



Checking in with the cast of Festival Opera's *Faust* as they prepare for the August 8 opening

"I get to play the Devil! *What's not to like?*" says **Kirk Eichelberger**, clearly relishing his upcoming turn as Méphistophélès in Festival Opera's highly-anticipated production of *Faust*, opening August 8. "I gallivant around the stage ruining people's lives, then turn to the audience and laugh about it!"

After making his debut in the role for San Jose Opera in 2002, it was just last May that Eichelberger was finally able to reprise it, for Opera Grand Rapids

[photo left]. "Eichelberger, suave, satirical and supremely confident, took great pleasure as the Devil in manipulating Faust or taunting villagers with man's love of mammon. His lyric bass voice pierced the auditorium with laser-like precision and menace," wrote *Grand Rapid Press* critic Jeffrey Kaczmarczyk.

Notes Eichelberger : "I had been looking for opportunities to sing it again for some time. And now it's come twice within just a few months," he notes of his ninth appearance with Festival Opera and second this season.

One of the reasons why he has returned so often? "Michael Morgan [Festival Opera's artistic and music director] is one of my favorite conductors. He is extremely musical. He knows when to take the lead and when to follow what I'm doing," says Eichelberger. "Singing for Michael is just effortless. He is so in tune with me and perhaps I, in turn, am in tune with him to the point where it is just effortless music making. It is a rare thing to find in opera, and it makes me just want to sing for him all the time."

What kinds of challenges come with being in every scene? "It's a lot of singing over the course of an evening, which means I have to be careful how I pace the role. I also have to be careful about how I rehearse. It is very tempting to sing out all the time because the music is so enjoyable."

After turning down invitations by various companies to perform Faust, tenor **Brian Thorsett** was finally persuaded by Festival Opera's Morgan that he was ready for primetime. "My career up to this point has mostly centered on baroque, bel canto and Mozart operas and oratorios – so, stylistically, this represents a tremendous departure for me. When

Michael first offered me this role, I was hesitant, but after a few emails back and forth, he really convinced me it would be a good fit and that the orchestra will be tailored to fit with all of the cast's talents. Not many do that.”

Once the former San Francisco Opera Merola participant signed on, he spent a month in Paris to prepare, including brushing up on his French and analyzing the original play for a deeper understanding of the opera's overall architecture. “I love the way Gounod crafted dramatic, character-filled music – at the same time, writing beautiful convincing melodies.” One of the biggest challenges to portraying the corruptible Faust, he says, is the first scene featuring the character's physical and vocal transformation “from an older disenchanting man to a robust young lover.”

For **Kristin Clayton**, a former San Francisco Opera Adler Fellow who plays Marguerite, it will be the first chance she's had to perform the role in its entirety – after years of singing it in selected scenes and ensembles. “It's very special when you find opera roles that feel suited specifically to your voice,” she says. “Marguerite goes through such a range of emotions, from loneliness and vulnerability to succumbing to passion and desire – and, finally, confusion and unending torment. And I love singing in French and adore the beautiful, romantic melodies throughout the opera.”

Gounod's powerful tale of a man who sells his soul to the devil in exchange for the return of his youth and the love of the innocent Marguerite will feature such other notable Bay Area talent as **Eugene Brancoveanu** as Valentin, **Patrice Houston** as Marthe, **Erin Neff** as Siébel and **Zachary Gordin** as Wagner.

The creative team behind *Faust* includes stage direction by **Michael Morgan**, who will also conduct, choreography by assistant director **Mark Foehringer** and production design by **Matthew Antaky**. To symbolize the modern relevance of Gounod's classic morality tale, Morgan will feature his performers in contemporary dress. “The story is timeless, it doesn't have to be set in any particular period.”

Rather than traditional three-dimensional sets, *Faust* will be staged with the illusion of physical environments –projected onto backdrops to create a magical interplay between story and setting. In lieu of set changes, gradual dissolves will transport the audience visually through the story. “It will be like the way you experience a sunrise,” says Morgan. “You don't notice each different gradation of light, but at some point you realize the sky is bright and the sun is up.”

As an example, Morgan says, “our modern setting for *Faust* will begin with Faust as an old man living in a retirement facility. As a backdrop, we will use projections to show the effects of time on Faust's surroundings, beginning with the wallpaper of his room, which will gradually transform into the vivid flowers of Marguerite's garden and then decay. This happens over the course of the entire performance. As the garden decays, a spider web becomes superimposed on the flowers symbolizing the trap set for Faust by Méphistophélès. This will be Festival Opera's first use of large scale projections, as well as employing this kind of visual symbolism, to tell a story through both sound and light.”

Performances of *Faust* are scheduled for 8 pm on Saturday, August 8, and Tuesday, August 11; and at 2 pm on Sunday, August 16, 2009. Location: Hofmann Theatre, Leshar Center for the Arts, 1601 Civic Drive, Walnut Creek, CA. Tickets: \$39 - \$100; \$10 discount for age 18 and under. Tickets can be ordered now by calling (925) 943-SHOW or purchased online at www.LesharArtsCenter.org. For more information, visit www.FestivalOpera.com or call (925) 944-9610.

PHOTO CAPTION: Kirk Eichelberger as Méphistophélès in Opera Grand Rapids' *Faust* last May. Photo by Dianne Carol Burdick.

MEDIA CONTACTS:

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

Helen Sheaff
Executive Director
Festival Opera
(925) 944-9610
info@festivalopera.com
