



Photo by William Moore, courtesy of Opera Memphis

One of the opera's many complex characters, Renato (Scott Bearden in the role at Opera Memphis) lashes out when his love and loyalty are betrayed.

## Un Ballo in Maschera: A Human Tragedy for All Time

Political conspiracy, adultery, loose-lipped servants, flamboyant parties, social manipulation, murder... all could be in a current newscast or a modern day movie. Nearly 150 years old, Giuseppe Verdi's *Un Ballo in Maschera* has all the elements of contemporary fiction and has remained relevant over time.

*Un Ballo* rarely fails to touch its audience, for the characters are all immensely human. Amelia, faced with her husband's wrath for suspected adultery, pleads not to save herself but for a final moment with her beloved son. Riccardo, tempted to use his power to seduce Amelia, chooses instead to preserve her marriage. And Renato, driven by emotions and a feeling of betrayal, impulsively takes violent and irreversible action. It is not so difficult to see ourselves in their feelings, nor in their actions. *Un Ballo in Maschera* is

*"[With] music so beautiful that actions become almost secondary, Un Ballo is an opera about humankind—in any time or place."*

one of Verdi's less known, but very successful works. And one that almost didn't make it to the stage.

### An Operatic Journey

Already a highly successful composer by 1858, Verdi was developing a major work for the Naples opera—*King Lear*—when plans fell through. Faced with having to fulfill his contract quickly, he and librettist Antonio Somma chose a familiar story, one that had already been presented as an opera three times. Originally to be titled *Una Vendetta in Domino*, Verdi's opera was loosely based on the story of a Swedish king who was shot at a masked ball in 1792.

As with many of his operas, Verdi encountered difficulties getting the libretto through the conservative censors of Naples. The plot line—a king assassinated by one of his friends—proved extremely controversial, as was the adulterous love affair. Although Verdi and Somma complied

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## Perspective: Making Up Opera

### A conversation with wig and makeup designer Denise Gutierrez

On every face, in every performance, Denise Gutierrez's work can be seen at Festival Opera, but no one in the audience actually sees her at work. Gutierrez has been the company's wig and makeup designer since 1995, a job she approaches with incredible passion and energy. Together with a team of three or more makeup artists, she is responsible for the physical look of every artist and chorus member on stage. From the moment production planning begins, Gutierrez brings her broad-based knowledge about design, theater, lighting, and historical events to bear on what the characters will look like. Her imagination is tapped to create, and also to execute—on performance nights, she can be found dusting face powder and touching up wigs as singers gather themselves to go on stage.

Festival Opera is fortunate to have someone of Gutierrez's experience in this key role. She received her training through San Francisco Opera's former apprenticeship program and has served on their staff for the past 21 years. Although her specialty is men's character roles, she is routinely assigned to principal artists of all types, including baritone Nathan Gunn in last year's acclaimed production of *Billy Budd*. Between hectic hours backstage and meetings for upcoming productions,

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## Festival Opera Board of Directors

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## From the Chair

Thanks to the wonderful support of our donors, large and small, I am pleased to report that for the second year in a row, Festival Opera met its budgeted income goals in 2004. The one-to-one matching challenge grant, offered near the end of the year, was met, and we are grateful to the Vodafone and Bank of America Foundations for helping to push us over the top. Throughout last year, at performances, park concerts, and our fabulous Gala at the Oakland Rotunda, I was privileged to meet many of you, our loyal patrons, and personally hear your commitment to support regional opera in the East Bay. You make our success possible and we thank you.

A review of 2004 shows the second consecutive year of increased donor support, our return to a two-opera season, and notable advances in artistic achievement. We met our goal to establish a reserve funding base by year end that enabled us to begin work on the 2005 season. At this point, Festival Opera's only debt is payable to a few current and former board members, and is being reduced, with their consent, in increments over time. Our artistic team created two highly-acclaimed opera productions, overcoming time, space and

budget challenges. In addition, audiences and donors were given opportunities to hear artists at Opera in the Park, an afternoon concert at Diablo Valley College, concerts at private homes, and the annual meeting. The team and our board is working to form an artistic map for the future, identifying productions that fit with our projected finances, while attracting patrons eager to see the exciting spectacle of voice, music and theater that is opera.

This year Festival Opera is 14 years old, a milestone many performing arts companies never reach. Through shifts in the local community and country-wide economic environments, we continue to focus on our mission to present high quality productions that feature the rising stars of opera. We are not the same company we were 13 years ago, nor will we be the same company five years from now. We must expand what we offer, improve what we do, and increase our reach into the community. Our hope is to satisfy our current patrons and welcome newcomers, sparking in all the tremendous passion we have for the art form of opera.

