

easy high notes (but slightly metallic chest voice) and the ability to evoke emotion through tone colour. Bringing textual specificity to bear (though with somewhat ‘American’ vowels), Palmertree didn’t rewrite the role’s history but showed both accomplishment and promise. She also pulled off the most arresting Tosca leap I’ve seen since Aprile Millo’s. Palmertree worked well opposite Victor



*‘Tosca’ in Princeton, with Victor Starsky as Cavaradossi and Toni Marie Palmertree in the title role*

Starsky, less advanced in singing with legato lines and in delivering clear Italian consonants but a confident, budding spinto tenor of considerable promise. He supplied some dynamic shading, though *piano* sections—like ‘O dolci mani’—needed more. Luis Ledesma knows his way around Scarpia; this former Lescaut and Marcello went for elegance of manner and crisp utterance rather than brute force, as under pressure his voice gets tremulous. But he made his effects felt. Jacob Hanes—directed as Sciarrone repeatedly to pound Cavaradossi, motivating ‘Qual violenza’ (though doing so in Tosca’s presence made incomprehensible her initial failure to understand what Roberti and company were doing next door)—sounded healthy as the Jailer, as did Eric Delagrangé’s booming-voiced Angelotti.

DAVID SHENGOLD

## St Louis

Why get married? As a cover for pursuing other people’s spouses? Or is marriage the apotheosis of human existence, offering the blessings of conjugal love, the joys of parenthood and the foundation for personal and civic stability? For its 50th anniversary season, OPERA THEATRE OF SAINT LOUIS explored marriage as the beating heart of human love in modes ranging from cynical to sublime, frothy to melodramatic.

The anniversary was keynoted by *Die Fledermaus*—nothing if not a celebration. Though I was unable to attend this production, a video I viewed of the final dress rehearsal and an informative programme note from the director Shawna Lucey confirmed the comic approach, which retains the let’s-be-naughty spirit while updating the setting to the more relatable New York of the 1960s.

‘Whoever kisses his own wife is crazy’ is the prevailing philosophy behind all the nodding, winking, disguising and pranking. But as always, with pressured humour and forced gaiety, there is desperation behind the laughter, and whether to let it show or remain latent is the director’s choice. Lucey chose interestingly, drawing a line from the early days of Hugh Hefner’s Playboy Bunny Clubs (1959) to

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Edward Nelson as Eisenstein and Sara Gartland as Rosalinde in 'Die Fledermaus' at OTSL

Stonewall (1969). Her staging created an interesting parallel between the club scene's allure for respectable suburban types of that era and the Viennese gaiety of Strauss, in which the desperate pursuit of the next prank, party and illicit romance superseded every human value.

Musically, OTSL fielded a strong cast that I was sorry to miss, featuring Deanna Breiwick as Adele, Sara Gartland as Rosalinde and Edward Nelson as Eisenstein.

Of particular interest to this reviewer would have been the Alfred of Joshua Blue, a romantic tenor with great Italian style, who demonstrated comic flair recently as Ferrando in Detroit. (Patrons say he was hilarious as Rosalinde's irrepressible former lover.) The veteran conductor George Manahan led the able cast.

If the absence of familial relations demonstrates the decadence of operetta, *This House*—the remarkable new opera with music by Ricky Ian Gordon and a libretto by the eminent playwright Lynn Nottage and her daughter, the poet Ruby Aiyo Gerber—offers an extreme contrast. This new opera, directed by the former OTSL artistic director James Robinson and seen at the matinee on June 21, opens on a scene in Harlem's legendary Sugar Hill. A young couple—she's pregnant, he's concerned and doting—hesitate on the front stoop of the grand, dilapidated brownstone where she grew up. Generations of familial and cultural history haunt her. Relatives she hasn't seen in years wait inside.

The expectant couple see financial opportunity for all in converting the house to condominiums, but can he understand her family's reluctance? The loyalties, resentments and passions embodied in the house and its history? The need to affirm the past in the changing times? Dare they go in? Certainly not together.

When the walls of the house open to us, the complex, impassioned relations between generations past, present and future take shape, revealing a story that is epic in scope yet intensely personal. The tension between conflicting loyalties brings generations into convergence. With the living keeping company with the dead, I couldn't always track the personae—and I left the theatre with the urge to see the opera several more times to match identities to events. In the end it didn't really matter; this opera gives us the privilege of glimpsing an epochal family history through an open window, and when the details don't quite coalesce, their meanings do.



