

Opera UCT stages ‘The Tales of Hoffmann’ – an electrifying, fantastical theatrical performance

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The Tales of Hoffmann was staged at The Baxter Theatre from 8 to 10 September.

A fantastical performance led by Opera UCT – the University of Cape Town’s (UCT) opera school – had theatregoers on the edge of their seats as they watched and listened as the cast flaunted their extraordinary singing talents during the *Les Contes d’Hoffmann* (*The Tales of Hoffmann*) production, staged at The Baxter Theatre this past weekend.

This version of French composer Jacques Offenbach’s popular production was directed by local theatre-maker Steven Stead and featured a young, multi-talented cast from Opera UCT. *The Tales of Hoffmann* was conducted by Professor Jeremy Silver, the director of Opera UCT, and was staged in the Pam Golding Theatre from 8 to 10 September.

“What an extraordinary performance by our marvellous cast. Everyone enjoyed playing the wide range of extravagant characters while having the opportunity to sing such a stirring score. The excitement among the company in the lead-up to opening night was electric and continued till long after we drew the final curtain,” Professor Silver said.

A captivating experience

Offenbach’s opera was first performed in 1881, one year after the composer’s death. And since then, it has become part of the standard repertoire of opera houses across the globe. The production is inspired by three stories by German writer ETA Hoffmann. *The Tales of Hoffmann* tells the story of a

poet (Hoffmann) who describes his past love affairs with three women: a mechanical doll, a younger singer, and a courtesan.

Thanks to the cast's sensational singing talents, Silver said the audience was captivated by the fantasy of the story and the waves of vocal and orchestral music. He said while some of the music like the famous *Barcarolle* and *The Doll Song* are very well known, this time, even those lesser-known pieces spoke directly to the audience and kept them enthralled and engaged throughout the performances. And because each set was designed differently for every individual story, Silver said each act offered the audience a different, fascinating world.



Act I. In his Paris workshop, the eccentric inventor Spalanzini has created a mechanical doll named Olympia.

"If I were to sum up the weekend's performance in just one word, then 'fantastical' is what I'd choose. This work presented the wildly imaginative stories of ETA Hoffmann, wrapped in the evocative music of Offenbach," Silver said. "The central character in our production is a filmmaker who struggles to balance his love affairs with his creative inspiration."

Singing a stirring score

He said the cast enjoyed playing a wide range of extravagant characters and also welcomed the opportunity to sing such a wonderful, stirring score.

The larger than usual cast, and the fact that each tale contained its unique character and colour, meant successfully integrating each singer's contribution into a single, meaningful experience – and this proved challenging. But Silver added that together with Stead, the duo easily conquered that hurdle.

"It's always wonderful to watch our students in action showcasing their extraordinary talents. Opera UCT has presented the cream of young South African vocal talent to its local audiences for years. And

many of these singers will go on to make significant careers on international opera stages, in the wake of several world-famous alumni. We are incredibly proud of all of them,” Silver said.

A dress rehearsal with a difference

But before the formal programme kicked off, the cast used their final dress rehearsals on Tuesday, 5 September, and Wednesday, 6 September, to showcase their talents and introduce pupils from local high schools to the world of opera.







Each set during “The Tales of Hoffmann” production was designed differently for every individual story and offered the audience a different, fascinating world.

According to Nica Reinke, a cast member and Opera UCT admin assistant, the idea of opening up the final dress rehearsals to local schools was to give them a full taste of the production. The team also

intended to use it as an opportunity to combat the stereotype that opera performances are aimed at an older, more affluent audience.

“Opera is a multifaceted, colourful and immersive artform, and by inviting schools to witness it, we aimed to open the opera to everyone, especially those who have not yet been exposed to it and would not have necessarily thought to enjoy it,” Reinke said.

Fostering a love for the arts

In addition, she said Opera UCT recognises that a love for the arts starts at a young age, and by exposing high school pupils to the production they also hope to nurture a newfound love and appreciation for the craft among the youth.

Act II. At an elegant home in Munich, the young Antonia sings a plaintive love song filled with memories of her dead mother, a famous singer.

“Witnessing a captivating production like *The Tales of Hoffmann* can be the reason someone decides to study music or simply become a lifelong patron of the arts. So, by opening up our final rehearsals, we hope to contribute to the creation of a future generation of opera singers and an opera-loving audience,” she said.

“The kids enjoyed every minute of the performance. We hope that this will be the start of a new relationship between Opera UCT and local schools, to help us build that pipeline of up-and-coming, diverse opera singers and audience members.”