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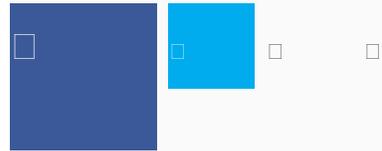
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Opera San Jose gives Puccini's 'La bohème' a 20th century treatment



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HIGHLIGHTS

Puccini's "La bohème" is the story of Mimi, a seamstress who befriends a band of young bohemians. The opera runs April 15-30 at the California Theatre in San Jose.

If you're an opera aficionado, chances are you have definitely heard of it, but even if you're not, the name should ring a bell. After all, 'La bohème,' an opera about a band of struggling artists learning how to negotiate love and loss, is one of the most frequently performed operas worldwide.

Now, it will be Opera San Jose's turn to tell the story, April 15-30 at the California Theatre.

Based on “Scènes de la vie de bohème” by French novelist and poet Henri Murger, “La bohème” is the story of Mimi (performed alternatively by Sylvia Lee and Julie Adams), a seamstress who spends half her time embroidering and the other half longing for springtime.

In her search for a match for her only candle, Mimi finds friendship with a band of young struggling artists—a handsome poet named Rodolfo (Kirk Dougherty), a philosopher named Colline (Colin Ramsey), a painter named Marcello (Matthew Hanscom), a musician named Schaunard (Brian James Myer) and a singer named Musetta (Vanessa Becerra).

The guys reside in an apartment attic living the bachelor life, or as Hanscom, who plays the painter, put it: “a frat boy existence.”

As it turns out, he said, not much has changed over the course of 200 years. “Young people still want to go out and party and old people still want to tell them to shut up.”

His character, Marcello, spends much of his time toiling over a painting of the Red Sea that he’s hoping to sell. As a married father of two in real life, Hanscom is beyond the bachelor lifestyle, but as an opera singer, he finds himself relating to the struggling artist in Marcello. Originally from Minnesota, Hanscom now lives in San Jose, where he’s been a resident of Opera San Jose for the past three years. He said he is familiar with “La bohème,” having previously played the role of Schaunard.

“This probably should be everyone’s first opera,” he said. “It’s full of energy for the majority of it until it gets heartbreakingly sad. You’re going to laugh, you’re going to cry. You’re going to go through all the emotions, which is how going to the theater should be.”

In this production, the role of Schaunard will be played by Las Vegas native Myer, who sees his character as the more outgoing and free-spirited of the group. This is Myer’s first year at Opera San Jose.



“The other guys can be pretty introspective, which is fine,” he said. “Because Schaunard is a musician and he’s used to being on stage, it’s fun coming out and being that lively presence. I like to be that way (off-stage), to make people laugh, make people smile in my daily life.”

Under Michael Shell’s direction, the four-act Italian opera by Puccini and librettists Luigi Illica and Giuseppe Giacosa will be presented in a noticeably different way. For one, the time period will be changed from Paris in the 1840s to the end of the World War I, when Paris was home to the likes of Vaslav Nijinsky, Igor Stravinsky, Pablo Picasso and Coco Chanel.

That was a company-wide decision, Shell said, to lend continuity to the company’s most recent production, “Silent Night,” an opera by Kevin Puts and Mark Campbell about soldiers who forged an impromptu ceasefire on Christmas Eve during World War I.

“ ‘Silent Night’ took place in 1914, and here we are at the end of the war and things are getting back to normal,” Shell said. “So, it just shows that sort of the continuation—what possibly happens when somebody from war goes back home and tries to get back to life.

“In a way,” he continued, “as a soldier, you are keenly aware of death and in all of ‘Bohème,’ the characters are sort of living in this kind of youthful paradise in the sense that they have this feeling of immortality.”

Shell, who recently directed the West Coast premiere of “Silent Night,” made his Opera San Jose debut as director of Rossini’s “The Italian Girl in Algiers” during the 2014-15 season. He comes to the company as a freelance director from New Jersey. This will be his first time directing “La bohème” in its entirety.

“‘Bohème’ is one of the quintessential, on top of everybody’s—all the opera lovers’—list of operas, and it’s a piece I feel, at the core of it, does what opera does really, really well,” he said. “It’s so well-crafted musically, as well as story-wise. It’s just one of those pieces you want to do, because you know it’s as good as Italian opera is going to get.”

He will be supported by music director and conductor Joseph Marcheso and set designer Kim Tolman.

General director Larry Hancock will give a 45-minute talk to ticket holders about the opera at 6:30 p.m. prior to the evening shows and at 1:30 p.m. prior to the matinees.

“La bohème” will be presented in Italian with English supertitles. The opera runs April 15-30 at the California Theatre, 345 S. First St., San Jose. Tickets are \$55-\$175 at operasj.org.

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