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Lakmé, Opéra Comique, Paris – review

By Francis Carlin

Budding star Sabine Devielhe in the title role is the main reason to catch this production



Sabine Devielhe and Frédéric Antoun in 'Lakmé'

No sooner has French coloratura soprano Natalie Dessay abandoned opera to retreat into cabaret, jazz and Michel Legrand, than another girl has appeared to take her place.

Sabine Devielhe is 28, petite and bursting with stage confidence in the title role. From the beginning of this new staging of Delibes' opera on a doomed interracial love affair in India during the British Raj, she hit every note cleanly with no sign of nerves. Inevitably, she brought the house down after the famous Bell Song, here not only a display of superior technique but also keen musical and dramatic intent. She even shrugged off a premature ovation from the benighted section of the audience that thought the air ended with the first big cadence. That, and audible exasperation from the cognoscenti, would have thrown most young sopranos off course, but not Ms Devielhe.

This budding star is the main reason to catch the show. Frédéric Antoun's Gérard – Lakmé's officer squeeze from the British Army – is clearly singing through a cold but still manages style and panache. Paul Gay is the Brahmin priest Nilakantha, Lakmé's father, and has rather less excuse for shouting his way through some lovely music. Jean-Sébastien Bou's Frédéric is uneven in tone. But the Accentus chorus is on its usual best behaviour, the officer's girlfriends are in jolly hockey sticks mood and young tenor Antoine Normand sings Hadji, Lakmé's devoted servant, with simple good taste.

They all deserve much better than Lilo Baur's also-ran staging, which only flickers with charm during the last act. Back in 1883 when it was first performed, *Lakmé* hit the headlines because of the small fortune spent on its sets. Today's Opéra Comique cannot compete but even an empty stage would have been better than Caroline Ginet's cumbrous evocation of a Hindu temple – a hideous construction of stainless steel pots and pans. Not to be outdone, Hanna Sjödin's costumes dress the British gals in dirndls and the officers in valet parking uniforms. Once again, the Opéra Comique's noble efforts to champion its rich heritage have been undermined by *n'importe quoi* design choices.

François-Xavier Roth waxes lyrical in the programme book about his choice of period instruments yet his "smaller timpani and trombones" still raise a fearful storm when a normal *double forte* would suffice. His conducting means well but, in overdoing attention to detail, he frequently makes the score sound oddly disjointed.



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