— *Susie Hanson*

## News in a Flash

For those of you who want to be among the first to hear our latest news, try our electronic newsletter—*Festival Opera Notes*. Sent via email once a month, the brief newsletter features



the latest company news and production updates, as well as event announcements and reminders. To see a sample or sign up, visit the Newsletter page of our website and click on the shaded column. Or you can subscribe by sending an email to [listmaster@festivalopera.com](mailto:listmaster@festivalopera.com) with your name and email address. We value our patrons and their privacy. Please be assured that we do NOT share this list with anyone and at any time you can opt out of the list.

Don't miss out on interim news announcements about Festival Opera's exciting season—sign up today! ■

## Choose the Best Seats in the House!

You should have recently received our season brochure. Season ticket packages are available now and single tickets will be offered beginning April 1. Purchase season tickets now to see both dynamic productions and you'll spend \$10 less than you would buying single tickets later! But don't forget to order before May 1 to take advantage of Early Bird pricing.

Be sure to consider our new Premiere Seating level at the Dean Leshner Regional Center. This prestigious level, the first row of the balcony extending to the first box on each side, offers the best seats in the house with exceptional acoustics, an unobstructed view, and extra leg room. There are limited seats available in this level, so act promptly to obtain the best choice.

Be sure to join us before and after the opera, too. A pre-curtain lecture is held one hour before each performance in the balcony, and on opening night, meet the artists at a no-host reception in the main floor rotunda. This will be an exciting season; order your tickets now! ■

Festival Opera Notes  
celebrates its first birth-  
day this month.

## **Un Ballo in Maschera** ...continued from Page 1

with the changes, an attempt on the life of Napoleon III again raised the censors' concerns. Told to rework the entire piece and change librettists, Verdi walked away from the project entirely. The resulting upheaval itself became quite operatic! A breach of contract lawsuit generated a countersuit by Verdi, which was finally, contentiously, settled out of court.

By this time, Verdi had invested enough time and energy to pursue staging the opera. The Teatro Apollo in Rome was interested and Verdi and Somma completed the work. Roman censors also insisted on changes, including a new name, *Un Ballo in Maschera*, and relocation of the action to America, an unusual setting for a 19<sup>th</sup> century Italian opera. The opera opened to great acclaim in February 1859 at the Teatro Apollo. It has since become a fixture in opera repertory, a rank none of the other operas based on this story ever achieved.

### **Putting Drama Center Stage**

Director David Cox's *Rigoletto* last year displayed his keen sense of drama and his desire to "let the music tell the story." He believes that while stage action should engage the audience and enhance the story, the direction should not get in the way of the music. In *Un Ballo in Maschera*, Cox will again seek to let the drama focus the audience on the beauty of the music. "This opera pivots on the very strong relationships between the three characters," he says. "The attraction between Amelia and Riccardo is, of course, the fatal flaw on which the whole opera turns, but the loyal friendship between Riccardo and Renato unquestionably plays as strong or even stronger a role in the drama."

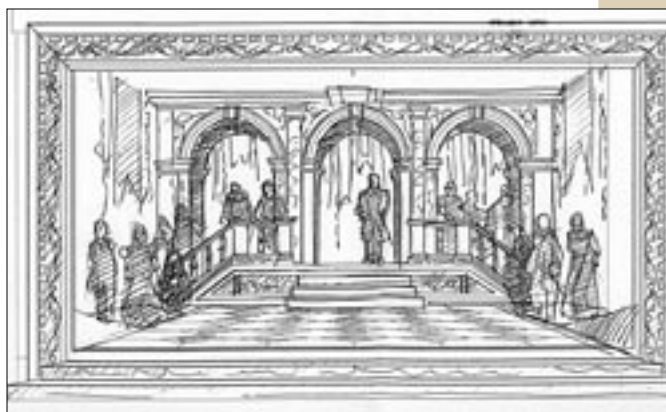
Although the production will not reflect the original American setting—Cox describes it as "vaguely European" instead—the opera will adhere to the original period of the piece. With each act opening as a tableau that sets the stage for the scene's dramatic events, Cox will bring this compelling opera and its emotional, human aspects to life.

