



Jordan Best as Minnie in Giacomo Puccini's opera "The Girl of the Golden West." Credit: Bari Lee

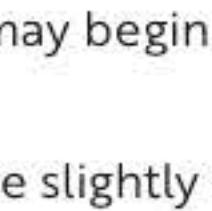
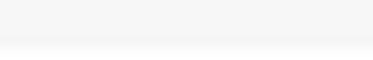
ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Puccini, poker and profanity: 'The Girl of the Golden West' takes an unexpectedly funny ride



BY JANA MARCUS

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Puccini heads to the California Gold Rush in "The Girl of the Golden West," where a contemporary English translation adds profanity, camp and plenty of unexpected laughs. The emotional depth sometimes gets lost along the way, but three terrific lead voices, particularly Jordan Best's Minnie, make the production.

Ever wonder where the theatrical expression "park and bark" comes from?

Spend an evening at the opera and you may begin to understand.

It's the slightly irreverent shorthand for a singer finding a spot, planting their feet, and letting the voice do the heavy lifting. And when that voice is powerful enough to sail over an orchestra and fill a theater without amplification, standing still suddenly makes a lot more sense.

Opera and musical theater may share the same stage, but they don't always play by the same rules. In musical theater, songs are often part of the physical action. Performers move, dance, embrace and interact as the story unfolds. Opera begins somewhere else: with the voice. The extraordinary physical demands of operatic singing traditionally make the staging more deliberate and, yes, sometimes considerably more static.

For audiences raised on contemporary musicals, that can take some getting used to.

But then a great soprano opens her mouth, the room fills with sound, and you remember that sometimes standing there and singing is more than enough.

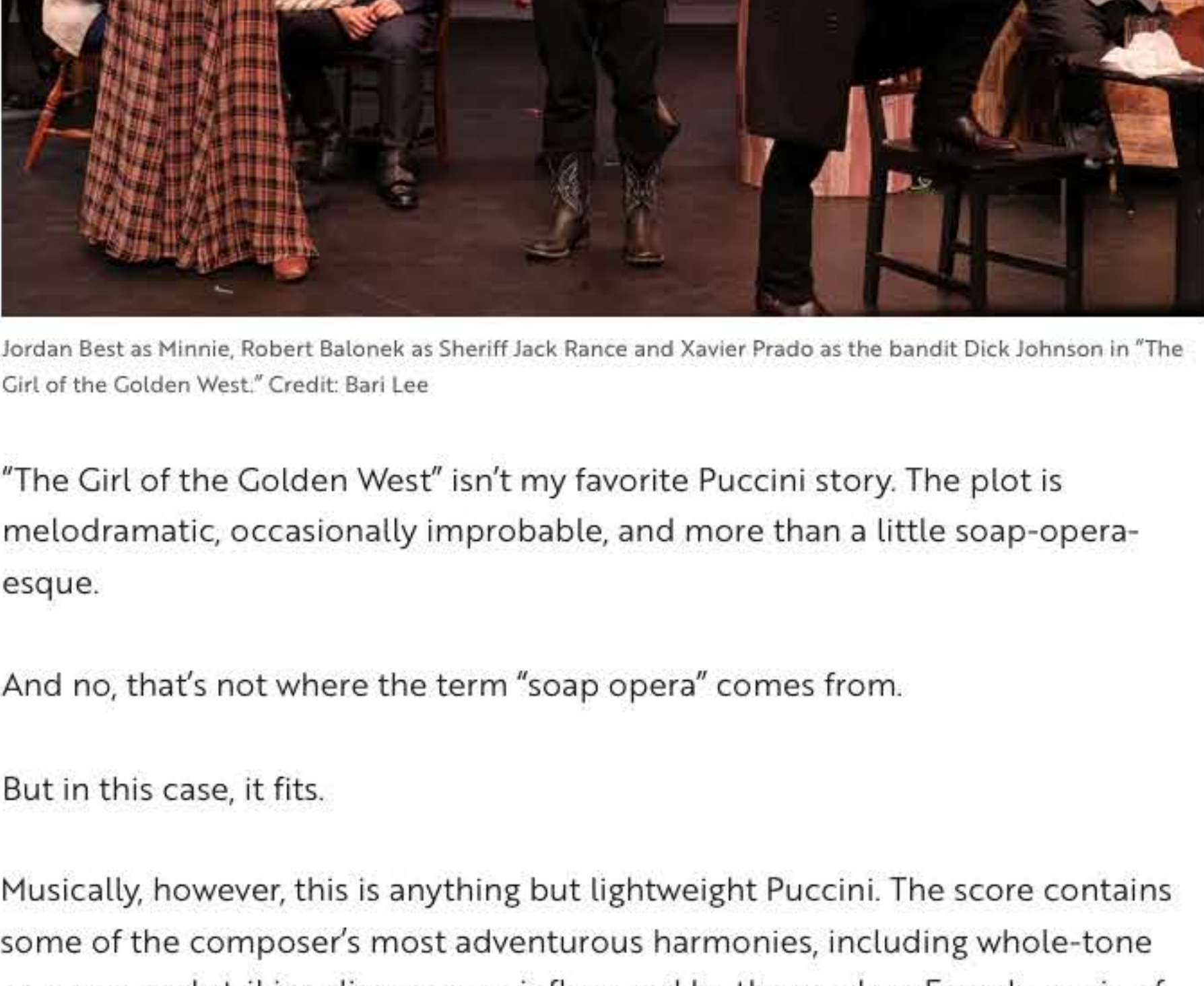
Which brings us to Giacomo Puccini's "The Girl of the Golden West," now playing at the Colligan Theater in Santa Cruz.

