

## A Way With Words, but No Lasting Luck With the Ladies

By VIVIEN SCHWEITZER

During Offenbach's "Tales of Hoffmann" at the Kaye Playhouse at Hunter College on Thursday evening, the tenor Won Whi Choi morphed from boorish to brooding in his arresting portrayal of the title character, a love-addicted poet. His eyes took on a haunted look during the song of Kleinzach in the Prologue, when, in between entertaining his comrades with legends of the dwarf, he briefly daydreams about his love. This production of "Hoffmann," with its daunting tenor role, was part of the Martina Arroyo Foundation's Prelude to Performance program. **The foundation has offered reliably high-quality productions since its founding almost a decade ago; standards were particularly impressive here.**

Before the performance, the tenor Richard Leech spoke briefly about the program, describing its aim of going beyond simply helping young singers hit their high notes and offering them, over several intense weeks, an in-depth analysis of language and character. **The rewards of that work were certainly apparent on Thursday, with strong singing and richly drawn characterizations from the talented cast.** Mr. Choi sang with an attractive tenor, demonstrating strong top notes, fluid phrasing and a darker-hued lower register, with only a few moments of strain throughout the evening. And he had clearly benefited from the program's emphasis on character study, revealing nuanced shades of Hoffmann's impetuous, drunken and melancholy moods.

Comedy and pathos were aptly balanced in this production, directed by E. Loren Meeker and featuring simple wood-paneled sets that doubled as bar and living rooms. The chorus sang vividly, and the conductor Robert Lyall kept the momentum flowing, although the orchestra's unpolished, sometimes out-of-tune playing often fell short of the high standards established by the cast.

Hoffmann's four loves — the fragile young singer Antonia, the courtesan Giulietta, the mechanical doll Olympia, and the prima donna Stella (who is an incarnation of the first three) — are sometimes sung by the same soprano. Here the roles were divvied up among four talented young singers. As Olympia, Mizuho Takeshita, wearing a hoop skirt that bounced with her perky movements, sang with fluid coloratura in her showpiece aria. As Antonia, Leonora Green offered an expressive rendition of "Elle a fui, la tourterelle." Tamara Rusqué demonstrated an appealing bright voice as Giulietta. The role of Stella was convincingly enacted by Meroe Khalia Adeeb. Kirsten Scott, a mezzo-soprano, moved and sang gracefully as the muse and Nicklausse, Hoffmann's trusty sidekick. Francisco Corredor, a tenor, elicited chuckles from the audience with his portrayal of the servant roles Andres, Cochenille and Frantz. Yuriy Yurchuk sang with a sonorous bass-baritone and menacing demeanor as the four villains. The smaller roles were equally well sung — with Walker Jermaine Jackson as Nathanaël and Spalanzani, Benjamin Bloomfield as Crespel and Chantelle Grant as the voice of Antonia's mother.