### **A Human Heroine**

Soprano Hope Briggs, who will sing her first Amelia in this production, sees her character as multi-layered and likeable. Although Amelia admits to loving Riccardo, she is committed to her marriage and to her beloved child. As Briggs says, "She is both strong and vulnerable. She wants to do what is right, but is pulled by emo-

tion. You can hear the struggle in her voice." Although Amelia does not appear in Act I, every appearance in subsequent acts is charged with emotion. Act II's love duet between Amelia and Riccardo leaves no question as to their attraction. The argument between Amelia and her husband in Act III is both intense and painful. Her final pleas to Riccardo to leave before he is killed are heartrending. This is not a lightweight role!

Blessed with a voice that has the rich and commanding tones required for Verdi heroines,



Briggs feels she is fortunate to be coming into this role at the right time in her career. It is a role that fits particularly well in her voice. Although she was assigned several scenes during a college competition and has periodically revisited the score since, she has not felt ready until recently. Briggs has always loved the opera and she looks forward to joining this production, where she will be well matched by tenor Mark Duffin as Riccardo and baritone Scott Bearden as Renato. She is particularly enthusiastic about working again with Maestro Morgan, whom she describes as being "passionate about the music and present for the singers"—essential elements in making any production a success.

Late this June, as David Cox meets with the cast and begins to sketch out the dramatic action of the opera, the roles of Riccardo, Amelia, and Renato will begin to emerge—passionate, loyal, emotional, loving, impulsive—in short, human. Woven together by music so beautiful that actions become almost secondary, *Un Ballo in Maschera* is an opera about humankind—in any time or place. It is an opera that has unerringly touched the hearts of audiences for nearly 150 years. ■

*Preliminary set design for Un Ballo in Maschera by Peter Crompton.*

## Perspective: Making Up Opera *...continued from Page 1*

Gutierrez also finds the time to design and create unique jewelry pieces. Festival Opera managed to capture a few free moments.

**FO:** Why is the makeup designer involved from the start of production planning?

**DG:** *The way a character looks is essential in carrying through the director's vision. Among other things, I have to know in what time period and country the opera will be set, and whether the opera's staging will have a real or fantasy look. That forms the basis of my research. It's my job to make sure the makeup and wigs enhance the overall feel of the production.*

**FO:** Fantasy looks are rare in opera.

**DG:** *That's true. Usually operas are based on a real life plot—guy meets girl, guy loses girl, guy stabs somebody. It's important for the characters to look as they might have looked in the time period, so the audience can relate. But fantasy looks are often seen in operas such as The Magic Flute, where certain characters need an "otherworldly" component. Then we might use gold body powder or attach an unusual accessory to their head. There will be an element of the fantastical in the masked ball during Un Ballo in Maschera, as well as in Candide this year.*

**FO:** Does the budget impact makeup and wig decisions too?

**DG:** *Absolutely. A big part of my job is balancing the look we want with what we can afford. Sometimes I lobby for things like hats because it saves on hair and wig styling. In general, wigs cost less than styling. Even though the fee for one stylist might be less than wig rentals over-*

*all, a stylist can only do so many heads in the available time—the team has just a total of 90 minutes before curtain to get everyone ready.*

**FO:** What's going to challenge your team most this season?

**DG:** *Keeping track of everybody in Candide! There are so many characters and they have so many costume changes. Some singers are on stage in nearly a half dozen different roles, not to mention chorus changes. Plotting the logistics will be a nightmare. I'm planning*

*to assign each of the three principals a personal makeup artist/dresser. That person will make sure the artist has what they need—and that no one bothers them—while they're jumping from one scene entrance to the next.*

**FO:** How do you think a knowledge of history impacts wig and makeup design?

**DG:** *Clearly, you have to know how hair looked during a specific period. But you also have to understand that how a character is received by the audience is determined a lot by their collective experience. You have to be careful. For example, shoulder length hair flipped out at the ends, paired with a stylishly cut suit might inappropriately evoke Jackie Kennedy. Or a certain shade of blue eyeshadow might make people think more of their high school days than of Tosca. You have to know popular culture and what might create unintentional resonance with your audience.*

**FO:** You'd certainly need to change it, if it made the audience laugh inappropriately.

**DG:** *Sometimes just because it makes us laugh! One time a singer was trying on wigs and did an impromptu impersonation of a local luminary with a similar hairstyle. Everyone backstage just howled with laughter; it was so spot-on. After that we had to choose a different wig, even though that one worked for the character and fit the production. No one could take her seriously in it!*

