



Bride dolls ... Tiffany Speight (Despina) with Sian Pendry (Dorabella) and Rachelle Durkin (Fiordiligi) who embody different ideals of the desirable.

Style with speed in this exuberant confetti Così

MOZART: COSÌ FAN TUTTE
Opera Australia
Opera House, September 17
Reviewed by Peter McCallum

HAD librettist Lorenzo da Ponte written a more coherent ending, *Così fan tutte* might have become a witty satire on the double moral standards that applied to men and women, with a gender-neutral title – “Everyone is like that” rather than “All women are like that”.

But as it is, it is only Despina, the pert servant given to sharp asides with a shrewd nose for hypocrisy who articulates the

opinion that since men are rarely faithful, it is foolish for women to be. We are thus left with the unsatisfactory dominant message that women are temperamentally unsuited for constancy and men should get used to it. Thus, the challenge for the modern director is something like the challenge of saying something outrageous at a party and getting away with it. Jim Sharman's new production does this superbly.

Ralph Myers's set is all whites, creams and gauze as though we are watching a performance by bride and groom dolls on the contorted icing of a monstrous

cake at a tourist wedding. This brings out the exuberance of Gabriela Tylesova's costumes and magnifies the effect of the colour co-ordinated confetti which the characters throw at each other symbolically.

Against this the four lovers strut and dance like mating birds. Rachelle Durkin (Fiordiligi) and Sian Pendry (Dorabella) embody different ideals of the desirable: Durkin sings with poised, well-sculpted clarity and her voice flashes with admirable precision in rapid passages. Pendry's sound is more complex with hidden colours and her approach to

phrasing is rounded rather than linear. In ensembles the first impression was of mismatched voice types but the balance and discipline were sufficiently polished that it became a highly effective alliance of sounds that preserved differences.

Tiffany Speight was delightful as Despina, with a coquettishly colourful voice and a withering eyebrow. Jose Carbo brought a benign, mature vocal and stage presence to Don Alfonso.

As Guglielmo, Shane Lawrence was particularly effective when faking it, bringing edge and vitality to persona and

voice. Henry Choo (Ferrando) was responsible for the evening's most lyric moments and his ability to shape and colour slow arias so as to create a touching musical moment stood out in a production that had the pace and action of a stage play. In this respect, conductor Simon Hewitt had good instinct for quick and insistent speeds. Singing the work in Jeremy Sams's deliberately klutzy English translation assisted Sharman's dramatic purpose.

Opera Australia's Mozart productions have been mixed in recent years, and this one deserves to endure.