

Donizetti's hotel for dodgy liaisons

**Sharp comedy from the principals makes
this staging fizz, says **Richard Morrison****

Opera
Don Pasquale
Theatre Royal,
Glasgow
★★★★☆

In its present straitened circumstances Scottish Opera cannot do much more than nibble at the repertoire. This new Donizetti staging, however — by the seasoned director/designer team of Renaud Doucet and André Barbe — is a giggle as well as a nibble. I won't give away what happens at the final curtain (except to say that Pasquale's true desires come within a whisker of being fulfilled), but it sends audiences out laughing into the damp night. In Glasgow, in January, that's no bad thing.

Doucet and Barbe update the comedy to 1960s Rome, but if that suggests the dolce vita glamour of Fellini's movies, forget it. With staff as old and seedy as himself, Pasquale runs a decrepit hotel — a kind of Fawlty Pensione, catering for dodgy liaisons between improbable couples. Clouds of hung-out washing descend to cover the roof terrace, and the decor comprises ghastly pink walls and statues of cats (Pasquale's obsession, though he is also allergic to them).

The humour is broad: during one patter duet, giant "thought bubbles" appear above each character, thus echoing the witty comic-book précis of the plot projected in the overture. And the transformation of the Pensione ordered by Norina allows

Barbe to make lots more visual gags at the expense of 1960s Italian designers.

What chiefly makes the show fizz, however, is some really sharp comedy from the four principals. The veteran Italian bass Alfonso Antoniozzi has the sort of voice that imposes itself by sheer character alone, and his Pasquale, all vest and braces until he unwisely brings out a lurid, crumpled suit to impress Norina, is a wonderfully rounded curmudgeon, genuinely shattered by Norina's rejection.

So too will be Aldo Di Toro's nerdish Ernesto, one rather suspects — if that "happy ending" lasts much beyond the final curtain, which looks doubtful. Nicholas Lester's suavely manipulative Malatesta seems a much better bet as a life-partner for Ruth Jenkins-Róbertsson's pushy Norina.

All sing well, and young Jenkins-Róbertsson in particular is stunning: the tone bright but not strident, the coloratura crystal-clear, and plenty of theatrical verve too. Similar qualities infuse the orchestral playing. Under Francesco Corti's dapper beat it is light, well-pointed and ideally paced to serve both the fizzing comedy and those brief but beguiling moments when romance rears its incongruous head.

**Box office: 0844 8717647, to Feb 1;
then Festival Theatre, Edinburgh,
Feb 18-22 (0131-529 6000)**



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Alfonso Antoniazzi as Pasquale in Scottish Opera's production