

The New York Times

ON THE WEB

THEATER REVIEW | 'MONSTERS AND PRODIGIES'

By [WILBORN HAMPTON](#)

Published: July 23, 2007

Anyone who has heard a boys' choir sing "Ave Maria" or "Silent Night," even in recording, knows the angelic beauty of the prepubescent male voice. In 18th-century Italy a delicate operation sought to preserve that vocal purity for life, and "Monsters and Prodigies" by the Mexican company Teatro de Ciertos Habitantes gives a zany account of the century of music ruled by castrati.

[Enlarge This Image](#)



Richard Termine for The New York Times

From left, Javier Medina, Luis Fernando Villegas, and Mexerico the horse in "Monsters and Prodigies."

Written by Jorge Kuri, who died in 2005, the play, subtitled "The History of the Castrati," had its premiere in Madrid seven years ago and was offered over the weekend as part of the [Lincoln Center Festival](#). It is clear, however, from Claudio Valdés Kuri's madcap staging that the show is as much his brainchild as the playwright's.

Castrati were the superstars of the 18th century. Operas were written especially for them; they commanded the biggest fees; women threw themselves at their feet. (As the play explains, castrati were not deprived

of sexual activity; they just couldn't procreate.) Castrati so dominated the operatic world that many real sopranos had to pretend to be men just to get a job.

"Monsters and Prodigies" takes a humorous look at a cultural oddity that thrived for a century. The play begins on a seemingly serious note. A centaur (played with snorts and stomping hooves by Miguel Angel Lopez) explains how deformed children were regarded as monsters in the Middle Ages. That is followed by a medical discourse on how the operation was carried out, delivered by Siamese twins named Jean and Ambroise Paré (admirably played by Raúl Román and Gastón Yanes), who made the castration of boys a specialty at their barbershop-surgery in Naples.

These lectures, which include some operatic footnotes (Gluck wrote "Orfeo" for the castrato Gaetano Guadagni), some gossip-column items from the 1700s (Casanova pursued Cardinal Borghese's castrato, although it isn't pointed out that Casanova was convinced he was a she) and some cultural history (Voltaire and Rousseau denounced castration, but the [Roman Catholic Church](#) turned a blind eye), are increasingly interspersed with screwball clowning. While the musical history lessons are delivered in Spanish (there are supertitles in English), the show's castrato (ably acted and sung in a countertenor range by Javier Medina) fumes at its keyboardist (Edwin Calderón, who riffs a mean harpsichord) while the Paré brothers' slave (delightfully played by Kaveh Parmas) taunts the centaur. A white horse (named Mexerico, with an impressive list of theater credits) is ridden around the stage by Napoleon (Luis Fernando Villegas). There is even a food fight.

The result of all the tomfoolery is a sophisticated yet good-natured lampoon of 18th-century opera. Despite the textbook data, the show is a spoof at heart, and it can be quite funny even for those who are not opera lovers.