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Igor Vieira as Dr. Dulcamara and Katrinia Thurman as Adina in Donizetti's "Elixir of Love." The company performs again Tuesday night.

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This 'Elixir of Love' is delicious

By Edward Ortiz
eortiz@sacbee.com

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Like a live wire throwing off sparks, the Sacramento Opera's production of Gaetano Donizetti's "Elixir of Love" sizzles with potent singing and crisp, smart direction.

The result Friday evening at the Community Center Theater was the delivery of the best production this company has staged in recent memory.

Directed by up-and-comer José Maria Condemi, this "Elixir" is updated to Napa Valley in the 1940s from the Basque hinterlands of the 1840s.

Here, Condemi asks his singers to honor all the broad comic strokes while also delivering the tiniest of dramatic inflections.

Typically you get the first but not the last in such productions.

Overall, Condemi pushes his singers to the limit physically.

In this production, acting is no poor stepchild to singing. And that serves to bring this story of the peasant Nemorino, who seeks the love of Adina, a capricious landowner, into highest comic relief.

The idea that this will not be your run-of-the-mill staging of "Elixir" becomes clear from the first note of the prelude. Here, Condemi has tenor Dinyar Vania, as Nemorino, and soprano Katrina Thurman, as Adina, appear in front of the curtain for a short quasi-pantomime - a risky Brechtian move that sets the tone of the evening.

Vania and Thurman give impressive vocal performances, living up to the task of filling the large Community Center Theater with their voices.

In the show-defining last-act aria, "Una furtiva lagrima," Vania sings with warmth and radiance, never overplaying the emotion yet selling the bittersweet quality of Donizetti's music and Felice Romani's libretto.

The statuesque Thurman, who in this production looks more like a Hollywood starlet than a Napa Valley landowner, uses her strong and youthful soprano to great effect. The sense of comic spontaneity and sexual brio she brought to the Adina role makes this production a must-see.

Also strong was baritone David Small as the braggart Sgt. Belcore. The weak link in this production is baritone Igor Vieira in the role of the charlatan Dr. Dulcamara.

Vieira played his Dulcamara as part pimp, part Madoff-like schemer. And as an actor he sold many of the over-the-top comic aspects of the role. But his voice did not carry well in the hall.

To Vieira's credit, the role calls for plenty of fast and clipped singing, and Condemi requires a mountain of comic action.

In the role of Giannetta, soprano Carrie Hennessey gave a robust performance. She delivered the second-act aria "Saria possibile?" with skill and sincere emotion. And the chorus gave a colorful performance.

Conductor Timm Rolek kept the orchestra at a lively pace throughout the evening. He coaxed a workable sound balance from the orchestra, allowing voices to bloom.

At this opera's end, one got the impression that the light bulb was on with the way this production was

staged, acted and sung. And that is a rarity in most productions, no matter where they're given.

Call arts critic Edward Ortiz at (916) 321-1071.

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