And there are voices here worth hearing.

Jordan Best brings a beautiful, expressive soprano to Minnie, Robert Balonek a rich, commanding baritone to Sheriff Jack Rance, and Xavier Prado a soaring tenor to Dick Johnson. Together, they provide some of the evening's most satisfying moments and a reminder of what can make opera so thrilling in the first place.

Puccini's only opera set in the United States trades Europe for the rough-and-tumble world of a California mining camp during the Gold Rush. Based on David Belasco's 1905 play, the story centers on Minnie, the fiercely independent proprietor of the Polka Saloon, where she serves as friend, confidante and object of affection to a collection of lonely miners.

Sheriff Jack Rance is in love with Minnie, but she isn't interested. Instead, she falls for a mysterious stranger calling himself Dick Johnson, who turns out to be the wanted bandit Ramerrez. Romance, jealousy, betrayal, and gunfire follow, culminating in an operatic poker game in which Minnie quite literally gambles for the life of the man she loves.



Jordan Best as Minnie, Robert Balonek as Sheriff Jack Rance and Xavier Prado as the bandit Dick Johnson in "The Girl of the Golden West." Credit: Bari Lee

"The Girl of the Golden West" isn't my favorite Puccini story. The plot is melodramatic, occasionally improbable, and more than a little soap-opera-esque.

And no, that's not where the term "soap opera" comes from.

But in this case, it fits.

Musically, however, this is anything but lightweight Puccini. The score contains some of the composer's most adventurous harmonies, including whole-tone passages and striking dissonances influenced by the modern French music of his time. It also has an almost cinematic quality, with the music flowing continuously through much of the drama rather than building toward a succession of arias with obvious stopping points.

Whatever I may think of the story, there is no mistaking the sophistication of the music, which makes what happens in this production particularly interesting.

Produced by Thomas Clark's Voice Studio, the opera is performed entirely in Clark's own English translation. Clark, a well-known Bay Area tenor and voice instructor who previously performed Dick Johnson with San Francisco Lyric Opera, writes in the program that his translation "captures the true essence of mining-camp life." He also sees the production as a way of honoring the country's 250th birthday and calls it the fulfillment of a lifetime dream.