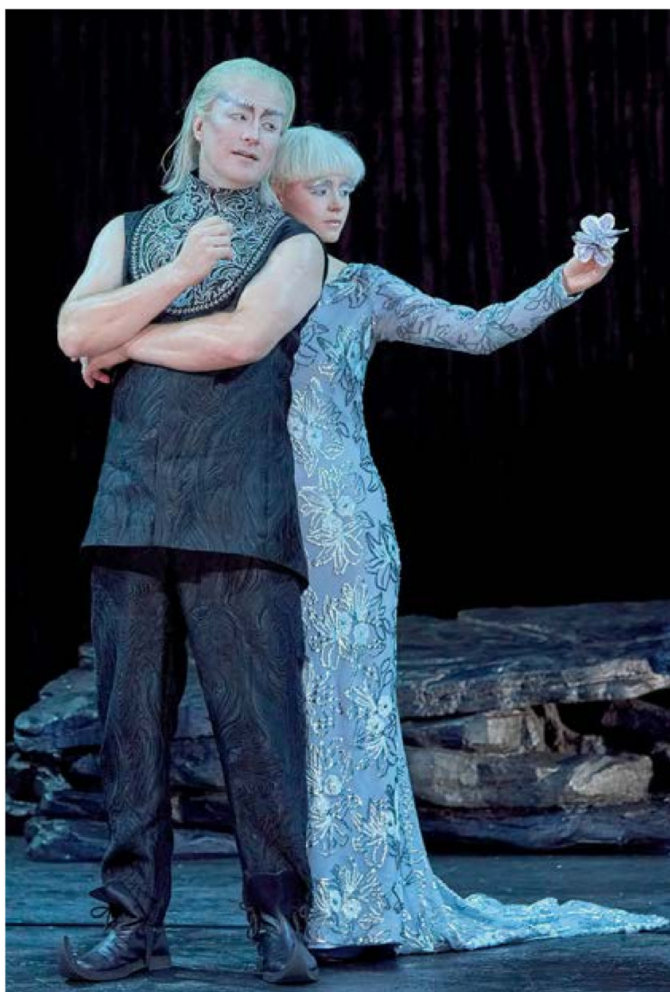
The musical performance was strong. The mezzo-soprano Briana Hunter and tenor Brad Bickhardt were audience surrogates as the sensible young couple, Zoe and Glenn, navigating the costs of urban housing with a baby on the way—a ubiquitous modern dilemma. They sang securely but gave an impression of emotional reserve that was at odds with the family’s anchor, the implacable Ida, voiced by two formidable sopranos: Brandie Inez Sutton (Young Ida) and Adrienne Danrich as the older matriarch. With emotions swirling around the self-possessed Zoe and Glenn, one could only wonder if they were merely compatible rather than swept away—especially after witnessing the tenderness shared by Zoe’s artist brother Lindon and his boyfriend, the restaurateur Thomas (played compassionately by the outstanding bass-baritone Christian Pursell), providing a foil for other love relationships. The baritone Justin Austin’s portrayal of the doomed Lindon conveyed a sense of Chekhovian melancholic inevitability I found heartbreaking to watch; his vocal finesse and dramatic ease continue to astound. Daniela Candillari conducted superbly. With the OTSL’s continuing record of premieres, she has shown the deftness of a logroller in staying on top of new music.

*This House* is the closest thing to a Great American Opera that I’ve been privileged to see—a work that should take a canonical position in American drama and music. Going beyond their collaboration in adapting her play *Intimate Apparel*, Nottage and Gordon’s partnership here resembles no other in American opera, but rather that of the composer Leoš Janáček with his dramatist sources. Gordon composes *on* the word, *on* the syllable, *on* the stress and unstress, and—most of all—on the dramatic moment. He creates a soundworld of lustrous, layered, long-lined harmonies that unexpectedly turn the corner onto new aural possibilities. With a scenario spanning the Harlem

*Briana Hunter and Brad Bickhardt as Zoe and Glenn in the premiere of ‘This House’ at OTSL*



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James Laing as Oberon and Matisse Carmick as Puck in Tim Albery's production of 'A Midsummer Night's Dream' in St Louis

Renaissance, jazz, blues, ragtime and hip-hop, one might have expected Gordon to rely on quoting musical genres. Instead, he composes from the inside out to create a unity between his notes and the librettists' words.

Gordon's style has aural allure that almost compels us to follow his harmonies wherever they go. In metropolitan settings where critics equate beauty with shallowness, his operas are all too rare. Without going into the long, corrosive journalistic history that led us here—dating back to the 1950s and '60s and the critical repudiation of Menotti and Barber—one can only hope that with *This House* the pattern will be broken.

When Benjamin Britten's opera *Peter Grimes* was premiered in 1945, its sudden, illuminating impact

was like a lightning flash, launching him from relative obscurity to global fame overnight. Fifteen years later, with Britten acknowledged as the greatest English composer since Purcell, his admirers may have shown equal surprise when the composer—known as a prickly guy with a dark worldview—chose to set *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Shakespeare's euphoric distillation of summer romance, as an opera and then delivered a score of pure enchantment.

I love this opera to bits, and I breached a critic's decorum when I attended the June 20 performance: rather than maintaining journalistic detachment, I hoped for a great performance—and I got what I wanted. But I was a nervous wreck beforehand. The reason: my need for magic.

