the part as a vibrant, youthful character," she shared. Beatrice's naïve spirit is captured, and, instead of "sultry" as in the 1994 film, a young woman open to the influence of poetic phrases is credibly revealed. The scenes in the bar illustrate this and I am reminded that opera performers can be superb actors.

Designer Philip Bussman's projections were wonderful, as words from the poetry are splayed onto a rich blue backdrop. This visual element suggests the sea surrounding the physical and cultural isolation of the

island. Other projections include star fields and fog, abstractly sustaining the emotional tone of the opera. Assisting with winning visual techniques, Jennifer Tipton's lighting is masterfully realized.

A co-production between LA Opera, Austria's Theater an der Wien and France's Theatre du Chatelet, performances run through October 16th. For tickets see www.laopera.com or call (213) 972-8001.

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