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Mark Foehringer joins opera's new breed of choreographers-turned-stage directors

Opening July 9, Festival Opera's *La Traviata* to feature members of the Mark Foehringer Dance Project / SF



WATCH VIDEOS of Stage Director Mark Foehringer and Artistic Director Michael Morgan discussing Festival Opera's exciting 20th Anniversary Season www.festivalopera.org

How surprised was Bay Area choreographer Mark Foehringer when Festival Opera's Artistic Director Michael Morgan asked him to serve as the stage director for *Lucia di Lammermoor*? After all, Foehringer's only prior opera experience had been as Morgan's assistant director on *Faust*, following their unlikely—but highly-successful—collaboration on *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in 2008.

“I said—*Are you sure?!*” Foehringer recalls with a laugh.

When he was asked to step back into the position for Festival Opera's 20th Anniversary presentation of *La Traviata*, opening July 9, 2011, Foehringer says: “I had been thinking that someday I might create a full length ballet of *La Traviata*. But I never thought that someday I would be directing it as an opera! It's challenging, but also very exciting that this vote of confidence has been given to me.”

“Mark has a rare gift for interpreting the story dramatically and elegantly,” Morgan says of the Fulbright Scholar, whose work as a choreographer has been characterized by the *San Francisco Chronicle* as possessing “a depth and naturalism rarely seen in dance.”

Opera's new breed of choreographers-turned-stage directors dates back to at least 1988, when Mark Morris helmed *Die Fledermaus* for Seattle Opera. (His latest was *Orfeo ed Euridice* for the MET this spring). What makes it possible, Foehringer suggests, is that "the structure of ballet as we know it today came out of opera. And when I tackle a new opera, I'm coming at it with the aesthetic I use to create ballets. I look for gestures that are natural to the singer, and I try to draw those out to enhance what the voices are doing—but also to help add another layer to the story."

Born in Minnesota and raised in São Paulo, Brazil, Foehringer grew up studying ballet and listening to great operatic and classical works almost daily. His parents' favorite opera? *La Traviata*. His first professional dance gig? As a member of the choral ballet at a local opera company. ("I could be found in the back waving a palm or something," he jokes.) Following a decade spent touring with Brazil's Cisne Negro Dance, Foehringer became an assistant to a ballet teacher who had just returned to São Paulo from Paris. Her obsession? *La Traviata*. "We would spend hours talking details—the difference between ballet and opera; the aesthetics of every *Traviata* she had seen."

If Foehringer is asked to direct again? "I would love to keep doing this. Here's the thing: I want to try all these different ways to use dance and the skill I have for storytelling—for which I am deeply grateful to Festival Opera and Michael in particular for their amazing support and wonderful camaraderie."

Festival Opera audiences this summer will have the opportunity to view Foehringer's artistry as a choreographer for both 2011 productions. Made possible through a grant from the Diablo Regional Arts Association, the Mark Foehringer Dance Project/SF will bring another dimension to Verdi's classic tale of love and virtue. Representing the company will be Emily Kerr, Sonja Dale, Jaelyn Stryker, Jekyns Pelaez, and Connolly Strombeck and Alec Lytton.

About Festival Opera's 20th Anniversary Season

***La Traviata* will be performed on July 9, 12, and 15 at 8 pm, and July 17 at 2 pm.**

To be conducted by Michael Morgan, *La Traviata* will feature Rebecca Davis performing Violetta (company debut), Andrew Whitfield as Alfredo, and Nicolai Janitzky as Giorgio Germont. Also appearing 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. A former resident artist with Opera San Jose, Davis most recently scored rave reviews as Violetta for 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." Whitfield is both a performer and conductor who just earned a masters degree from the San Francisco Conservatory of Music, where he studied under Michael Morgan. He currently serves as the chorus master for Opera San Jose, where he will sing dual roles in their upcoming production of *Idomeneo*. Janitzky has sung Schelkalov in *Boris Godunov* for San Francisco Opera, Baron Duphol in *La Traviata* at San Diego Opera, and Sharpless in Livermore Valley Opera's *Madama Butterfly*.

***The Most Happy Fella* is scheduled for August 6 and 12 at 8 pm, and August 9 and 14 at 2 pm.**

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.

DETAILS

- *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, with discounts for groups of 10 or more.
- Tickets 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 and www.mfdpsf.org

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