

# ~ Life in LAMORINDA ~

## Profound issues raised in a seemingly simple fairy tale at Town Hall Theatre

By Sophie Braccini



From left: DC Scarpelli as the emperor and Isabel To as Mei Lin

Town Hall Theatre opens its 2017-18 season with "The Song of the Nightingale," a musical fairy tale that mixes acting, live music, songs and advanced choreography. A sweet and simple story, it also touches upon deeper themes such as the nature of art, real and artificial pleasures, life and death. The endearing new show is for all audiences, including children.

The emperor of ancient China is benevolent but a bit of the shallow leader. Upon hearing that the most unique treasure of this kingdom is the song of the nightingale, he wants the bird for himself. He loves the small and plain little bird at first, but when he is given a shinier mechanical bird, he abandons the real bird. Of course the mechanical bird breaks, and as the emperor approaches death, his last wish is to hear the real banished bird one last time. Will the song of the nightingale be strong enough the fight death itself? Along the way, the emperor learns that real happiness is found in simplicity and authenticity.

The plot by local playwright Min Kahng is based on Hans Christian Andersen's 1844 fairy tale "The Nightingale." The original story already contained inspiring themes. The nightingale is a bird that is known to the simple people of the kingdom, who are touched by the beauty of its song, which speaks directly to their hearts. The emperor also is touched, but he wants the bird for himself. The theme of mechanical/artificial versus natural is at the center of An-

dersen's story. The Danish writer already perceived how a glittering artificial novelty could be attractive when compared to more natural and simple pleasures.

Kahng wrote the scenario, music and lyrics of this original piece. It adds many contemporary thematic to Andersen's story. There is an element of feminism in the 21st century version, with women claiming their rightful place; the play addresses social change as the emperor makes unrealistic demands of his subjects; the author also touches on the problems of violence versus peaceful conflict resolution and gives the peace advocate role to women.

A lot has to be said about Michael Mohammed's staging and direction. One of the challenges was to create interesting visuals for the nightingale and the mechanical bird. Pauli Amornkhul is the dancer who plays the nightingale. She dances her way through the play as the flute sings her song. Her grace and spirit adds charm to the play and the demanding choreography creates a very nice visual of a bird. Christopher Juan is the mechanical bird. The character created here is very reminiscent of South Korean singer Psy ("Gangnam Style") and is positively hilarious.

The rest of the cast includes excellent actors and singers that often play multiple roles. Isabel To as Mei Lin, DC Scarpelli as the Emperor, Lisa Woo as Madame Wu, Matt Ono as Xiao Hai, and Ted V. Bigornia as Bing Wen are very well cast and hold the singing parts to a

high level. Special mention to 12-year-old Kenneth Greenwell who plays Tai Yun.

Musicians perform live on stage, behind the actors. It is wonderful to have the talented artists there, but it reduces the available space available to the actors and in several scenes the visuals would have benefited from more expansion.

THT is starting a new program this season called "Lit Up at Town Hall," a community literary series exploring the themes of each of the plays. The "The Song of the Nightingale" discussion will focus on how fairy tales explore the joys and limitations of that which is produced by human imagination from 7 to 9 p.m. Wednesday, Oct. 4. Tickets are \$10 for adults, \$5 for students or youth, and free to Town Hall Theatre subscribers.

"The Song of the Nightingale" is playing at Town Hall Theatre through Oct. 21. For tickets and more information, visit at www.townhalltheatre.com.

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## SMC jazzes it up at first of three concerts



SMC Jazz Band

Photo provided

Like jazz? The Lamorinda community is invited to attend the first in a series of three lively Saint Mary's College Jazz Band concerts, featuring "up-tempo numbers, dance tunes, and instrumental jazz soloists" under the direction of maestro John Maltester at 7:30 p.m. Thursday, Oct. 5 at the Soda Activity Center in Claeys Lounge.

"This first concert features the Campolindo High School Jazz Ensemble as the guest group, the SMC Jazz Combo, and the SMC Jazz Band," Maltester said. "The music ranges from traditional stan-

dards to contemporary jazz for big band including music from the Count Basie, Stan Kenton and other big band libraries." The concert is about 90 minutes in length and will feature several SMC scholarship recipients performing solos.

Tickets for the event are \$5 general and \$2 for students and seniors. An additional set of concerts is scheduled at 7:30 p.m. Thursday, Nov. 16 and at 5 p.m. Friday, Nov. 17, and will feature the SMC combo and big band performing a variety of standard jazz arrangements.

- J. Wake

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