There is certainly an argument for performing opera in English. It removes the language barrier and makes the story immediately accessible.

But I confess I prefer my Puccini in Italian.

Part of the magic of opera, for me, is surrendering to the human voice as an instrument, allowing the music to carry you without necessarily understanding every word. In English, the words suddenly demand attention. And in Clark's decidedly contemporary translation, they frequently had the audience laughing.

Early in Act I, when Rance rather bluntly tells Minnie how badly he wants her, she sends him packing with, "The only friend I need is a gun, so fuck off."

The audience roared.

And it wasn't the only time.

Which left me wondering: Was this supposed to be funny?

Perhaps it was. But stage director Gary Stanford Jr. describes the opera in his program notes as a "deeply human, moving portrait of love, redemption and second chances." Yet the contemporary language and liberal doses of profanity repeatedly push the production toward comedy and, at times, outright camp.

program notes as a "deeply human, moving portrait of love, redemption and second chances." Yet the contemporary language and liberal doses of profanity repeatedly push the production toward comedy and, at times, outright camp.

The audience clearly enjoyed the laughs. But when Puccini's soaring music is paired with language that makes us giggle, the words begin competing with the voices and the emotional stakes become harder to take seriously. For me, some of the mystery and emotion disappeared along with the language barrier.

The production is also slow to find its footing. Early in the first act, the staging feels tentative, with singers sometimes left standing without much to do when they aren't singing. There is a fair amount of standing in place and waiting for the next musical moment to arrive. As the story gathers momentum, however, so does the staging, and the production becomes more assured.

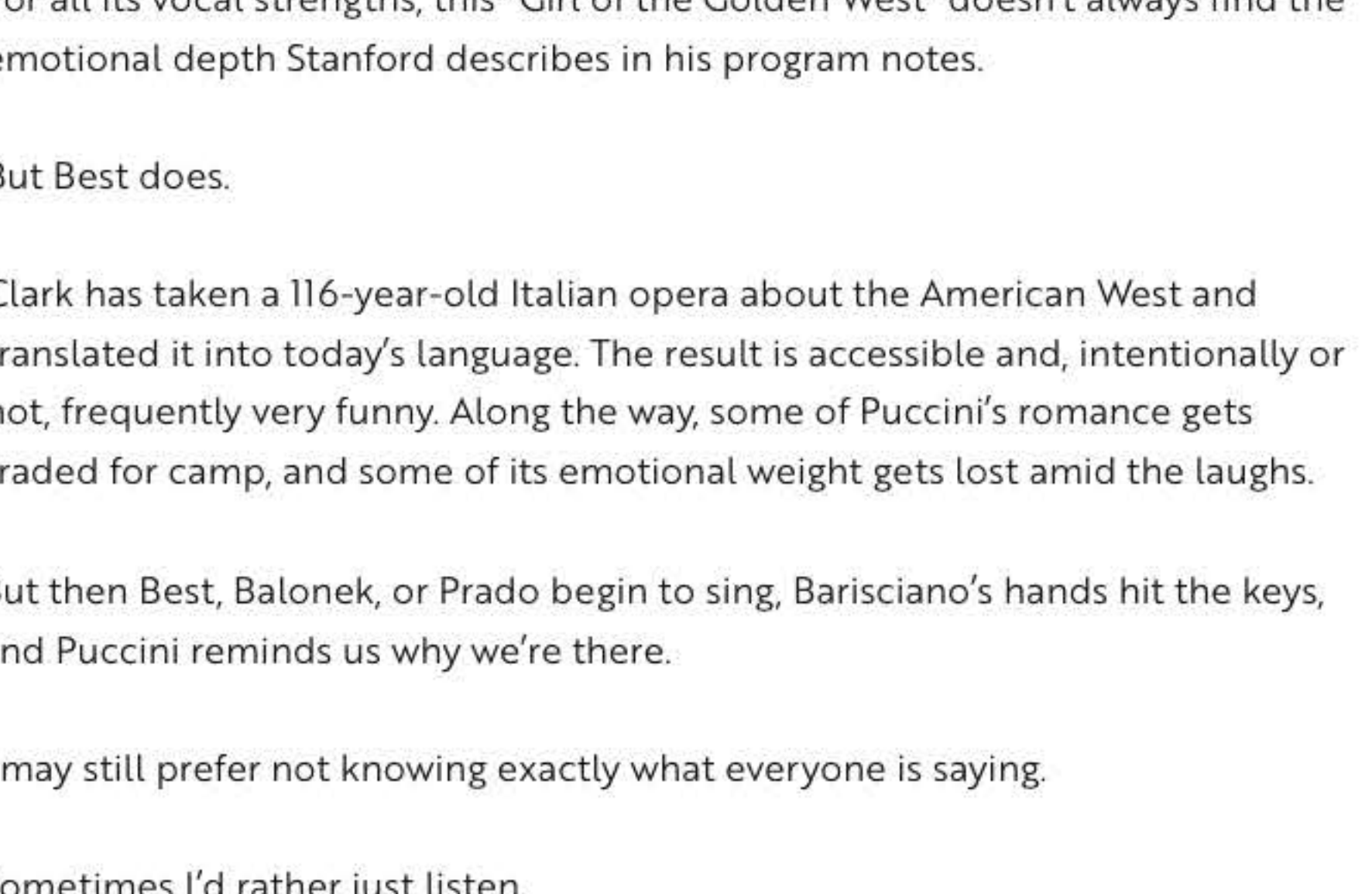
And ultimately, it is the singers who keep pulling us back into Puccini's world.

