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Brilliant New Le nozze di Figaro

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Mozart's Le nozze di Figaro has rarely looked as alive, as intelligent, and as irresistibly theatrical as in the Opéra national de Paris production at the Palais Garnier in the 2025–26 season. Anchored by Antonello Manacorda in the pit and the multifaceted vision of Netia Jones as stage director, set, costume and video designer, this staging offers a genuinely fresh reading of a beloved classic while remaining scrupulously faithful to Mozart and Da Ponte.

The fundamental coup de théâtre of the evening is Jones's decision to set the action backstage at the Palais Garnier itself. We do not simply visit Count Almaviva's estate; we move through rehearsal rooms, dressing tables, costume racks and lighting rigs of a great opera house in full motion. This "theatre within the theatre" concept is far more than a visual gimmick. It reframes Beaumarchais' "mad day" as a contemporary examination of power, hierarchy and gender inside the cultural institution we are actually sitting in. The audience is constantly aware that the intrigues of nobles and servants are mirrored by directors, administrators, chorus members and stagehands: different titles, the same games of privilege and dependency.

Visually, the production is stunning. Jones' use of projected architectural drawings, enlarged texts from the libretto and ghostly shadows blown up on the back wall creates dynamic spatial layers: we see the opera, its skeleton, and its commentary at once. The revolving succession of backstage corridors, makeup mirrors and costume rails suggests an organism in constant flux, perfectly matching Mozart's quicksilver ensembles and rapidly shifting perspectives. Lucy Carter's lighting emphasises the doubleness of the world: warm pools of rehearsal light contrast with stark, almost forensic washes that remind us we are observing an ecosystem under scrutiny.

The strength of this production is that its concept always serves character and music. Figaro and Susanna, sung in the main run by Gordon Bintner and Sabine Devieilhe, emerge not as stock buffo figures but as highly contemporary young professionals negotiating precarity in a rigid hierarchy. Jones' backstage setting turns Figaro into a kind of assistant stage manager and Susanna into a brilliant, indispensable dresser and confidante. Their wit and resilience, always central to the opera, now take on an added poignancy: they are the people who actually keep the house running, even as they are subject to the whims of those above them.

Opposite them, Christian Gerhaher's Count Almaviva (with Jérôme Boutillier later in the run) becomes a

Redaktioneller Programmdienst:
European News Agency

Annette-Kolb-Str. 16
D-85055 Ingolstadt
Telefon: +49 (0) 841-951. 99.660
Telefax: +49 (0) 841-951. 99.661
Email: contact@european-news-agency.com
Internet: european-news-agency.com

disturbingly recognisable figure of institutional power: charming, articulate, but convinced that his desires define the rules of the game. By placing him in an environment filled with interns, young singers and backstage staff, the staging makes the “droit du seigneur” feel chillingly close to modern discussions about harassment and abuse in the performing arts world. Yet this is achieved without didactic overstatement; instead, small gestures, nervous silences and glances at security cameras or monitors hint at how power polices behaviour.

The women of the opera benefit enormously from this framing. Hanna-Elisabeth Müller’s Countess, appearing as an established star within the house, sings “Porgi, amor” and “Dove sono” not in some idealised boudoir but in a large, impersonal dressing room, surrounded by discarded costumes and trophies of past triumphs. Her loneliness thus reads as both marital and professional: a woman whose artistic voice is celebrated, while her private needs are ignored. Devieilhe’s Susanna, resourceful and quick-witted, becomes the Countess’s indispensable ally and emotional anchor, their relationship developed through a wealth of small stage details—shared cigarettes in corridors, whispered jokes during rehearsals.

Lea Desandre’s Cherubino (alternating later with Seray Pinar) is perhaps the most striking beneficiary of Jones’ approach. Located within a building full of young dancers, students and apprentices, Cherubino’s fluid, searching sexuality feels completely organic. The “Non so più” and “Voi che sapete” become not just expressions of adolescent confusion, but almost field notes from an institution where bodies are constantly trained, judged and displayed. Sophie Laplane’s choreography ingeniously integrates the ballet corps and other movers, so that Cherubino’s restless energy seems to ripple through the ensemble like a contagious impulse towards freedom.

Musically, the evening rests on the assured shoulders of the Paris Opera Orchestra and Chorus under Antonello Manacorda. His reading of the score is fleet yet never breathless, attentive to textual detail while allowing the music to breathe in long, lyrical arches. The orchestra’s articulation in the overture – bright strings, perky woodwinds, and sharply profiled horns – sets the tone for an evening in which rhythmic buoyancy supports, rather than undercuts, emotional depth. Recitatives are unusually alive: Manacorda and the continuo team treat them as genuine conversation, flexible in tempo, alert to every inflection from the stage, so that dialogues feel improvised, even as they are meticulously shaped.

Vocal casting across the board reflects the Paris Opera’s characteristic blend of international stars and strong ensemble members. Alongside the central quartet, Monica Bacelli’s Marcellina and James Creswell’s Bartolo are luxuriously drawn: their Act III revelations gain an extra twist when staged as an almost bureaucratic discovery in a cramped administrative office, complete with filing cabinets and fluorescent lighting. The smaller roles – Don Basilio, Don Curzio, Antonio and Barbarina – are treated with unusual care, each given physical and psychological specificity within the backstage environment,

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Internet: european-news-agency.com

suggesting the complex web of minor power relations that sustains any large institution.

What makes this Nozze particularly compelling is how seamlessly it knits political awareness into theatrical pleasure. The production never forgets that Mozart's opera, born from a play once banned for its critique of privilege, is fundamentally about class conflict and the possibility of change. But rather than illustrating that conflict in period costumes and aristocratic salons, Jones turns the Palais Garnier itself into the contested space—a palace of illusion whose glamour is built on the labour of many unseen hands. When, in the final scene, the masquerades and misunderstandings unfold among racks of costumes and hanging garments, the opera's themes of disguise and identity acquire a delicious meta-theatrical charge.

The Count's plea for forgiveness becomes not only a private moment of contrition, but a quiet question addressed to the whole structure of the house: can an institution built on hierarchy learn humility? Finally, the emotional payoff of the evening is considerable. The closing ensemble, with its radiant acceptance and reconciliation, feels like a collective exhalation from the entire company – soloists, chorus, dancers and backstage figures all sharing the stage in a moment of communal music-making. In that instant, the theatre-within-the-theatre concept resolves into something profoundly simple: the recognition that opera, at its best, is a shared human enterprise, uniting voices at every level in a fragile but deeply moving harmony.

Le nozze di Figaro stands as a model of how to renew a canonical work without betraying it. Intellectually alert, visually striking and musically first-rate, it speaks both to seasoned operagoers and to newcomers looking for a production that reflects contemporary questions about power, gender and work while preserving Mozart's irresistible blend of wit, tenderness and dramatic truth. For anyone curious about what a modern, thoughtful Figaro can be, this staging at the Palais Garnier is essential viewing.

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Redaktioneller Programmdienst:
European News Agency

Annette-Kolb-Str. 16
D-85055 Ingolstadt
Telefon: +49 (0) 841-951. 99.660
Telefax: +49 (0) 841-951. 99.661
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Internet: european-news-agency.com