

Right place, right time

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~~Lakme~~ fares
well in staging
at Athenaeum

By John von Rhein
Music critic

It is easy for some learned commentators to dismiss Delibes' "Lakme" as a piece of perfumed kitsch, a quaint relic of French Romantic opera now best consigned to the archives.

Yet Chicago has a sort of proprietary claim on "Lakme," for it was here that it received its American premiere in 1883, and it was here that the *opéra lyrique* enchanted audiences for some four

'Lakme'

Opera in three acts by Leo Delibes, presented by Chicago Opera Theater. Conducted by Fiora Contino, staged by David Gately, sets by Wally Coberg, costumes by Renee Starr Liepins, lighting by Michael Philippi, choreography by Anna Paskevaska, artistic supervision by Alan Stone. Length of performance: 3:10. Opened Wednesday and repeats at 8 p.m. Saturday, May 18, and May 26; at 3 p.m. Sunday and May 20; and at 7:30 p.m. May 23, at the Athenaeum Theatre, 2936 N. Southport Ave. Tickets \$14 to \$36. Phone 312-663-0048.

decades. "Lakme's" popularity waned during the postwar era, although recent years have seen scattered revivals.

Is "Lakme" ripe for reappraisal? If the new production at Chicago Opera Theater is any indication, absolutely. No matter that the formulaic plot lacks dramatic tension. The score is filled with melodious arias and ensembles that fall gracefully on the ear, as the best French music always does. It is a minor opera, yes, but a deliciously charming one. All it requires are the right singers, presented in the proper setting, to bring it off.

There are several reasons why Chicago Opera Theater's "Lakme," which concludes the company's 1990 season at the Athenaeum Theatre (through May 26), succeeds where the Lyric's did not. "Lakme" is a delicate hothouse flower that needs to be showcased in a relatively small theater in the language of the audience. "Lakme" was lost on the vast Civic Opera stage; at the 900-



Paul Geiger (left), Diana Walker and Mark Thomsen help make "Lakme" a rousing success.

seat Athenaeum, it looks and sounds just right.

The Lyric production was unfortunate in its casting. The Opera Theater by comparison offers two exceptionally fine young American singers, Diana Walker and Mark Thomsen, as the star-crossed lovers and surrounds them with a first-rate production that sustains the mood of exotic romance very nicely indeed. It is conducted by Fiora Contino (the first woman conductor ever to grace the COT roster, and a superior one at that) and directed by COT veteran David Gately, both of whom show a distinct affinity for the French romantic style.

Walker sang the Brahmin priestess in pure, clear, silvery tones, with push-button ease and fluency at the top of her range. An intensely musical singer, she negotiated all the technical hurdles of the Bell Song without batting a pretty eyelash. It did not hurt in the slightest, of course, that the singer is as easy on the eyes as she

is on the ears, and that she is a delicate, poignant actress.

Thomsen was likewise ideal as Gerald, Lakme's lover, a British army officer who eventually chooses duty over love. He commands an ample lyric tenor of smoothly appealing quality, firmly placed, true of pitch and diction, sensitive to the musical shape of the singing line. Here was no cardboard operatic romance; you really felt for this young couple's cross-cultural predicament.

Of the secondary singers, Paul

Geiger as the vengeful Nilakanta growled and glowered with appropriate menace, Michael Sarkesian's Mallika blended deftly with Walker in the turbulent duet and William Schickel gave a solid accounting of the British officer, although the singer never worked on his military bearing.

The handsome sets (from the Chicago City Opera), costumes, choreography and dancing reinforced the exotic, picture-postcard romanticism of the opera. Chicago Opera Theater's "Lakme" is a guarantee that you'll be a better opera fan than you were before.