

'Flying mouse' by R. Strauss fills the house

SECTION F
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■ "Die Fledermaus," Strauss opera in Seattle Opera production; in English, with Hermann Michael conducting, staging by Mark Morris. Last Saturday through May 18 (tickets are scarce; call 443-4711).

by Melinda Bargreen
Times music critic

"Die Fledermaus" means "the bat," and Seattle Opera's new production goes like its namesake.

From the opening bars of its overture, that hit parade of wonderful tunes, to the finale, where all the mistaken identities are resolved in a wash of champagne, this "Fledermaus" is a lively and inventive show that is kept speeding merrily along.

Seattle Opera fans have heard Hermann Michael in deeply serious works, such as "Tannhaeuser" and last summer's "Ring," but it was amply evident in Saturday's sold-out "Fledermaus" opener that he can be effervescent and buoyant with the best of them. Michael's conducting conveyed the lilt and exquisite timing necessary to make "Die Fledermaus" rise; without these, it's a flat soufflé.

For the first time, Seattle Opera presented an opera in English — with surtitles (the projected live translations that work like the subtitles of foreign movies). This isn't as silly as it sounds: Enunciation is a lost art among many singers, so you need a translation to figure out what they're singing even when it's your native tongue.

The dialogue was miked and amplified, as is the company's custom. This time the volume was turned up too loud, and the speaking voices sounded brassy and echoing. Maybe that's an opening-night wrinkle that will be ironed out along with the errant spots (the lighting, by Joan Sullivan, saw more than its share of snafus) and the vanishing supratitles.

The staging was by choreographer Mark Morris, making his debut as a stage director, and it was a most promising debut. This was a "Fledermaus" rich in self-

Rosalinda opts out of screamers

mockery, ready to make fun of itself, to carry the spoofing in the libretto one step farther. Yet it wasn't any more campy or sillier than your standard "Fledermaus," just wittier. Morris knows how to create a mood with a gesture and how to stage a confrontation, and it was a relief to see some of the stock repertoire of operatic stage gestures in at least temporary retirement.

Morris cut away at the dialogue; he could have cut even more. The pace began to flag a little in the last act, despite the inspired shenanigans of Zale Kessler as Frosch.

The production looked opulent and suitably Viennese, with handsome sets borrowed from the Houston Grand Opera and costumes from Santa Fe Opera. The natty-looking chorus sang and danced expertly.

The cast was dominated by the strong Rosalinda of Beverly Morgan and the charming Eisenstein of Dale Duesing. Both were taking some musical risks; Morgan doesn't have the top notes many Rosalindas like to flourish, and she wisely opted out of some of the optional screamers. Duesing, a true baritone with an unusually wide range, sang a role usually allotted to tenors and had to make one or two compromises in the extreme upper compass. Both Morgan and Duesing are engaging actors; Duesing was particularly amusing as a French "marquis" who apparently studied his accent with Inspector Clouseau.

As Adele, Kathryn Gamberoni made the most of her cream-puff

coloratura arias and her stage-stealing opportunities. Joseph Wolverton displayed a beautiful tenor as Alfred; John del Carlo was a hilarious Frank, and Erich Parce's Dr. Falke was superbly sung and acted. Emily Golden was a bit too pallid as Orlovsky. Linda Kappus, Rick Vale and Byron Ellis were fine in smaller roles.

The production is virtually sold out, the last show in what is probably Seattle Opera's most successful season. Despite a string of sellouts, the company is battling heavy odds in an attempt to balance its budget by June 30: The tickets roll out, but the contributions don't always roll in.