

The wonderfully noir set of *A Florentine Tragedy* showcases the twisted passions of Simone (Alan Held) and Bianca (Gun-Brit Barkmin). Photo: Chris Hutcheson.

ERIC FRIESEN

The COC *Opera Future Shop*

Moderation is a fatal thing; nothing succeeds like excess.
OSCAR WILDE

*A good hockey player plays where the puck is.
A great hockey player plays where the puck is going to be.*
WAYNE GRETZKY

FOUR years ago, the Canadian Opera Company in Toronto hired as its general director a 34-year-old German administrator whiz kid to fill the enormous shoes of the late Richard Bradshaw. Alexander Neef came to Toronto having served a priceless apprenticeship with Gerard Mortier at the Ruhrtriennale, the Salzburg Festival, the Paris Opera, and New York City Opera. But it has taken until this season to rightly judge how the COC has been re-shaped under young Mr Neef. Companies have to plan years in advance to contract singers, directors, and productions. The 2011–12 season, just completed, is the first for which Alexander Neef is entirely responsible. Judging from what we have seen these past ten months, the Neef Stamp is Eurocentric and avant-garde, and focused on updating classics and using star directors, supported by superb vocal casting, a strong Canadian singing presence, and a great orchestra.

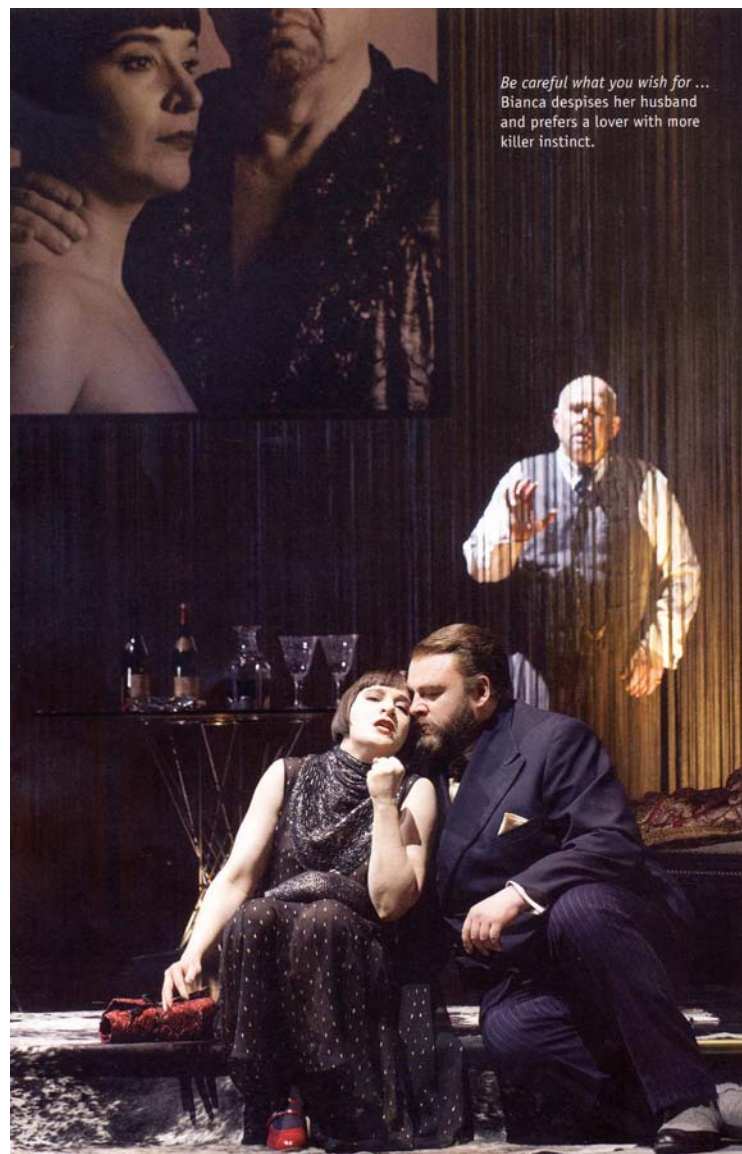
ERIC FRIESEN is a broadcaster and writer specializing in the arts. He writes regularly on music for *Queen's Quarterly*.

