



HIGH EMOTION Rachelle Durkin as the automaton Olympia, with Rosario La Spina, left, and Andrew Foote.

Tales to remember

OPERA

The Tales of Hoffmann

WA Opera

His Majesty's Theatre

REVIEW **WILLIAM YEOMAN**

Jacques Offenbach died while his then-incomplete opera *The Tales of Hoffman*, first performed in Paris in 1881, was still in rehearsal. There is no such thing as an authoritative text.

Nevertheless, it is difficult to justify sticking to the traditional yet dramatically questionable re-ordering of the three central acts, as is done in this otherwise excellent 2007 Opera Australia production, here given a vital, fluid and enormously entertaining if at times predictably safe reading by WA Opera.

Largely based on three of E.T.A. Hoffmann's own stories, *The Tales of Hoffmann* has the poet telling the stories of three of his previous loves — the mechanical doll Olympia, the courtesan Giulietta and the singer Antonia — to a group of students while awaiting his latest infatuation, the prima donna Stella. In attendance is his constant companion, Nicklausse, a personification of Hoffmann's muse.

The three tales correspond to the three acts, which are framed by a prologue and epilogue. Further unity is

achieved by having the objects of Hoffmann's affections sung by the same singer, likewise the Muse and Nicklausse and the four "baddies", Lindorf, Coppelius, Dapertuto and Dr Miracle. These symmetries have a further purpose that is revealed only in the epilogue.

That this opening-night performance was such a success was down to the consummate singing and acting not only of the principals but of the WA Opera Chorus. For its part the WA Symphony Orchestra, under the capable baton of Lionel Friend, also contributed much by way of a forceful, rhetorically astute interpretation of Offenbach's score.

Hoffmann is a big sing, but tenor Rosario La Spina proves more than equal to the task, modulating his powerful tenor where necessary to portray a tortured poet in thrall to desire and drink. Catherine Carby as the Muse/Nicklausse is an attractive and subtle dramatic foil to Hoffmann, while James Clayton as Lindorf/Coppelius/Dapertutto/Dr Miracle is so successful as a larger-than-life villain that on this occasion he earned good-natured boos from the audience at curtain call.

Andrew Foote as Luther/Spalanzani/Crespel again excels himself by so seamlessly moving between comedy and tragedy. He is a delight to watch, as is Adrian McEniery as Nathanael/

Cochenille/Pittchinaccio/ Frantz — a veritable moveable feast of comedic turns. Also good in smaller parts are Robert Hofmann and Sarah-Janet Brittenden.

But this opening night surely belonged to WA-born soprano Rachelle Durkin as Hoffmann's successive objects of desire. While the highlight was the coloratura tour-de-force *Les oiseaux dans la charmille*, otherwise known as *The Doll's Song*, Durkin brought a seemingly limitless range of emotion to each part, revealing herself as not only a solid dramatic actress but a talented comedian. And all this on top of a gorgeous, flexible yet firmly centred soprano.

Yes, the poor Maj feels overstuffed by Roger Kirk's complex and inventive stage design; yes, Stuart Maunder's direction lacks the archness and edginess required of a modern-day performance of a 19th century pseudo-comic opera; yes, in the context of Hoffmann's "spiritual and moral decline" it makes more sense to have the Giulietta story come last, as Offenbach intended, and not in the second act. But you'll be hard pressed to have a better night at the opera.

The Tales of Hoffman continues tomorrow, Thursday and Saturday. Tickets at BOCS.