**FO:** Makeup is an extremely personal job—you're working on people's faces! Is it a collaborative effort?

**DG:** *Singers have some input, although their look must fit within the framework of the director's vision and the production style. It's important to pair the personality of the makeup artist with the singer. The best jobs are when the relationship clicks and you can work collaboratively. For our Barber of Seville in 1997, I was directed to make Don Basilio, bass-baritone Philip Skinner, look "horrible." Phil really got into it, throwing out ideas. By the time he went on stage, he had warts and blackened teeth! Working with artists like Phil is what makes Festival Opera so enjoyable. I love the work I do and am so proud of the company's professionalism. We've done work that rivals San Francisco Opera in terms of vocal and production quality, and I'm very glad to be a part of it.* ■



*Denise Gutierrez uses a fine touch in applying makeup.*

## Alumni Notes

Tenor **David Miller**, last seen with Festival Opera as Ernesto in 2002's *Don Pasquale*, has since become an international music star. One of four young male vocalists of the group **Il Divo**, Miller has been touring Europe to record crowds since the release of Il Divo's eponymous debut album. The vocal group, made up of three tenors and one baritone, was created in early 2004 by impresario Simon Cowell of *American Idol* fame after two years of worldwide auditions. Miller's selection and the ensuing recording schedule required him to withdraw from our 2004 season, during which he was slated to sing the role of Roméo. Nonetheless, Festival Opera can say that we discovered him before Simon Cowell! If you'd like to see David Miller and Il Divo, tune into *The Oprah Winfrey Show* on April 7, *The Tonight Show* the following week, or visit their website at [www.ildivo.com](http://www.ildivo.com)

Soprano **Rebecca Garcia** who impressed audiences last summer with her emotionally wrenching portrayal of Juliette's poison scene, also impressed judges of the Metropolitan Opera Regional Council Auditions. On the strength of her performance in that aria, Garcia was named winner of the Western Regional audition and is in New York this month for the Semi-Final and

Grand Final Auditions. We will again enjoy Garcia's crystalline voice this summer when she returns to sing the role of the servant girl, Paquette, in *Candide*.

Tenor **Brandon Jovanovich** has been very busy singing internationally since appearing as Sam in Festival Opera's *Susannah* during 2002. He recently made his debut at La Scala in *The Tales of Hoffmann* where, as he describes it, he got the "review of a lifetime." Jovanovich also sang the role of Pinkerton in both Toulon and Toulouse France last year. During 2004 he was profiled in "Sound Bites," *Opera News*' section on up-and-coming artists, and continues to be active in performing and recording new works. Recent CD releases include Jovanovich as Boconnion in *The Mines of Sulpher* with Glimmerglass Opera. He also sings Philippe in *The New Moon*, a new recording of the operetta by Romberg, which features baritone Rodney Gilfrey as Robert. ■



David Miller as Ernesto in *Don Pasquale* (2002).



Rebecca Garcia as Juliette (2004).

## Get to Know our Stars!

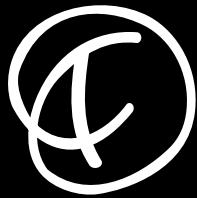
This season, the wide range of talent coming to perform is coming from an equally wide range of geographic locations. As a result, Festival Opera is very much in need of artist housing this summer. If you have an extra room, an open apartment, or need a housesitter during July or August, please consider welcoming one of our artists.

This is a great opportunity to get to know our singers and learn a little more about how opera looks from the inside. It also allows Festival Opera to spend its budget on enhanced productions rather than on housing. If you can help, please call Helen Sheaff as soon as possible at (925) 944-9610 to make arrangements. Thank you! ■

**See us on the Web at  
[www.festivalopera.com](http://www.festivalopera.com)**

## A Very Special Evening: "Glitter and Be Gay!"

Join us on Saturday, October 1, 2005 for our largest fundraising event of the year. This fabulous event, themed around the famous "glittering" aria from *Candide*, will again be held in the elegant Oakland Rotunda building, with its spectacular dome and art deco ornamentation. The success of last year's event contributed greatly to our ability to meet year-end income goals and move forward with our upcoming season. This year, we anticipate even bigger things and even more fun for everyone as we gear up for Festival Opera's 2006 season. The gala committee is already putting together some unusual and exciting plans for "Glitter and Be Gay!," including a diamond jewelry prize drawing, special live and silent auction items, and a repeat of last year's highly popular martini bar. With lively entertainment, plus delectable catering by Patrick David's, this will definitely be an evening to remember. Mark your calendar now! ■



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*Roberta Emerson*  
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