PERHAPS the best prism through which to view the season is this spring's double bill: a new COC production of Zemlinsky's *A Florentine Tragedy* (1917) and Puccini's *Gianni Schicchi* (1917–1918). Creating this as a double bill was a masterstroke. Both operas are set in Florence, both were written at around the same time, and yet they are also dramatically different. *A Florentine Tragedy* has the feeling of 1920s modernist noir, with a lush score redolent of late Strauss and Mahler but no memorable tunes, while *Schicchi* is an Italian romp with one of Puccini's greatest hits, "O mio babbino caro." If the audience came to hear "O mio" and to be in the familiar world of Puccini, they were first treated to something they likely had never seen or heard before: the story of an adulterous wife and cuckolded husband reuniting through the murder of the wife's lover, set in opulent, seething late-romantic orchestral music.

The star of *A Florentine Tragedy* was the COC Orchestra. This orchestra is one of the signature legacies of Richard Bradshaw who, like James Levine at the Metropolitan Opera in New York, knew that while singers sell operas and get all the good tunes, a company without a superb orchestra is like a house built on sand. Who can forget Bradshaw and his orchestra in the new pit of the Four Seasons Centre for Wagner's *Ring Cycle* in 2006? COC Music Director Johannes Debus, another young German come to be part of the company's creative leadership, has gained command of this orchestra in these post-Bradshaw years, and it is sounding better than ever. For this double bill, the maestro in the pit was a familiar figure in Toronto, but only recently at the COC: Sir Andrew Davis. For decades Andrew Davis has been conducting the Toronto Symphony, and in recent years he has been down the road at the Lyric Opera in Chicago and at the Met in New York. But, incredibly, it was only at the end of last season that he made his debut at the COC conducting *Ariadne auf Naxos*. Much credit goes to Neef for finally engaging Sir Andrew for opera in Toronto. The expanded COC orchestra, particularly the strings, never sounded better than they did on the afternoon I heard them surging and swooning through Zemlinsky's almost orgiastic score.

Both the operas in this double bill are set in Renaissance Florence, but in this COC production were made more contemporary: *Tragedy* is set in the 1920s, and *Schicchi* in the present day. I've never seen this Zemlinsky opera before, but I cannot now imagine it set in any other time than the 1920s. The soulless anomie of Simone and Bianca's Florentine house, Gun-Brit Barkmin's exaggerated Erté-style dance

250 | Queen's Quarterly



*Be careful what you wish for ...
Bianca despises her husband
and prefers a lover with more
killer instinct.*



Love will eventually triumph amidst the ruins of avarice in *Gianni Schicchi*: (left to right) Simone Osborne as Laretta, René Barbera as Rinuccio, and Alan Held as Gianni Schicchi.

sequences during the overture, the spooky, menacing interior half-light, all match pitch-perfectly Simone's harsh, high register Teutonic baritone recitatives (well done, baritone Alan Held) and the *fin-de-siècle* over-ripeness of the orchestral score. It was as if Michelangelo Antonioni had been asked to direct Richard Strauss' *Salome*. Thank you, director Catherine Malfitano, set designer Wilson Chin, and costume designer Terese Wadden.

To me, *Gianni Schicchi* was a triumph for the COC's Ensemble Studio, where young Canadian singers spend one to three years honing their craft, singing small and occasionally "B" cast roles on the main stage, mingling with the international stars, and mounting their own productions from time to time. No less than seven singers in the *Schicchi* cast were either current members or

graduates of the COC Ensemble Studio and really held their own with the imported stars.

The 25-year-old Vancouver soprano Simone Osborne, singing her first "A" cast major role, was absolutely wonderful as Laretta, Gianni Schicchi's daughter, who desperately wants to marry Rinuccio. She is the young innocent in a cast of mostly greedy, grasping relatives who care only about getting their share of the dead Buoso Donati's rich estate. The climactic musical moment in the opera comes when young Laretta turns to her father and sings to him of her love for Rinuccio, "O mio babbino caro." Not only does it, for the moment, bring all the feuding and manic plotting onstage to a halt, but it is also one of the great hits of Italian opera. Ms Osborne sang it her way, and I would say Puccini's way, with an affecting, sweet simplicity, so unlike the great golden hit approach of sopranos in recital. It was a revelation of hearing a popular aria in context, and of hearing the aria serve the drama, the story, rather than the ego of the soprano.

Singers from the Ensemble Studio fed a lot of the other productions as well, and this development marks something new and important in the life of Canadian opera. As Montreal artistic director Richard Turp



A family's manic greed and comic scheming fuel Puccini's glorious music in *Gianni Schicchi*. This production represents a triumph for the company's Ensemble Studio.

told me recently: "what the COC is doing is letting singers develop here in Canada and *then* go to Europe, and not necessarily the other way around."

