

A Big Salute to 'The Daughter of the Regiment'

By J. WARREN CAHILL

Gaetano Donizetti's musical jewel *The Daughter of the Regiment*, originally written for the Paris Comic Opera in 1840, will be brought back to life in Newburgh this weekend, March 10 and 11 at the Calvary Presbyterian Church, after having opened last week in Blooming Grove to a delighted audience. Having had the pleasure of attending the opening performance of this charming comedy, I will tell you that it is a performance that should not be missed, whether you consider yourself an opera fan or not.

Claudia Cumming's "Opera Company of the Highlands" has followed its successful performance of *The Bat* with Donizetti's valentine to coloratura soprano voices everywhere and discovered many wonderful voices to surround the two singers in the starring role of Marie, the orphaned girl who grew up with a regiment of French soldiers as fathers and thus developed 'a personality that could give and take with the boys.' She is feisty, witty, hard nosed, and can sing the regiment song with the guys with such abandon that cheers them on to battle. The wonderful cast includes Kinga Skretkowicz and Jeanai Ratcliffe alternating in the role of Marie, a favorite part of Joan Sutherland, Beverly Sills, and Lily Pons to name a few; in fact, the original English performance of Marie was played in London by Jenny Lind. The Marie of Jeanai Ratcliffe delighted both sight and sound as her dazzling voice was matched by the vivacity of her manners and facial expressions bringing the lively sprite, Marie, to life. The surrounding cast was exceptional as well, particularly Luke Grooms as Marie's love object, Tonio, Giuseppe Spoletini as Sulpice, the leader of the regiment, and the hilarious Jennifer Barsamian as the Marquise de Berkenfield.

The Opera Company of the Highlands knows how to get the most out of its performances and since it is a touring show, the sets are kept to a minimum - a few tables and chairs here and there - but the wonderful costumes get the audience in the proper mood for the time, which is during the Napoleonic wars. The accompaniment is provided by two piano players, French horn and drum and seems to be enough to support the singers without getting in the way of the words, which were in English and nicely enunciated so that following the plot of the farcical story was not difficult at all.

While Claudia Cummings is the overall artistic and Musical Director, the stage director, Michael Shell, deserves special mention for his choreography of the various antics the characters must perform as the twists and turns of the plot develop; the opening scene of Act 2 where Marie is being instructed wordlessly into the proper ways to be a lady of high society is wonderful. The entire evening is one you will thoroughly enjoy.

The performances in Newburgh will be at 8 p.m. Friday and Saturday.