

MUSIC

Detroit Opera's romantic tragedy 'La Traviata' will transport audiences to 1920s Paris



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Detroit Opera invites its patrons to travel back to the sparkling salons of 1920s Paris for the next two weekends with a visually stunning production of Giuseppe Verdi's "La Traviata" opening Saturday, Oct. 19.

The story that inspired the film "Moulin Rouge" is also one of the world's most frequently performed operas. Directed by the internationally acclaimed Francesca Zambello and conducted by Detroit Opera music director Roberto Kalb, it stars soprano Emily Pogorelc and tenor Galeano Salas, two rising singers appearing for the first time with Detroit Opera.

Verdi's opera spins the tragic romance of courtesan Violetta young nobleman Alfredo. Detroit Opera's staging takes the characters from their original 1853 setting to the early 20th century to take a progressive look at gender relations and society's changing views about women.

Zambello mused on the topic of Violetta's freedom and constrictions as a woman of her time.

"How many choices did women have, really, until after World War II, to enter into the workforce?" Zambello asked. "WWII revolutionized work for women in this country. (Violetta) is at the height of Parisian society as a courtesan – which it's important to differentiate from a prostitute.

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"Part of the reason men are attracted to her is she represents a kind of allure. Salons were musical and intellectual and would have had performers and dancers and singers and actors, and that's very different from (Alfredo's) tight middle- and upper-class world."

Zambello also spoke with the Free Press about the production's setting and look.

"What I tried to do," said Zambello, "was to really create this world of Violetta's salon. I did go back to the source material, the novel, which inspired the setting. It begins in a kind of sanatorium where

Violetta is languishing and about to die, and it (goes) back in her memory, and we tell the story through her. We transform into her glittering Parisian world, and then follow her life and how eventually her illness brings her down.

“The production is, visually, very splendid, very grand. Lots of beautiful, period costumes from the turn of the 19th to the 20th century. It’s very much inspired by painters like John Singer Sargent, and very evocative of Paris at that time – big and lavish and sumptuous. Very pleasing to the eye, but also very powerful dramatically.”

Though Pogorelc and Salas are on their first adventure with Detroit Opera, the two have known each other for a few years and both live in Munich, Germany.

“It’s very cool to be back with someone I know,” said Salas. “We actually live a few minutes away from each other, and Munich is a smaller city, so it’s funny that we both came to Detroit so that we could get together again. I’m very excited to do this with her. I think it’s a real debut for her. Because of this cast and these people we’re working with, there’s a lot of good, young energy we’ve got going on that I think will be really interesting to watch.”

Salas has been called a “vocal powerhouse” by Schmopera and “most impressive” by Opera News. Likewise, Pogorelc has been celebrated by Opera Magazine for her “marvellously flexible lyric soprano, both warm and luminous.”

“This is my first time doing the part, and it’s such an iconic part,” said Pogorelc. “Every soprano wants to sing (Violetta), so I’m really looking forward to exploring this, and it’s really a dream come true to do it in Detroit. We have such a great cast and a great conductor. We are so lucky to have (Kalb). He’s married to an incredible soprano, and I think that really makes him so singer-friendly. He really knows how to breathe. He has such an understanding of what it takes on our side to do what we do.”

“La Traviata” opens Saturday, Oct. 19, 2024, at 7:30 p.m. at the Detroit Opera House. Only two more performances will be given, both the following weekend: Friday, Oct. 25 at 7:30 p.m. and Sunday, Oct. 27 at 2:30 p.m. Tickets start at \$30 and can be purchased at detroitopera.org.

A vision for opera’s future

Detroit Opera artistic director Yuval Sharon has a celebrated history of reinventing opera. He shares his views on opera as a living, breathing, evolving art form in “A New Philosophy of Opera,” a new book published this fall.

“The book is not just for people that already love opera,” said Sharon. “I’ve actually been talking to a number of people who are not opera people (but) have seen this book as a way into opera. They’re

maybe theater people, or dance people, and it's been very encouraging for me to hear. It ends up talking a lot about the current state of the arts in America right now.

"It's great, because I want to talk to an opera audience but I also want to engage people who may not think that opera is for them. Maybe this book helps give them a way into opera to see how it's not that far from the things they might already love."

This effort is helped by a playlist of suggested recordings that pop up throughout the book to help illustrate points and convey purpose to readers.

The journey of the writing process was a complicated one, and ended up being heavily influenced by Sharon's experiences in Detroit. He originally planned to write it during a one-year sabbatical in Japan that was planned to begin on April 1, 2020. The COVID-19 pandemic, however, had other plans, and Sharon ended up accepting an offer to come to Detroit.

"The trajectory for this book has taken some unexpected detours," he said. "Detroit played a big part in the writing ... The book that I ended up writing, I think, is so much better because ... it is, in a way, the result of me being engaged with Detroit, and engaged with thinking about opera in Detroit. So, now, four years into my time in Detroit, it's like, 'Here's what I've been thinking about, here's what I've learned, here's what I want to impart to the world beyond Detroit.'"

And what has he learned in Detroit?

"There are things that I really discovered about the process," he said. "I've learned so much in sharing my ideas with Detroit audiences as to why it's justified for me to shuffle the acts of 'La Bohème,' for example, or, is it still opera when we do something in the parking garage? And should we be doing more of those things? Or, what happens when we restage an opera – for example, doing that with 'Madame Butterfly' using virtual reality to understand the piece in a brand new way.

"Or (understanding) why there is such a desire here in Detroit for brand-new works that really have a new language, like 'Malcolm X.' I had conversations with donors, with audience members, with artists, as to why I think that this is not just a viable path forward for opera, but a necessary path for the expansion of the art form and the continued relevance and electricity inherent in it."

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