

**A New Opera, Tailor-made for a Deserving Diva**

By Wynne Delacoma, *MusicalAmerica.com*

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CHICAGO—Chicago Opera Theater has become something of a Midwestern Mecca for both mezzo-soprano Frederica von Stade and composer Ricky Ian Gordon. In 2010 COT presented Von Stade in Jake Heggie's *Three Decembers*. In 2013, it mounted Gordon's *Orpheus & Euridice*, an evocative take on the Greek myth, in a vintage public natatorium. It was a smash hit.

This spring COT's ingenious General Director Andreas Mitisek has brought singer and composer together, with a luminous Von Stade starring in Gordon's newest chamber opera, *A Coffin in Egypt*, based on a play by Horton Foote. Gordon wrote the opera with Von Stade in mind as Myrtle Bledsoe, a rich, 90-year-old widow reflecting on her unhappy life in the tiny town of Egypt, Texas. In addition to the world premiere in Houston in March 2014, Von Stade has sung the opera in Los Angeles and Philadelphia. At the April 29 performance in Chicago's Harris Theater, she was entirely at home in the role. Though Myrtle moved slowly and depended on a cane, she was a compelling figure—slim and elegant, with a halo of white hair and a chic, red silk caftan that shimmered as she moved. Summoning all the rich resources of her vibrant, ringing mezzo voice, Von Stade bared the soul of a proud, bitter woman, creating a character that both chilled and broke the heart.

Though tragedy has stalked Myrtle's life—murders in the family, the deaths of her two daughters, the humiliation of a serially unfaithful husband—*A Coffin in Egypt* is an opera of gentle contours. Foote's plays are full of deeply human characters trying to make sense of the world in which they find themselves. Eschewing histrionics, everything in this production, directed by Leonard Foglia who also wrote the libretto, illuminates Myrtle's brave attempt to see her life honestly, without the comfort of an unreliable, self-serving memory.

Gordon's beautifully crafted score for nine musicians, conducted deftly by Emanuele Andrizzi, is her superb partner in this daunting task. It is a typically eclectic but cohesive Gordon mix. A quartet of singers—Kimberly E. Jones, Leah Dexter, Bernard Holcomb, and Nicholas Davis—come and go as a kind of Greek chorus, singing soothing gospel-inflected tunes and dressed in their Sunday best, circa 1970. As Myrtle remembers dancing with a dashing Army captain during World War II, the orchestra unfurls a quietly uptempo waltz.



But Von Stade soared in full-throated arias, now erupting in venomous hate for her husband and his mistresses, now awestruck by the beauty of the endless Texas prairie. Recalling the Arab sheik who adored her and the Mr. Froman who might have made her a movie star, she became a young girl, her voice juicy and languorous in Gordon's meandering melodies, her face joyful and bright.

The score never indulges in harsh dissonance simply for its own sake, but a restless undercurrent of slightly off-kilter harmonies is ever-present. Pungent phrases for solo winds or strings emerge and fade away, and melodies, though easy on the ear, rarely settle into predictable patterns. Unresolved phrases hang in the air like Myrtle's unanswered questions about her own troubled life.

The understated set by Riccardo Hernandez, who also designed the costumes, and subtle lighting by Brian Nason surrounded Von Stade and the ghosts of Myrtle's past with an evocative backdrop. She tells her story against an undulating wall splashed with hazy images of vast cotton fields. Towering stalks of tangled brown leaves hint at terminal decay, but glimpses of open sky and snowy cotton buds imply something more hopeful.

One of the pleasures of *A Coffin in Egypt* is the chance to revel in a fresh, well-told story. Opera lovers typically walk into the theater knowing the twists and turns of what the story they are about to see. That wasn't the case with *A Coffin in Egypt*; most of us didn't know how Myrtle's story would play out. We were especially attentive as we learned, via flashbacks, what happened next—that she would have taken that handsome soldier, Captain Lawson, as her lover, or that her husband would commit murder and father an illegitimate child. During stretches of spoken conversation with Myrtle, four actors—Carolyn Johnson, David Matranga, William Dwyer, and Whitney Rappano—brought her past to life, from her domineering husband (Matranga) to a gossipy store clerk (Johnson).

It is Von Stade's Myrtle, however, who lingers in the memory. Baffled by the way her life unfolded, at age 90 all too aware that happiness often resides in what she called "the moments we let pass," she was a woman struggling to put hatred and regret behind her. "If I can only get it told, finally get it told," Myrtle sang, desperately hoping that her examined life might turn out to have been one worth living. It was a privilege to listen to her "finally get it told."

Performances through May 3.