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Review: MN Opera's "Adventures of Pinocchio" an enchanting experience for all ages

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Of all the theater based performance art forms, few can feel as intimidating to the uninitiated as opera. Preconceptions ranging from heavily stylized singing (often in foreign languages) to a grandiosity of presentation (often viewed as pomposity) are enough to dissuade many from even contemplating an evening at the opera - a shame considering the uniquely emphatic beauty of the form. The production of *The Adventures of Pinocchio*, now receiving its North American premiere by the [MN Opera](#) at [Ordway Center](#), gives an ideal introduction to the form by offering an imaginatively conceived take on the classic tale that is at once comfortably familiar, yet invigorated with enough twists and turns to delight audience members of all ages. Sung in English, *The Adventures of Pinocchio* is an accessible presentation that achieves the laudable feat of making opera an enchanting family friendly experience.

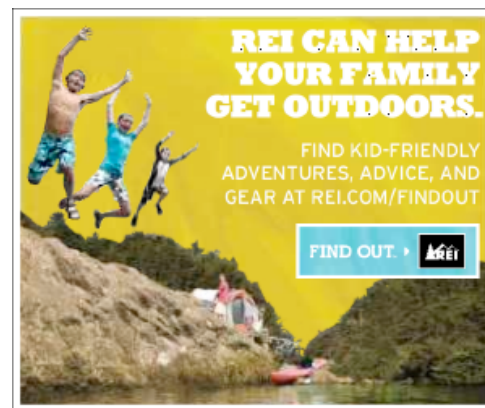
Those whose familiarity with the Pinocchio tale comes exclusively from the [1940 Disney film](#) will likely be surprised by the grittiness of this adaptation. [Jonathan Dove](#), the composer of the piece, has sought to restore to the storyline the often harsh moral lessons of Italian author [Carlo Collodi's original text](#). In short, the wooden puppet must endure hazard after hazard, each wrought by his own bad behavior, before being transformed into a real boy. This Pinocchio begins the story with tendencies toward brash arrogance, insolent laziness, and brazen dishonesty. These negative traits will cause Pinocchio a series of misfortunes such as having his feet incinerated, finding his life threatened by malicious thieves, being changed into a braying donkey, and getting swallowed whole by a monstrous fish. Needless to say, Pinocchio doesn't learn such lessons easily, making his eventual embrace of such virtuous attributes as honesty and hard work

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all the more rewarding.

The character of Pinocchio is brought to vivid life by the gifted mezzo-soprano, Adriana Zabala. With her versatile range complimented by emotive feeling, Zabala powerfully projects Pinocchio's stages of maturation from a child given to self-centered sullenness to a youth wandering through heartsick longing. Pardon the awful pun (I'm sorry, but I can't resist), there's nothing wooden about Zabala's performance. She carries the character on his adventure with a vibrancy that will hold the attention of adults and children alike.

Zabala is well supported by an accompanying cast that establishes a fascinating ground between traditional operatic gravitas and the exaggerated mannerisms of children's tales. As Pinocchio's father Gepetto, Andrew Wilkowske uses his lush baritone to project a warmth of sentiment befitting a protective parent. Likewise, owning the role of the benevolently watchful Blue Fairy, Maureen O'Flynn radiates a resplendent feeling of compassion and love. Supplementing the primary roles are a wealth of delightfully whimsical secondary characters, including scene stealing turns from Rebecca Bottone as the Cricket and Cindy Sadler as the Snail.

Forming the aural backdrop is a gorgeous musical score that seamlessly ranges from lavishly layered heightened drama to delicate notes of soothing reassurance, each section punctuating the tonal shifts in the storyline. Renowned conductor Anne Manson demonstrates her deft skill for crafting dynamic musical mosaics that capture the spirit of each and every scene. At any moment the stage is capable of being thrillingly awash in a breathtaking display of musical diversity and verve.

The set design by Francis O'Connor is a marvel of winsome form and mesmerizing function. In particular, the supposed childhood utopia of Funland is rendered like a kinetic, carnivalesque dream, a vibrancy of colors and shapes filling the stage with constant motion. Scene transitions are just as transfixing, particularly the fascinating movement in which a tumultuous sea dissolves into the belly of the monstrous fish that has swallowed our hero.

Opera traditionalists might scoff at the play's seeming aspirations toward popular entertainment, but doing so overlooks how extraordinarily well the production adapts the art form's essential ingredients for contemporary perspectives. *The Adventures of Pinocchio* is family friendly entertainment for the 21st century that manages to conjure timeless lessons of selflessness and responsibility. For experienced opera patrons and newcomers alike, whatever your age, this fantastic production shouldn't be missed.

The Adventures of Pinocchio runs through March 8th.

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