At the center is Jordan Best as Minnie, whom Clark describes as his "star soprano."

Best is wonderful, and Minnie gives her plenty to work with. This is no fragile operatic heroine waiting around to be rescued. She runs a saloon, reads the Bible to rough miners, carries a gun and, when the man she loves is in danger, takes matters very much into her own hands.

Best embraces all of it. Her easy stage presence gives Minnie warmth, strength, and humor, and even when Stanford's staging falls into that traditional operatic pattern of planting singers in place, Best keeps her alive.

Balonek gives Rance considerable authority and presence, even if the sheriff's relentless pursuit of Minnie isn't exactly winning him points in the romance department.



Xavier Prado as the bandit Dick Johnson in "The Girl of the Golden West." Credit: Bari Lee

Prado is equally impressive as Johnson, particularly when Puccini gives his tenor room to soar.

I only wish I could have seen more of his face.

Prado's hair repeatedly falls forward as he sings, obscuring his expressions at moments when we most want to connect with Johnson emotionally. After a while, I found myself wanting to reach onto the stage and brush it out of his eyes. Opera is visual as well as musical, and when a performer is giving us that much vocally, I want to see the face delivering it.

Visually, the production keeps things simple. Billie King's minimal set is effective, while Zachary Wilson's rear-screen projections add a playful layer, complete with moving cowboys, flying birds and falling snow.

Umberto Barisciano at the piano is tremendous. Playful and wonderfully expressive, he tackles Puccini's entire score by himself, essentially doing the work of an orchestra at the keyboard. At times, the piano overpowers the singers, particularly in quieter passages, but his command of this complex score is impressive.

For all its vocal strengths, this "Girl of the Golden West" doesn't always find the emotional depth Stanford describes in his program notes.

But Best does.

Clark has taken a 116-year-old Italian opera about the American West and translated it into today's language. The result is accessible and, intentionally or not, frequently very funny. Along the way, some of Puccini's romance gets traded for camp, and some of its emotional weight gets lost amid the laughs.

But then Best, Balonek, or Prado begin to sing, Barisciano's hands hit the keys, and Puccini reminds us why we're there.

I may still prefer not knowing exactly what everyone is saying.

Sometimes I'd rather just listen.