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Review: 'La Cage aux Folles' Brightens Up Berlin

The vivid characters and the infectious melodies of the 1983 musical prove remarkably durable in Barrie Kosky's madcap production at Komische Oper Berlin.



At Komische Oper Berlin, Barrie Kosky's new production of "La Cage aux Folles" was full of plumage. (©Monika Rittershaus)

By [A.J. Goldman](#)

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La Cage aux Folles

NYT Critic's Pick

BERLIN — In Jerry Herman and Harvey Fierstein's "La Cage aux Folles," the habitués of the show's titular nightclub are enumerated as a "girl who needs a shave," "both the riffraff and the royalty," "eccentric couples" and "a nun with a Marine." That description seemed to fit the fashionable and eclectic opening night audience of the [Komische Oper Berlin](#)'s new production of the Tony Award-winning 1983 musical.

Barrie Kosky's decade-long reign running the Komische, one of this city's three world-class opera companies, was a near breathless succession of musical and theatrical high jinks. When [Kosky stepped down](#) from his role as the Komische's artistic director over the summer, his parting gift to the house was a glitzy and unexpectedly moving Yiddish revue. "La Cage," Kosky's first production as guest director, premiered on Saturday night and remains in repertory through June 9.

Although Kosky has already directed several musicals at the house, this production did mark something of a departure for the company. The “La Cage” score is on the weaker end of the house’s musical theater repertory, which includes “Kiss Me, Kate,” “West Side Story” and “Fiddler on the Roof.” Even so, it was a thrill to hear Herman’s old-fashioned Broadway songs, tunes that swing between razzle-dazzle and sentimentality, performed by a full orchestra. (The most recent Broadway revival of “La Cage,” from 2010, was rescored for eight musicians.) The chameleon-like Orchestra of the Komische Oper Berlin (the same week as the “La Cage” premiere they also performed works by Mozart, Dvorak and Prokofiev) played with polish and panache for the conductor Koen Schoots.



Stefan Kurt, right, as Zaza. Kurt’s mix of elegant wit, dramatic flair and emotional vulnerability was never less than captivating. (©Monika Rittershaus)

Herman and Fierstein’s musical is based on Jean Poiret’s 1973 farce about a gay owner of a nightclub and his lover, a drag queen and the revue’s star, whose (heterosexual) son brings his fiancée’s ultraconservative parents for dinner. The production has incredible staying power. Even if the musical no longer feels as revolutionary as it did when it was first performed nearly 40 years ago — the original production is widely considered a milestone in gay theater history — the show’s premise, the vivid characters and the infectious melodies are remarkably durable, or, at least, proved so in Kosky’s madcap production.

This energetically choreographed, outrageously costumed and boldly designed staging gave full evidence of Kosky’s shrewd theatrical instincts. One of the first things we see onstage, during the overture, are a number of large silver cages occupied with extras decked-out in colorful plumes and wearing bird masks. The 13-strong “Cagelles,” as the nightclub dancers are called, spend most of the evening energetically twirling, tapping, can-canning and step-dancing clad in pink feathers, fake gold brocade, lace stockings or sparkly underwear. (I’d like to petition the Tonys to consider the choreographer Otto Pichler, assisted here by Mariana Souza, and the costume designer Klaus Bruns as overseas awards candidates.)

In contrast to the plumage on display, Rufus Didwizsus' sets are comparatively simple, even minimal at times, with one notable exception: the gay couple's apartment. The flamboyant room boasts a sexually explicit illustration by Tom of Finland, large white porcelain vases and couches that are shaped like male genitalia. In addition, there's an outdoor bistro under a starry set and a series of eclectic curtains with large, neon images of hummingbirds, flamingos and cockatoos that provide trippy backdrops to the kinetic dance numbers.



Images of birds and plants provide colorful backdrops to the kinetic dance numbers. (© Monika Rittershaus)

But “La Cage” requires more than theatrical pizzazz. For the piece to work, the camp needs to be counterbalanced by heart, and the cast Kosky has assembled bring both to the stage. The Swiss actor Stefan Kurt, best-known here for his work with Robert Wilson, was captivating as Albin, the drag queen who performs as Zaza. Kurt played him with a touch of Quentin Crisp and a dash of Norma Desmond, but made the role his own by refusing to copy what other actors have done with it. Kurt is not a classical trained singer, and his vocal performance was not as polished as many of the others. But his mix of elegant wit, dramatic flair and emotional vulnerability was never less than captivating.

Peter Renz, a former tenor engaged at the Komische, returned to play the dilemma-stricken Georges, the nightclub owner whose loyalty is divided between his lover and his son. He sang with warmth and beauty and acted with the brittle sang-froid of someone trying to maintain sanity in a madhouse. As the couple's assistant, Jacob, [Daniel Daniela Yrureta Ojeda](#), a Venezuelan dancer who has appeared here in several other Kosky productions, brought impressive physical antics and impeccable comic timing to a wonderfully scene-chewing role. Nicky Wuchinger was comparatively stiff as Georges' son Jean-Michel, a fairly colorless role, although he crooned and harmonized well with Maria-Danaé Bansen, another young Berliner who lithely danced her way through the production as his fiancée Anne.

Helmut Baumann, a local musical theater legend who originated the role of Zaza in “La Cage's” German premiere in 1985, was cast here as the restaurateur Jacqueline. His entrance won applause from the opening night crowd, which was one of many times throughout the evening that the performance was punctuated by the audience's vocal enthusiasm. One couldn't really blame them. With this production,

Kosky has turned his former opera house into an inviting place to perch for an evening. It's the giddiest, most thrilling, most fabulous show in town.

La Cage aux Folles

Through June 9. Komische Oper Berlin; komische-oper-berlin.de.

A correction was made on Jan. 30, 2023

An earlier version of this review misstated the given name of the show's assistant choreographer. She is Mariana Souza, not Maria.