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Festival Opera's *Madama Butterfly* to take wing with dramatic new staging

"This will not be your every day *Madama Butterfly*," says director Brian Staufenbiel of the innovative staging planned for Festival Opera's production of Puccini's masterpiece, when it opens July 10 at the Leshner Center for the Arts in Walnut Creek.

Staufenbiel, who was awarded first prize in the 2007 National Opera Association competition in New York, is incorporating shadow puppetry, a proscenium stage, and stylized costumes to enhance the intimacy and drama of Puccini's classic tragedy of a Japanese geisha, Cio-Cio San, who forsakes her family and religion to marry an American naval officer, only to discover that their union was a matter of convenience to relieve the tedium of his tour of duty in Nagasaki.

The combined effect, Staufenbiel believes, will magnify the characters' actions and interactions, while allowing the audience to experience the intimate and profound emotions that accompany the transformation of the beautiful *Madama Butterfly* from submissive girl to passionately devoted wife to deeply despairing lover.

One of the most exhilarating aspects of the art form is that even a familiar opera – much less one of *Madama Butterfly*'s passion and drama – has the potential to deliver a new and powerful experience, Staufenbiel says. "There is always an opportunity for audiences to discover an opera in a different way," he contends.

In the tradition of Japan's centuries-old Bunraku puppetry, the Festival Opera production will employ shadow puppetry (created by set designer Matthew Antaky, who co-founded Shadow Light Productions) as a prequel to each act. "I've always been fascinated with shadow puppets, so the idea of giving the story a human perspective from a puppetry aesthetic was intriguing," says Staufenbiel, who holds a doctorate in vocal performance and literature from the Eastman School of Music and heads up the opera program at the University of California, Santa Cruz.

To create the environment of the story, "we are using a simplistic but dramatic set that will frame the action and put the focus on the singers and the tragedy as it unfolds," he continues. Structured around a proscenium stage, Japanese shoji screens will be mounted on terraced platforms to create a raked effect, and traditional sliding doors will focus attention inward to magnify the characters. "The result is a kind of funnel effect, and as you look into it, everyone becomes a little bigger. When Cio-Cio San sings her aria in the middle of the stage, you're going to feel her angst and the passion."

The costumes for *Madama Butterfly* will also have more theatrical flair than traditional geisha kimonos.

Festival Opera's first presentation of *Madama Butterfly* since 2001 will showcase an outstanding cast that includes New York soprano Teresa Eickel as Cio-Cio San; former San Jose Opera resident tenor Christopher Bengochea as Lt. B. F. Pinkerton; Adler Fellow and Merola alumnus, bass-baritone Philip Skinner, as Sharpless; and mezzo-soprano Nicole Takesono as Suzuki. The role of Kate Pinkerton will be sung by Elizabeth O'Neill, Goro by Andrew Whitfield, Prince Yamadori by Kurt Krikorian and The Bonze by John Bischoff.

Making his debut as principal conductor will be Joseph Marcheso, who studied under Michael Morgan in the San Francisco Conservatory's graduate program after serving as the music director for a small regional company in New York. Sets will be by Matthew Antaky.

Performances of Festival Opera's *Madama Butterfly* are scheduled for 8 pm on July 10, 13, and 16; and at 2 pm on Sunday, July 18. All performances will take place at the Leshar Center for the Arts, 1601 Civic Drive, Walnut Creek. Tickets are \$39 to \$100, and now available three ways: Online at www.LesharArtsCenter.org. By phone: (925) 943-SHOW. And in person at the Leshar Center box office and Barnes & Noble Bookstore in Walnut Creek. For more information, visit www.FestivalOpera.com.

About Festival Opera

Festival Opera under Artistic Director Michael Morgan has emerged as the third-largest opera company in the San Francisco Bay Area and one of the top three professional arts companies based in Walnut Creek. Founded in 1991, the non-profit organization has become a showcase for providing young, emerging artists – many of them San Francisco Opera Adler Fellows and Merola Opera Program participants – with principal roles in professional productions. Festival Opera's season consists of two full productions presented each July and August. The company also provides complimentary lectures on opera throughout the community and before each performance, and internship opportunities for college and high school students. For more information, visit www.FestivalOpera.com.

Of Special Note

When Madama Butterfly takes the stage in July, audiences will be treated not only to great musical performances, but also an enhanced visual experience, courtesy of our partnership with the Diablo Regional Arts Association (DRAA). As Season Partner for 2010, DRAA will underwrite enhancements in costumes, lighting and sets, all designed to highlight the dramatic impact of one of the most powerful stories in opera. Festival Opera executive director Helen Sheaff said, "At a time when many funders are reducing or even eliminating grants, we're grateful to DRAA for their continuing support of artistic

excellence at the Lesher Center. We've worked with them over many seasons and the result has always been to add extra dimension and 'sizzle' to our performances. We're looking forward to another great partnership this year."

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