

Local boy-makes-good in Youngstown

By [Kelly Ferjutz](#) | Published on Dec 5, 2012

Youngstown, OH – Who says you can't go home again? Local boy-makes-good, **Lawrence Brownlee**, returned to his hometown on Friday night, and it's a safe bet he could have easily been elected "King of Youngstown" based on the love shown him by the audience, not all of whom were natives of the city.

Opera Western Reserve has presented one night of professional opera each year for nine seasons. This reviewer has seen six of them, and can state with confidence that this was, for several reasons, the best one yet. For starters, the subtitle screen was not only larger and easier to read, but it was placed center stage; two vital adjustments that gave the audience a better experience, rather than the distracting and difficult-to-see smaller screens at either side of the proscenium in previous years.

Gioachino Rossini was already a veteran of the opera-composing world at the age of 23 when he wrote this charmingly joyous bit of *buffa* in a three-week span. The opera remains among the top ten most frequently performed operas worldwide. Comic opera aside, this particular production of *The Barber of Seville* seemed happier and brighter than others. It possibly could be due to the stellar cast as I felt there was completely no room for improvement.

Briefly, the young Count of Almaviva has fallen in love with the beautiful young Rosina. She is, unfortunately, the ward of the elderly and grumpy Dr. Bartolo, who is determined to marry her, thus grabbing not only her – well, you know – but also her dowry for himself. The two men are aided – and hindered – by the barber, Figaro, the local busy-body and narcissistic nuisance to the citizens of Seville.

The technical contributions were superb! The set was bright and cheery, as were the costumes. The production team of David Vosburgh (production director and scenic design) and Susan Davenny Wyner (musical director/conductor) work wonderfully well together, with the audience being the beneficiary of their collective wisdom and experience. Mr. Vosburgh also contributed the witty translation for the supertitles. Costumes by Barbara Luce and lighting by Rising Sun were highlighted by the hair/wig/makeup of Linda Leith. The large chorus (three ensembles joined together) was prepared by Carol Baird, Sue Ellen Davis and Jon Simsic. Judith Ryder supplied the harpsichord continuo.

Opera succeeds or fails, however, by the vocal and acting talents of the folks on stage – and tonight, we had Mr. Lawrence Brownlee! The high flying tenor role of Almaviva is referred to as Mr. Brownlee's 'signature role' – and it's no hoax. He inhabits it as though born to play this part. Actually, he *is* Almaviva, in all its glorious bits. I've seen numerous tenors try to tackle Almaviva in my lifetime, but none better than Mr. Brownlee. Brownlee is not only a gifted and magical singer, but an actor of immense talent. I'd be willing to bet he could have 'made it' strictly as an actor, but thankfully, we don't have to worry about that. His second act portrayal of

Don Alonso had the capacity audience laughing louder than the orchestra was playing! Not an easy trick.

Brownlee's Rosina was the saucy soprano, **Randa Rouwyeha**, who could clearly cause a great deal of trouble for anyone who stood between her and the dishy Almaviva. She tossed off her opening '*una voce poco fa*' with the greatest of ease and obvious enjoyment. With a lesser Almaviva, **Brian Keith Johnson** would easily have stolen the show as Figaro. The newly svelte Mr. Johnson cavorted and generally delighted with his robust baritone. **Jason Budd** as Doctor Bartolo was a suitable foil for the younger more bumptious Almaviva, and was especially enjoyable in the act two aria where the poor doctor's name is bumbled and fuddled and otherwise rendered nearly unrecognizable. **Timothy Bruno** achieved comedic perfection as Don Basilio.

Next year's production of *La Bohème* will be presented at Youngstown's beautiful Stambaugh Auditorium on Friday, November 15, 2013. For more information or tickets (when available) visit: www.operawesternreserve.org.