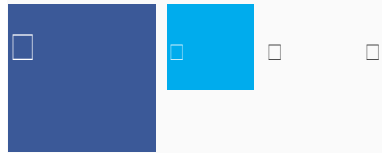


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Opera San Jose mounts 'visceral' epic 'Moby-Dick'



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Kristine McIntyre's production of Jake Heggie's "Moby-Dick," which was staged previously in Utah and Pennsylvania, is now headed for the Opera San Jose stage.

By Georgia Rowe | Correspondent, Bay Area News Group

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When San Francisco composer Jake Heggie announced nearly 10 years ago that he was writing a new work based on "Moby-Dick," the opera world was aghast. Was it even possible to transform Herman Melville's leviathan novel into a single evening-length work?

Turns out it was. Heggie's opera premiered at Dallas Opera in 2010, received an acclaimed San Francisco Opera production in 2012 and has been performed in opera houses around the world since then, making it one of the most frequently produced stage works by the composer of hits that include "Dead Man Walking," "Great Scott" and, most recently, "It's a Wonderful Life."

Now "Moby-Dick" is returning to the Bay Area, in an Opera San Jose production directed by Kristine McIntyre and conducted by Joseph Marcheso. It opens Feb. 9 at the California Theatre, with six performances continuing through Feb. 24.

McIntyre, who has become something of a Heggie specialist — she's directed numerous productions of his works, including "Dead Man Walking" and "The End of the Affair" — is reviving her "Moby-Dick" production, which was previously staged by the Philadelphia and Utah Opera companies. The cast includes tenors Richard Cox and Noah Stewart, baritone Justin Ryan and bass-baritone Ashraf Sewailam.

On a recent rehearsal break, she said the two-act opera often comes as a surprise to audiences — and first-time cast members — who think of Melville's novel as the longest, most tedious book they've ever been asked to read.

"It's funny — whenever we do the first read-through, there is always some surprise," she said. "Certainly, the first act flies by. There's no let up. My goal was to make a very character-driven production, one that is really active and visceral."

Like Melville's novel, the opera is set aboard the whaling ship Pequod, with most of the novel's characters intact. Missing is the famous opening line ("Call me Ishmael"); Heggie and librettist Gene Scheer renamed the young sailor-narrator Greenhorn.



Tenor Richard Cox will sing the role of the obsessive Captain Ahab in Opera San Jose's production of "Moby-Dick." SEAN TURI PHOTOGRAPHY

The opera features four principal characters: Ahab and his first mate, Starbuck; Greenhorn and the Polynesian harpooner, Queequeg. Heggie gives them beautifully expressive music, and the chorus plays a significant role, delivering the ravishing ensemble, "We are one body breathing, pulling to the beat of your shining heart."

Staging the opera poses particular challenges, says McIntyre, who started her opera career on the directing staff of San Francisco Opera. "It's no easy task to take a novel like this — the Norton critical edition is 436 pages — and get it down to a manageable, you-haven't-killed-yourself opera size," she said. "If you know the book well, there are bits that you might miss. There's an enormous boiling down of the essential aspects of the novel, and the libretto does that very well, focusing Melville's narrative and finding interesting relationships between the characters."



Herman Melville's Ishmael character has been renamed Greenhorn for the opera; tenor Noah Stewart will fill that role. NOAHSTEWART.COM

McIntyre wanted the production "to look like Melville," and she started by spending hours at the New Bedford Whaling Museum, looking at exhibits on ships and whaling. "I was fascinated by how they displayed things – it was about looking at boats and the instruments of whaling from every possible angle." She and designers Erhard Rom (sets), costumes (Jessica Jahn) and lighting (Pamila Z. Gray) "constantly played with that" as they built the world of the opera.

Opera San Jose is one of five co-producers of this "Moby-Dick." After these performances, McIntyre will remount her production in Chicago and Barcelona.

"Working on something like this, it becomes sort of all-consuming," says the director, who says she has read Melville's novel eight times. A while back, she started blogging about it. "It's ridiculous how deep you can go in, once you get started."

She's also a self-confessed "Trekkie" – a fan of the "Star Trek" TV series and the films it spawned. Her "Moby-Dick" rehearsals often draw parallels between captains Jean-Luc Picard and Ahab. She's often blogs about the connections.

