plywood top, covered in a white cloth and surrounded by 20 or so similarly utilitarian chairs. And that was all we got for three whole acts. Unsurprisingly, Silke Willrett’s costumes had the performers in modern dress: jacket and tie for the chorus (except in the finale, when they appeared in vests and cardboard crowns) and, in a slightly more elegant version, for Rigoletto; the Duke wore military uniform, except when he appeared in the guise of a student—here a surfer dude.

That pretty much sums up Tatiana Gürbaca’s production. It was not driven by any particular idea or concept, but relied on a sleazy, violent atmosphere and the distancing of mockery. The director focused most of her attention on the chorus, which was omnipotent and omnipresent, even remaining on stage to provide the humming effects for the storm in the last act (whereas Verdi places them in the wings). She left the principals pretty much to their own devices, except in the quartet, where there seemed to be some vestige of an attempt at characterization.

Aleksandra Kurzak’s Gilda rolled her eyes, ate bread and Nutella (prepared by a distinctly chavvy Giovanna), and lost a shoe—like Cinderella—when she was abducted. The Polish soprano’s rounded tone, dynamic variety and clean trills were very appealing; but her top notes—often taken from below—proved hit and miss, and her Italian pronunciation left something to be desired, while overall she crucially lacked vocal and physical expressivity. Saimir Pirgu cut a fine figure on stage, and his accurate, well-projected top notes sometimes achieved brilliance, but the lower registers occasionally seemed uncomfortable. Honours went to Quinn Kelsey, powerful and incisive in the title role and moving in his ‘Cortigiani’ aria; and to Christof Fischesser as Sparafucile and Valery Murga as Monterone. Fabio Luisi, conducting with subtlety but with no lack of effect, kept a constant eye on the balance between orchestra and singers.

NICOLAS BLANMONT

Thailand

Bangkok

Rama VI, king of Thailand from 1910 to 1925, adapted Shakespeare’s Othello, setting it in south-east Asia. Somtow Sucharitkul’s original idea for Opera Siam’s new production (February 28) was for the audience to ‘hear Verdi’s Otello and see Rama VI’s Phya Rachawangsan’. Scheduling problems, however, led to the absence of the planned director, leaving Somtow to conduct and direct, and the result was ill-prepared. The plan to use stylized acting of the time of Rama VI backfired particularly: some, including Thailand’s leading dramatist, Patravadi, have breathed new life into Rama’s
creations while retaining traditional acting conventions, but Opera Siam’s *Otello* came out looking merely static and stilted, with a disconnect between Verdi’s music and the supposedly Asian action on stage.

The singing was mostly disappointing, too. Javier Agullo, as Cassio, was the one consistently wonderful performer, a real Verdian lyric tenor with a sweet, expressive voice. Jeffrey Springer’s voice, though strong and clear, lacked beauty, and his characterization of Otello was for the most part devoid of subtlety. The crisp-voiced Phillip Joll (Iago) also scored low in vocal expression. Nancy Yuen sang sweetly thoughout, but her voice was short of power and her Desdemona really came to life only as she was about to die. Emanuella Barazia lent character to Emilia; Ralph Mcdonald, however, was cast well beyond his capabilities as Lodovico. The singing of the chorus, if not its acting, was adequate and at times better than that.

Happily, things did come together in the fourth act. Yuen was rapturous in her grief, her ‘Ave Maria’ affecting. Springer finally brought some nuances to his role, making us pity Otello. The drama was helped profoundly by the orchestral playing: in fact, it was the Siam Philharmonic that was the evening’s saving grace, underlining Somtow’s achievement in building world-class orchestral forces in Thailand. **Jonathan Richmond**

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**United States**

**Houston**

The Mozart-Da Ponte trilogy productions that Göran Järvefelt and his designer Carl Friedrich Oberle devised for Houston Grand Opera in the 1980s echoed the 18th-century style preserved in Stockholm’s Drottningholm Court Theatre. HGO’s fourth revival of its 1986 *Don Giovanni*, seen on January 27 in Wortham Theater Center’s Brown Theater, reinforced the staging’s period feel by inviting Trevor Pinnock to conduct the score for the first time. Coaxing some piquant period-instrument sonorities from the modern-instrument orchestra and allowing some suave vocal embellishments, Pinnock’s reading was taut and bracing while eschewing the speed-demon approach that marks (mars?) some of his period-performance colleagues’ Mozart interpretations. He also adopted surprisingly spacious tempos in several arias, and gave the recitatives lots of breathing room.

Harry Silverstein elegantly recreated Järvefelt’s original concept, with its stylized stage action and picturesque tableaux. Adrian Eröd’s Giovanni boasted lots of lithe swagger, yet his pleasant but lean, dry baritone lacked seductive roundness. Kyle Ketelsen was a fat-toned Leporello, delightfully comic. Rachel Willis-Sørensen was a commanding Donna Anna, and Veronika Dzhioeva a warm-toned Donna Elvira. Joel Prieto fielded a plangent tenor as Don Ottavio, and Morris Robinson boomed the Commendatore’s baleful challenges resoundingly. Michael Sumuel put across Masetto’s awkward writing strongly, but as Zerlina Malin Christensson lacked the pointed tone that lets even small voices project in large spaces.

HGO honoured its own precedent by casting a tenor in its Brown Theater mounting of Jerome Kern’s *Show Boat*, seen on January 20. In the company’s 1982 staging, the American tenor Jacque Trussel played the charismatic but irresponsible riverboat gambler Gaylord Ravenal. Importing Francesca Zambello’s 2012 production from Chicago, it cast Joseph Kaiser, who looked debonair and sang smoothly while romancing Sasha Cooke’s Magnolia Hawks, her bright, compact mezzo uncommonly robust for a soubrette role.