

Wexford Festival at the Opera House, Wexford



Ratcliff duo: Mariangela Sicilia, Angelo Villari Clive Barda

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Revivals of *Guglielmo Ratcliff* are regularly rumoured then swiftly scotched, usually because the company in question is unable to secure a tenor who can sing the arduous title role without adding to the opera's substantial body count.

Yet there is more to *Ratcliff* than vocal display, murder, suicide, dynastic curses and bloodied wedding rings. Mascagni's orchestral writing is a heathery fusion of Donizettian gothic horror and baleful Verdian knots of low strings and brass. It needs a stylish conductor as much as it needs a burly tenor, and in Francesco Cilluffo, the conductor of Fabio Ceresa's Wexford Festival production, it has one. The intermezzo alone is worth the journey.

Designed by Tiziano Santi and Giuseppe Palella, everything is bridal white, including the wolfhounds that press their muzzles into the lap of mad Margherita (Annunziata Vestri). The castle is home to MacGregor (Gianluca Buratto) and his daughter Maria (Mariangela Sicilia), whose unfortunate romantic history is recounted in one of the opera's many unreliable narrations.

Count Douglas (David Stout) is Maria's latest fiancé, the previous two having been killed by the lover she rejected, Guglielmo Ratcliff (Angelo Villari). Villari sings with pumped verismo glamour. Sicilia and Vestri excel in their fey coloratura flights and doomy ballads, as does Stout. It is irredeemably silly and fantastically seductive — an opera in which people love passionately but not well.

Le Pré aux clercs, Ferdinand Hérold's dessert-trolley comedy of love between a Huguenot ambassador (Nico Darmanin) and a Catholic noblewoman (Marie-Ève Munger), comes to Wexford from the Opéra-Comique. Conducted by Jean-Luc Tingaud and revived by Laurent Delvert, the production zips along daffily, with extended passages of spoken dialogue.

Marie Lenormand (Marguerite de Valois), Eric Huchet (Cantarelli), Dominique Côté (Comminges) and Tomislav Lavoie (Giro) deliver these wittily and stylishly. Yet the evening belongs to the 21-year-old soprano Magali Simard-Galdès (Nicette), making her professional debut with sparkling fioritura while the chorus paws her, pats her, picks her up and turns her upside down like a bottle of ketchup. Any girl in her right mind would employ a sharp right hook. This being opera, she seems to enjoy it.

The Wexford Festival runs to Nov 1. *Guglielmo Ratcliff* will be broadcast live on BBC Radio Three on Saturday, October 31

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