

# Festival Opera Announces 21<sup>th</sup> Season ----- Re-Envisioning an Opera Company

Facing a budget shortfall and the need to re-envision the company, Festival Opera plans to begin anew in 2012 with a combination of exploring and developing new community connections and experimenting with different scales of productions to bring opera to its East Bay audiences. The move is prompted by a need for a more sustainable model of business operations and also by a need to consider new and relevant ways to connect to the community.

Festival Opera's 2011 season productions – Giuseppe Verdi's *La Traviata* and Frank Loesser's operatic musical, *The Most Happy Fella* – resulted in disappointing ticket sales despite critical nods for artistry. Coupled with lower than anticipated grants and donations, the company faced the fact that continuing as it has for many seasons is no longer viable. "Festival Opera has a rich tradition and great assets in our artistic and production capacity and our community-based chorus. These can be harnessed in innovative ways," says executive director Sara Nealy, who took the helm in March. She considers the move an opportunity to re-envision the company's direction and adopt an agile and creative model, "We have to be nimble and responsive; great creativity can emerge from great pressure."

Festival Opera will replace its standard season productions of fully-staged opera at the Leshner Center in the summer for a transitional season of offerings in 2012 and early 2013. **Opera in the Park**, a popular event free to the public that usually attracts a couple thousand opera enthusiasts and picnickers is featured, as well as a **benefit concert July 14<sup>th</sup> at the Leshner Center for the Arts**. The concert will feature great artists spanning Festival Opera's 20 seasons. In the fall, Festival Opera plans to present "**About Face**," an **opera experience** designed to raise awareness of a widespread but little-known medical condition: facial paralysis. "About Face" incorporates theater, interactivity and Henry Mollicone's chamber opera work, *Face on the Barroom Floor*; the production features the composer on piano with singers Eugene Brancoveanu and Heidi Moss, a soprano who is afflicted with a form of facial palsy. Also planned is the **Open Chorus Rehearsal**, an educational event now in its third year, led by chorus master and artistic administrator James Toland. In the winter, Festival Opera plans to present the hauntingly

beautiful one-act opera, *The Emperor of Atlantis, or Death's Refusal*. The opera was composed by Viktor Ullmann with a libretto by Peter Kien, both inmates at the Nazi “artists” concentration camp of Theresienstadt (Terezín) where it was banned as a satire of Hitler. Unlike the men who created it, the work survived.

Artistic director Michael Morgan says, “Festival Opera, like many other arts organizations, is facing a test. If our community will come with us, we can present a range of opera productions, including the return to the larger productions that have been so impressive. But it is only with input from that community that we will find the right path for the company. We are not giving up on our community and I hope they won't give up on us. We are hoping for a future as artistically excellent as our past.”



Festival Opera production of *La Traviata*, July 2011

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**Photo Credit: Robert Shomler**

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