Britten's airborne confection requires magic from beginning to end. Comparable to the E flat major orchestral rumblings that inaugurate *Das Rheingold*, the opening bars of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* enfold a hidden world. Gossamer strings plunge us immediately into Britten's enchanted forest. Our scouts were the director Tim Albery's solemn procession of seemingly ancient toddlers bobbing along like



little ETs with fairy lights twinkling in their hair. Along with Albery's lucidly blocked stage movement, they helped us track the welter of lovers in full flight and pursuit.

The hero of the performance was Leonard Slatkin, who led his orchestra in a feat combining a sensitive interpretation and extended high-wire act. The excellent OTSL orchestra draws its players from the St Louis Symphony, where Slatkin had a long, distinguished tenure as music director.

OTSL is almost infallible in casting attractive, dynamic young singers early in their careers, and in this case they fielded an ideal foursome of young lovers: the tenor Anthony León as Lysander, mezzo-soprano Jennifer Johnson Cano as Hermia, baritone Theo Hoffman as Demetrius and soprano Teresa Perrotta as Helena. However, it was in the casting of Tytania, Oberon and Puck that OTSL's choices introduced a tantalizing note of sexual ambiguity.

Britten created the role of Oberon for the creamy head tones of the countertenor Alfred Deller, but here the role was essayed by the countertenor James Laing, whose voice is far more robust and who cuts a commanding figure on stage. This Oberon was a hunk, and his gender-fluid Puck, the actor Matisse Carmack, pined desperately for him—another lover lost in the forest. Could Puck stand a chance against the regal Tytania of the soprano Jana McIntyre? They bore a physical resemblance and even rocked the same gown, but Puck's ardour seemed lost on Oberon. Maybe with the help of a little love potion?

The first opera performed in OTSL's first season was Donizetti's *buffa* masterpiece *Don Pasquale*, perhaps the most beautiful and sophisticated of all bel canto comedies. I attended the celebratory new staging on June 21. Sheri

*'Don Pasquale' at OTSL, with Susanne Burgess as Norina and Sheri Greenawald as the Notary*



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Greenawald was a pert Norina almost 50 years ago; this season she returned as the Notary in a comic turn that deepened a warm, sensitively updated production. The 26-year-old director of that first production, Christopher Alden, also returned to St Louis this summer—a half-century older (in chronological years only, his appearance and demeanour belying his age) and wiser: Alden’s new production seemed to be of indeterminate time or place, but gave more modern settings and costumes to the young lovers and more period elegance to Pasquale. A corner café—you could smell the espresso—made a comfortable vantage point for locals, the onlookers (audience members) and the quietly observant Notary. Patiently shuffling and keeping her own quiet counsel, she was the one character who understood all the others.

Beguiling music and slapstick comedy can run away with *Don Pasquale*, but Alden, trusting the composer, kept the opera’s themes well in line—so that Susanne Burgess’s Norina, displaying all the coloratura sparkle one could wish for, did not push her lines to the point of overweening self-regard or put her Ernesto, the very appealing tenor Charles Sy, in the shade. Their ally was the suavely calculating Malatesta of the baritone Kyle Miller. Kensho Watanabe conducted adroitly.

Comedy is a serious business, and more than any other Italian comic opera, *Don Pasquale* bears out the truism that comedy is sad. The opera’s climax comes when Norina, posing as Pasquale’s ‘wife’, Sofronia, slaps him—a poignant, humanizing moment that in this staging was fully realized without being overplayed. Until this moment we had known Pasquale (played to perfection by Patrick Carfizzi) as tyrannical and self-deluded; now we, and the characters around him, saw the humanity of an ageing aristocrat clinging to youth. Only our Notary saw his dilemma from the outset and understood that, to borrow a line from *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, ‘Jack shall have Jill [...] and all shall be well’.

MICHAEL CLIVE

## San Francisco

Harvey Milk was a pioneering openly gay elected official (a ‘supervisor’ in San Francisco political parlance) who was homophobically assassinated in 1978. Milk has become an icon in San Francisco history and not just gay history: Terminal 1 at San Francisco International Airport is named for him. Now there is a considerably rewritten version of the composer Stewart Wallace and librettist Michael Korie’s 1995 opera *Harvey Milk*—a revision that was co-commissioned by Opera Parallèle and Opera Theatre of Saint Louis, where it was performed in 2022.

*Harvey Milk Reimagined* arrived at OPERA PARALLÈLE in late spring at the BLUE SHIELD OF CALIFORNIA THEATER in the Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, seen on June 6. (Milk may still be an icon here, but not for Donald Trump’s regime, which is busy stripping a Navy ship of his name, even after Milk was posthumously awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom in 2009 by Barack Obama.)

It’s a good story, and it was stalwartly performed, especially by Michael Kelly as Milk, with Christopher Oglesby as Dan White, the assassin. Opera Parallèle’s