

Dayton Opera's *La Traviata* is graced with perfect cast selection

Burt Saidel



Giuseppe Verdi's, *La Traviata*, is one of the world's most popular operas. It deserves to be. It has everything.

The plot, a romantic tragedy, has believable and touchable characters that retain larger-than-life images making them immortal. Violetta Valéry was a reigning glamorous courtesan during elegant Paris of the 1850s. It was a society that tolerated, read that encouraged, highly public extra-marital affairs.

Alfredo Germont, son of a wealthy and upwardly mobile family, is a typical wastrel of the time. No job or responsibility, those traits were alien to his nature, Alfredo lived the fast life of the times. He met Violetta, was totally captivated, and the rest is what makes grand opera so grand.

I stated that *La Traviata* has everything. It does, especially after Dayton Opera's stellar season opening production. Impresario Tom Bankston has added a final touch – the perfect cast.

"Bankston Magic" has long been at the center of Dayton Opera's success. For "Traviata" Tom scored

the equivalent of a "triple-double." He chose a stage director, Kathleen Clawson, who really loves opera. Her passion is communicating with the audience.

In "Traviata" her touches created real drama to complement the beautiful music and singing. The Act III ball scene is often static or confused. Clawson introduced real tension, real acting, even while the large chorus is standing still. This elevates the scene into a dramatic triumph.

The opera is the story of Violetta, her forsaken love and death from tuberculosis. Commentators have said that Verdi was in love with his alluring creation. Shana Blake Hill, beautiful and vibrant, is well-remembered for her debut as Musetta in Dayton Opera's *La Bohème*. If Verdi were alive, he would be in love with Shana; the audience certainly was.

Verdi gives Violetta some of the greatest music in the literature. He did not stint on the other stars of "Traviata" but he lavished incredible musical riches on his heroine. Shana

makes the very most of this timeless gift, singing with sheer beauty and passion.

I can predict that we are hearing one of the great Violettas of the future. Her beauty is only the beginning. Molding a vibrant voice around each vocal line, her characters are given a life of their own.

The first act, effervescent with

the glamour of a *belle fete*, gives Violetta and Alfredo arias and duets which crystallize the moment and the opera. Alfredo is played and sung by the handsome Chad Johnson in his debut.

Chad has the vocal gifts and stage persona to melt any female heart. He does, and Violetta tops the list of conquests. The familiar arias of the

first act – "Libiamo", "Un di felice", "Fors' è lui", "Sempre Libera" resonate perfectly.

The glamour also includes a stunning set, adapted from the Cincinnati Opera "Masked Ball" production and a stage full of beautifully costumed jubilant celebrants. Dayton Opera veteran, Ken Shaw, See **Graced** on page 18

DSPS peace art exhibition Oct. 22

The Dayton Society of Painters & Sculptors (DSPS) and the European organization "Artenade" are co-sponsoring an International Peace Art Exhibition, a commemorative celebration of the 14th anniversary of the Dayton Peace Accords. Aptly enough it is being held in Dayton and is the very first time this international traveling exhibition (judged at The Hague in the Netherlands) is being displayed in the United States.

The focus of the exhibit is on nonviolent solutions to foster peace and features works of art by professional, international artists communicating the theme of peace. The Opening Reception and Auction is free and open to the public and will be held on Thursday, Oct. 22 from 5-9 p.m. at the DSPS 48 High Street Gallery in Dayton. It will offer a unique opportunity to view and become owners of art crafted by professional, international artists.

The entire show is free and open to the public. Limited gallery hours, Oct. 23-Nov. 1; Thursday through Sundays, 2-7 p.m. at the 48 High Street Gallery in Dayton. Free parking in the Bomberger Center Lot across the street from the gallery.

The efforts of artists from around the world are being used to raise funds to support the Dayton Peace Museum and help the children's orphanage in Narva, Estonia.

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