

FESTIVAL OPERA Announces 20th Anniversary Season



Rebecca Davis



Andrew Whitfield



Ted Weis



Shawnette Sulker

There will be much to celebrate when Festival Opera opens its 20th anniversary season in less than two months. Under Artistic Director Michael Morgan, the Walnut Creek-based performing arts organization has grown into the Bay Area's third-largest opera company and one of the country's leading showcases for emerging young talent—many of them San Francisco Opera Adler Fellows and Merola participants.

For the occasion, Festival Opera will present its first production of Giuseppe Verdi's *La Traviata* in almost 15 years; its first-ever musical theatre, Frank Loesser's *The Most Happy Fella*; and the Mark Foehringer Dance Project SF in an innovative interpretation of each work through movement.

Opening July 9, 2011, *La Traviata* will feature the company debut of Rebecca Davis performing Violetta and Andrew Whitfield as Alfredo. Rounding out the cast will be Nicole Takesono as Anina, Michael Foreman as Gastone, Nik Nackley in the role of Baron Douphol, Igor Vieira singing Marquis, and Julie Anne Miller as Flora. Stage direction will be by Mark Foehringer. Michael Morgan will conduct. A former resident artist with Opera San Jose, Davis most recently scored rave reviews at Opera Santa Barbara. Among them, the *Santa Barbara Independent* reported that she “delivered riveting accounts of each of her character's crucial arias and duets” and “embodied Violetta to perfection.” Davis recently made her Carnegie Hall debut as a soloist, and has appeared with companies throughout North America. She's won the Grand Prize of the Chicago Bel Canto competition and became a Tri-State Region finalist in the Metropolitan Opera National Council's competition. Whitfield is both a performer and conductor, who studied under Morgan at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music, where he just earned a masters degree. Prior to moving to the Bay Area, Whitfield was

music director for Amato Opera in New York. He is currently chorus master at Opera San Jose, where he will sing dual roles in their upcoming production of *Idomeneo*.

For its second season production, Festival Opera's founder Ted Weis will perform the role of Tony and Shawnette Sulker will sing Rosabella in *The Most Happy Fella*, opening August 6. This will be Weis' fourth turn in the piece since performing it at the Diablo Light Opera Company in 1996. His intense passion for opera led Weis to first found the Arizona Opera in 1971, followed by Festival Opera exactly 20 years later. Through the years, he has amazingly found the time to perform with almost every company in the region, including San Francisco Opera, while maintaining a practice in Internal Medicine and Nephrology at Walnut Creek and Concord John Muir Hospitals, as well as serving as Medicine Dept. Chairman and President of the Medical Staff at Mt. Diablo Hospital in Concord. Sulker has appeared in three San Francisco Opera productions and sung around the world.

"Festival Opera's slight detour into the world of musical theater this summer is in honor of our founder, Ted Weis," says Artistic Director Michael Morgan. "The role of the *Most Happy Fella* is one that he has sung several times before, and we wanted to give him a platform for doing it again. Since *Fella* requires a good deal of operatic singing, it has been done by several opera companies around the country and really inhabits that area between opera and musical, not fitting completely into either category. Without Ted Weis, there would likely be no Festival Opera, so for our anniversary season we make him as big a star onstage as he has been offstage."

Morgan adds: "*La Traviata* is an evergreen, an opera that will likely never go out of the repertoire. It's been so long since we last did it that it's high time it was heard again. The company has also grown so tremendously artistically since then that it's a perfect piece to demonstrate (to anyone who might remember that production) how far we have come at the time of our 20th Anniversary. "

***La Traviata* will be performed on July 9, 12, and 15 at 8 pm, and July 17 at 2 pm. *The Most Happy Fella* is scheduled for August 6 and 12 at 8 pm, and August 9 and 14 at 2 pm. All performances will take place at the Leshar Center for the Arts, 1601 Civic Drive, Walnut Creek. Tickets for each production are \$39 to \$100, and can be purchased online at www.LesharArtsCenter.org, by phone to (925) 943-SHOW, at the Leshar Center box office, or at Barnes & Noble Bookstore in Walnut Creek. For more information, visit www.FestivalOpera.org.**

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MEDIA CONTACTS:

Lyla Foggia
Foggia Public Relations LLC
(503) 622-0232
lyla@foggiapr.com

Sara Nealy
Executive Director
Festival Opera
Office: (925) 944-9610
snealy@festivalopera.com