The 2011–12 season was shot through with some of our finest Canadian singers. Soprano Adrienne Pieczonka sang the title role in *Tosca*. The entire cast of *Love from Afar* was Canadian: baritone Russell Braun was Jaufré Rudel; soprano Erin Wall sang the role of Clémence, and Krisztina Szabó was the eerie Pilgrim. Russell Braun also starred as Orestes in *Iphigenia in Tauris*, and Erin Wall was heard again later in the season as Antonia in *Tales of Hoffman*. In fact the Offenbach opera was also full of Canadians, including baritone John Relyea as the Four Villains, mezzo Lauren Segal as the Muse, and soprano Andriana Chuchman as Olympia. All of the women in the cast of *Semele* were Canadian: Jane Archibald as Semele, Allyson McHardy as Juno, and Katherine Whyte as Iris. Tenor Joseph Kaiser

was a notable Pylades in *Iphigenia*, and baritone Phillip Ens (Sparafucile) and Robert Pomakov (Count Monterone) were some of the memorable lower voices in *Rigoletto*. There's no question we are in a golden age of Canadian operatic singing right now, and it was on full display this year on the Four Seasons stage.

FOR the most part, the critics have praised the season's productions. The near rapturous notices for Kaija Saariaho's *Love from Afar* created a buzz in Toronto that made a very contemporary opera succeed at the box office (90 percent houses). Robert Carsen's production of *Iphigenia*, and Susan Graham in the title role, also brought mostly kudos. The one exception was Handel's *Semele*, whose production (not the singing) was almost universally condemned. Arthur Kaptainis, critic for the *National Post*, declared the COC's *Semele* "the most ludicrous spectacle ever mounted under the aegis of the once-proud COC, a national embarrassment ..."

The audience, however, seemed to disagree, and the COC published lots of tweets and emails that effectively countered the bad notices. I was actually heartened by the bad reviews. To me it means that the COC is doing something right. They are taking risks and pushing the reputation of the company beyond the bounds of Canadian respectability. A main Canadian opera stage is provoking the city, connecting with the artistic avant-garde, and aligning itself with the sensibility of younger opera fans and potential young opera goers. The COC's production of *Semele* was challenging the oft-sacred approach we give the classics of the past, and at the same time revealing the river of sex (in William Boyd's vivid phrase) that runs beneath the tradition of baroque opera. Of course in taking bold risks an opera company will sometimes fail; a production may crash and burn; it may offend the core audience, maybe even cause scandal. But better that than an outlay of safe conventionality which will drain the artistic life out of an art form in no time. A *National Post* reader, Rosalind Robertson of Toronto, responding to the Kaptainis review, put it very well in her letter to the editor:

Unlike reviewer Arthur Kaptainis, I genuinely enjoyed how the Canadian Opera Company's (COC) production of Handel's *Semele* fully embraced the bawdy libretto and the general raunchiness of the baroque period. I may have not liked every element, but I enjoyed most of what your local critic has pronounced a national embarrassment.





Simone (Alan Held) learns to be the kind of man his wife can love.

It is clear Mr. Kaptainis and I have wildly different tastes. He likes his baroque opera like a pretty Fragonard painting, and I like solid musical execution with a creative understanding of the flagrant sexuality of the period. *Semele* easily surpassed my expectations on both points... [He] wishes the sacred operatic gates be shackled, and I can't think up a faster way for opera to die.

I will happily see anything COC general director Alexander Neef chooses to show me. I might be offended but I certainly won't be bored, which, for me, is the worst offense a production can commit ...

A new and vital chapter has opened in the life of the COC, and while change always irks some of the faithful, the company could still report an average attendance for each performance of 91 percent. That's a truly heartening affirmation for the road ahead. Beyond the statistics, however, it's exciting to see how many young people fill the Four Seasons Centre for each performance. They are clearly responding to the new vision, and under Alexander Neef's leadership, that new vision is crystal clear. The COC, the sixth largest company in North America, has turned its face to Europe, rather than south to the United States. It is also embracing the multi-ethnic character of its home city, drawing on Canada's best singing and directing talents, and is unafraid of taking artistic or even moral risks.

The one challenge Alexander Neef has not yet embraced is the commitment to stage a new opera by a Canadian composer and librettist, or to resurrect one from the company's past. He doesn't seem very keen on it right now, but perhaps this will come with time and encouragement from the Canadian friends he trusts.

FORMER Governor General Adrienne Clarkson, who has loved opera since she was child, is a huge fan of the Neef regime at the COC. "He has brought the most fantastic push to opera in Toronto," she told me. "He's the right age and the right person for the COC now. He's young and resilient, confident in the very best way. He's brought a real vigour to the company, and his financial management is sound. He has a great knowledge of singers all over the world, of knowing where their careers are going, for casting them in the right way. And he brought back director Robert Carsen, Canada's genius, who had flourished abroad. We're in very good hands with him." 