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Bianchi-Nelson delivers powerful operatic and dramatic bilingual performance in Neapolitan Ice Cream: The Musical



By Jim Stewart

Fans of Italian music enjoyed 21 timeless songs, drama aficionados witnessed masterful storytelling about the immigrant experience, and the cultural celebration was capped with three-flavor gelato on Sunday at the Humber River Centre in Bolton.

The matinee performance of Neapolitan Ice Cream: The Musical featured a virtuoso performance by Reilly Bianchi-Nelson that was befitting the Four Seasons Centre or venerable Massey Hall in downtown Toronto.

If you closed your eyes and fell into the mid-afternoon soaring tones of Bianchi-Nelson, it was easy to imagine yourself at Teatro alla Scala in Milan.

But we weren't in Milan and we weren't in Toronto.

Instead, 150 fortunate attendees savored the operatic stylings and poignant narration of Bianchi-Nelson in a repurposed fire-hall in downtown Bolton. Remarkably and miraculously, the acoustics were terrific — kudos to the talented sound and video crew from MF Media Inc — and the sold-out venue was transformed into an intimate setting in which the moving story of Caterina was sung in Italian and narrated in English — showcasing Bianchi-Nelson's versatility as a polished singer and compelling

actress.

Her on-stage comfort with graceful guitarist Tonino Chiodo and her chemistry with dynamic accordionist Matti Pulkki [their eyes met in four perfectly-synced, full-stop endings to songs] were evident through the production.

Neapolitan Ice Cream is a quick-moving story—more than 20 public domain songs, narrative fragments, and sepia-toned or black and white visual backdrops are woven together skillfully and concisely to tell a tale about betrayal, perseverance, and reinvention.

The show, performed in two acts, ran for just over an hour and left the audience wanting more.

Producer and director Loredana Cunti described her charming stage show as “my musical love letter to the immigrant experience, and a celebration of reinvention, resilience, and the ability to find joy in a song or in a single scoop of ice cream.”

Indeed, the audience was treated to a single-serving package of Neapolitan Gelato after the show—a delicious exclamation point to an equally-delectable performance by a gifted soprano.

Attendees fell in love with the dynamic Bianchi-Nelson immediately as her vocal range covered “O Sole Mio,” she enlivened Puccini’s “O Mio Babbino Caro,” and her expressive storytelling abilities allowed her to carry the story on her own as the bilingual narrator and protagonist.

The powerhouse performer—clad in a shimmering azure gown befitting the aquatic setting and themes—captured our attention with her glistening, far-away blue eyes which gazed out in the distance during her truncated voyage from Naples to Scotland instead of Naples to North America.

The spotlight shifts from Bianchi-Nelson only once during the production.

At the darkest point of Caterina’s betrayal by the villainous and duplicitous Captain Salvatore, special guest performer Bruno Monardo emerges from the front row, moves centre stage, and the 17-year-old wonderkind injects much-needed energy to the closing segment of Act 1. The animated accordionist got the audience to clap along with his show-stopping tunes and set the stage for Bianchi-Nelson’s seamless return to sing “Passione” and “Core ‘Ngrato” as she comes to terms with being jilted by Giovanni who has chosen not to depart from his newfound life in Canada and leaves Caterina to fend for herself in Scotland.

As Caterina gets acclimated to the gruff Gaelic culture, she mutters, “We weren’t in the Promised Land. We were in Scot-land.” With “Scotland the Brave” serving as a backdrop and being delivered by Pulkki on the accordion, the protagonist enters into a relationship with Jacques who gifts her with wild strawberries. These simple gifts become a significant ingredient in the three-flavored ice cream she crafts from her nonna’s cocoa from Naples, and rich Scottish cream. With employment secured in a café in town and the three-flavored gelato well-received by the locals, Bianchi-Nelson’s character delivers “O Marinariello” (The Fisherman). The lyrics “Vicin’ o mare, facimm’ amore” (By the sea, let’s be lovers) foreshadow the protagonist admitting that she’s become “a Neapolitan mother chasing freckled children around.”

After settling into domestic life, Bianchi-Nelson’s character delivers a soaring rendition of “I Te Vurria Vasa” (“I long to kiss you”) to show that she’s still hooked on Giovanni but is settling on Jacques the kind-hearted fisherman and good father. Her final stirring operatic performance in Act 2 sets up the jaunty closing number “Funiculi Funicula.”

After the show and during the rush by audience members for strawberry, vanilla, and chocolate gelato, the fourth-generation Italo-Canadian offered insights about delivering such a command performance in an intimate, “truck theatre” setting like the Humber River Centre.

“I’ve done a lot of smaller productions and there’s always a collective energy in the audience. There’s a feeling that you’re singing to each person and you’re sensing the deep feelings they’re experiencing as they connect to the songs and story. I could feel that as the audience was clearly moved—some were tearing up—as their stories were told.”

Bianchi-Nelson credited the sound crew for the show’s production quality and her comfort on stage.

“Every venue requires some changes operationally—but today I felt very comfortable with the new headset and not having to hold a microphone allowed me to act more freely. We’ve made little changes after our performances so far. Today, there was no reverb so everything felt clear.”

The audience clearly got what they signed up for—including the ice cream—and many were re-living their own trans-Atlantic passages. Bianchi-Nelson's performance was felt deeply by Richmond Hill resident Tina Mancini who travelled to Bolton to experience a tale near and dear to her heart and connect to her Neapolitan roots.

“It was meaningful in so many ways. I grew up with those songs in Naples. Mom and Dad loved the Neapolitan songs—we would dance to all of them. My dad taught us to dance so we could dance at weddings. Events would reinforce our culture.”

Mancini was moved by the production and thought the highlight was “Reilly's delivery of ‘O Surdato ‘Nnamurato.’ When she sings about her first love—her first and last love—in ‘Soldier in Love,’ she fought so hard to come to Canada and be with Giovanni and yet she created hope for herself in another country. I also loved that you're celebrating folklore, especially the importance of music to our culture. It's the immigrant experience, the hardships, the dreams. We wanted a better life and, in 1966, we arrived in Canada with \$500 in our pocket and a few of our possessions. I'll never forget that.”

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