"I tend to direct these pieces, like 'Peter Grimes,' 'Billy Budd,' and 'Moby-Dick' – operas with lots of men in them. There's a kind of nerdiness about opera singers – you can tell that a lot of them are going to be sci-fi buffs. So it goes over well."

In a recent rehearsal, she and the cast started talking about her favorite "Star Trek" film, "The Wrath of Khan."

"It has a lot of 'Moby-Dick' references in it," she says, "and Khan actually quotes from the novel. I did a blog post on it: sort of an 'Ahab vs. Khan' throw-down, two intellectual super-villains of literature and sci-fi." Still, what McIntyre loves most about "Moby-Dick" is its humanity. "I'm moved by the moral goodness of

Starbuck, the relationship between Greenhorn and Queequeg, this notion of otherness. When you come down to it, it's an opera about how friendship can literally save your life."

Contact Georgia Rowe at growe@pacbell.net.

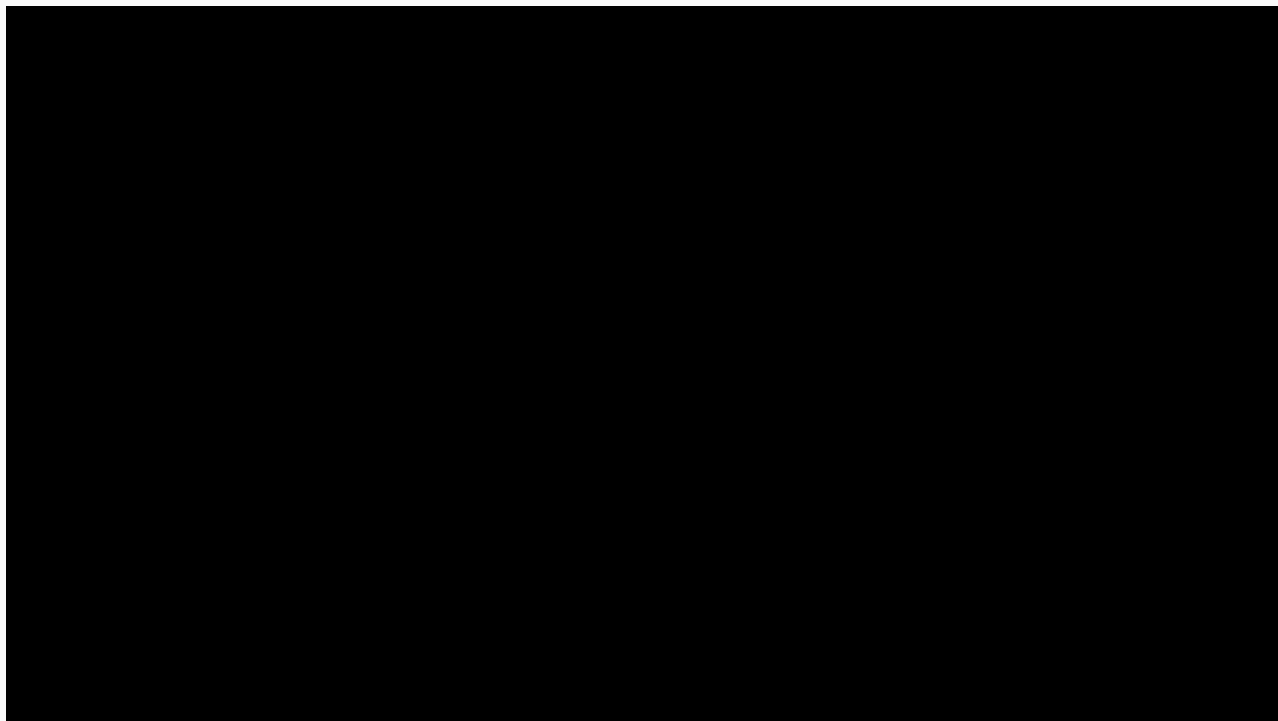
'MOBY-DICK'

Music by Jake Heggie, libretto by Gene Scheer, presented by Opera San Jose

When: Feb. 9-24

Where: California Theatre, 345 S. 1st St., San Jose

Tickets: \$10-\$185; 408-437-4450; www.operasj.org.



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Famed pianist Leon Fleisher celebrates 90th birthday with SF concert

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