

The Desert Song @ Winter Opera St. Louis

Music by Sigmund Romberg

Lyrics by Oscar Hammerstein II, Otto Harbach, and Frank Mendel

New Book by David Taylor Little

Running March 3 - 5, 2023 @ The Kirkwood Performing Arts Center

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Winter Opera St. Louis' production of the 1926 operetta *The Desert Song* is the first in St. Louis since 1996 and is WOSTL's most requested production in their 16 years of operation. *The Desert Song* has been hailed as one of the greatest operettas in the theatre canon, but it hasn't been produced very often recently – mostly because of the script's blatant sexism and Orientalism. However, WOSTL has collaborated with playwright David Taylor Little to present a revised version that omits some of the more cringe-inducing moments while preserving the plot, characters, and score. Even with the revisions, there were some times that the show still felt antiquated (including some very topical references for 1926), but in the end, the cringe was overshadowed by the incredible talent of WOSTL's cast and orchestra.

The Desert Song is essentially a mashup of *Lawrence of Arabia* and *The Scarlet Pimpernel* wrapped around a plot inspired by the 1925 uprising of the Riffs against the French occupation of Morocco. The story takes place in the fictional Arabian country of Sharabhat, which for decades has been colonized by the also-fictitious nation of Marne. When the show starts, we see the Riffs – a group of Sharabhat rebels – planning an all-out attack on the oppressive Marnish army. The leader of the Riffs is a masked vigilante known only as “The Red Shadow,” but he is soon revealed to be none other than Pierre Birabeau, the son of the Marnish army's General. Pierre keeps the Red Shadow a secret by putting on a mild-mannered, cowardly persona in front of his father. The Red Shadow, with his roguish romanticism, has become the object of affection for Margot Bonvalet, a socialite who is currently engaged to Paul Fontaine, the Marnish army's bland Captain. Pierre, outside of the mask, has fallen head-over-heels for Margot – an affection that she does not return. This love triangle eventually becomes an imploding love star after a confrontation between Captain Fontaine and his former lover, the Sharabhat dancer Azuri. But what makes this story a true comic operetta is a romantic subplot featuring effeminate reporter Bennie Kidd and his brassy secretary Susan, as well as the Red Shadow's closest ally – the nabob Ali Ben Ali and his harem of Spanish dancers.

I keep forgetting just how absurd the stories of operettas can be, and *The Desert Song* has one that is absolutely nutty, requiring disbelief so suspended that one fears it might come crashing down. But in the show's three-hour runtime, director Jon Truitt never resorts to campy proceedings to get laughs. The show is never boring and it moves along very well. Hell, during the moments where the cast is just standing and singing, they deliver captivating performances that elicit cheers from even the very stuffiest of theatre patrons. Sitting through all three hours is worth it just to hear Sigmund Romberg's lush score beautifully played by the WOSTL orchestra under the deft hand of conductor Dario Salvi. Contributing to the show's charms are Scott

Loebl's versatile set, Colleen Michelson's costumes, Jessica Dana's hair and makeup, Michael Sullivan's lights, Laura Skroska's props, and Jesse Cunningham's supertitles.

I found Colin Levin to be more convincing as Pierre than as the Red Shadow; his interpretation was more like a bloviating swashbuckler than the commanding swordsman he should be. What helped me warm up to him, though, was his great chemistry with Lauren Nash Silberstein's vibrant, charming performance as Margot. Despite how quirky their characters are, both Levin and Silberstein have clear, powerful vocals and a fun knack for physical comedy. As the Red Shadow's second-in-command, Sid El Kar, Taylor Comstock not only delivers a wonderful comic performance but also a beautiful tenor that is absolutely stunning. Also hilarious are the actual comic relief characters, Alexander Scheuermann as Bennie and Holly Janz as Susan. Rounding out the core cast are Gary Moss as General Birabeau, Jason Mallory as Captain Fontaine, Kelsey Amanda as Azuri, Cristina Bakhoun Sanchez as Clementina (the leader of the Spanish dancers), and Jacob Lassetter as Ali Ben Ali. The standout performers from the excellent chorus are Caitlin Hadeler, Janelle Pierce, Joel Rogier, Halstead Selby, Thomas Taylor, and Jordan Wolk.

I was really surprised by how much I enjoyed *The Desert Song* – this version, anyway. It's not a perfect show, but I would say that its biggest flaw is the fact that this only has a two-performance run. If only the Kirkwood Performing Arts Center was a bigger venue, then maybe even more people will have the rare chance to see why *The Desert Song* is one of the greats. But for those like me who attended their sold-out two-show run, we know that Winter Opera St. Louis has presented a real winner. I look forward to seeing what operetta they tackle next.