

# The Modesto Bee

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## There's real magic in this production of 'Flute'

By *LISA MILLEGAN*

[lmillegan@modbee.com](mailto:lmillegan@modbee.com)

Exotic and colorful with stunningly beautiful costumes and sets, Townsend Opera Players' "The Magic Flute" is a sight to behold.

Mysterious symbols fill a temple wall. Strange spirits in crescent hats and zebra-striped robes come in and out to offer advice. A queen in a spectacular cape warns dire punishment if her edicts aren't followed.

Director Andrew Sutherland, production designer Corey Strauss and costume designer Cindy DeFilippo should feel very proud.

But this show offers far more than eye candy. Under the guidance of music director Joseph Wiggett, chorus master Yohan Partan and conductor Dustin Soiseth, the soloists, chorus members and orchestra musicians perform Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's familiar 1791 score with confident ease.

This imaginative production, which is co-presented by California State University, Stanislaus, pleased both adults and children at Sunday afternoon's opening performance at the Gallo Center for the Arts. A 5-year-old boy in front of me was entranced by the production and giggled at the jokes.

The tunes are easy to like (some have been featured in movies and television shows) and the program is sung in English with supertitles above the stage to help anyone who misses any of the lyrics. The opera also is sprinkled with spoken dialogue.

Soprano Shawnette Sulker performs jaw-dropping vocal acrobatics as the villainous Queen of the Night, effortlessly hitting sky-high notes. She makes an impressive grand entrance, arriving on stage in a grand chariot.

Tenor David Gagnon brings passion and a sense of devotion to Tamino, the young prince who undergoes a series of trials at a temple to enter a spiritual brotherhood.

Soprano Robin Fisher, who teaches at California State University, Sacramento, uses her powerful, athletic voice to good effect as Pamina, Tamino's love interest. Bass Kenneth Woods stretches his voice to hit the lowest register as the imposing

priest Sarastro. Tenor Donn Bradley, a Stanislaus State student, is comically evil as inept guard Monastatos.

But if there was a popularity vote at Sunday's performance, the winner would probably be Stanislaus State student Joshua Bailey as playful bird catcher Papageno. The baritone was lovable as Tamino's goofy sidekick who would rather chase women than work on his spiritual development. Audience members loved his funny lines about how much he appreciates Gallo wine.

With outstanding production values and an impressive cast, this show is a good bet for both opera fans and novices alike.

Bee arts writer Lisa Millegan can be reached at 578-2313 or [lmillegan@modbee.com](mailto:lmillegan@modbee.com).