

Music Review

An Opera Reimagined and Infused With Youth

'Falstaff,' Part of Prelude to Performance at Kaye Playhouse

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The aspiring singers who performed in the spirited production of Verdi's "Falstaff" on Friday night, presented by the Martina Arroyo Foundation at Hunter College's Kaye Playhouse, are sure to remember the laughter and bravos of the delighted audience.

But the lasting lessons probably took place offstage, in the weeks leading up to this performance. Each year the organization, founded by the great soprano Martina Arroyo, offers a program called Prelude to Performance. Young singers, usually in groups of about 35, are given instruction in role development, language and analyzing librettos. There is even a combat class. This year the participants had master classes with the magnificent mezzo-soprano Stephanie Blythe and the veteran tenor Anthony Laciura, among other artists. The extensive coaching was primarily focused on preparing staged productions of two operas, "Falstaff" and Mozart's "Così fan tutte," each performed twice with different casts in a single weekend. With colorful period costumes and simple sets, this opening night "Falstaff," conducted by Willie Anthony Waters and directed by Matthew Lata, was enlivened by the earnestness and vitality of the gifted cast.

In some ways "Falstaff," Verdi's final opera, is an ideal piece for a training program, a true ensemble opera. The involvement and excitement of Friday night's cast, which had just this one shot at performing the piece, came through consistently. Almost all the singers brought something personal and distinctive to their roles. The hearty baritone Robert Kerr began his career in musical theater, and that experience showed in his performance of Falstaff. He made words matter and conveyed the self-delusion of this likable laughingstock, a character convinced that his girth is actually an imposing physique with natural appeal for cultured women. The merry wives of the tale were charming: Allyson Herman as Alice Ford and Kiri Parker as Meg Page. Nichole Ashley Peyreigne was a drolly comical Mistress Quickly. As Nannetta, Alice Ford's daughter, the soprano Nicole Haslett brought floating lyricism to the enchanting final scene when, disguised as the queen of the fairies, the young woman leads townspeople in an elaborate midnight trick to teach Falstaff a lesson. Youngchul Park made an aptly smitten Fenton, who adores Nannetta. Matthew Gamble brought an appealing lyric baritone voice and uncommon intensity to Ford, Alice Ford's husband. Also winning were Brandon Snook as Dr. Caius, Christopher Longo as Bardolfo and Christian Zaremba, a stage animal with a big bass voice, as Pistola.