



MUSIC NEWS & REVIEWS OCTOBER 12, 2016 11:41 AM

'La Bohème' to romance SLO opera lovers



Starring in Opera San Luis Obispo's production of "La Bohème," front row, Jennie Litster, Kathryn Gunnink, Nathan Granner, and back row from left, Babatunde Akinboboye, John Viscardi, Sergey Khalikulov, Gabriel Vamulescu and Jim Seeber (Benoit). At center is Brian Asher Alhadeff, Opera San Luis Obispo artistic director. **Laura Dickinson** - ldickinson@thetribunenews.com



BY SARAH LINN

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Brian Asher Alhadeff still shudders when he thinks of the time he shelled out \$220 to see a minimalist production of "Madama Butterfly."



"The curtain went up and there was nothing on the stage. Nothing. I was thinking to myself, 'Oh my god, I have to get through the next two hours of this with my imagination only,'" quipped Alhadeff, the artistic director of [Opera San Luis Obispo](#).



He's determined never to put Central Coast audience members through the same ordeal.

That's why Opera San Luis Obispo is teaming up with a number of local performing arts groups to present a fully-fledged production of "[La Bohème](#)" this weekend. One of the most celebrated works in the classical music canon, Giacomo Puccini's opera features a picturesque period setting, a lushly romantic plot and a swoon-worthy score.

Alhadeff described "La Bohème" as the perfect way to cap off Opera San Luis Obispo's 30th season. The company started its anniversary celebration in March with a gala concert featuring famous opera arias, choruses and more.

"Every opera I choose for the community, I look for it to ... serve as an artistic picture of our community," Alhadeff said, adding that "La Bohème" offers plenty of opportunities to showcase local talent. "We can do this in grand fashion here, while at the same time branching out with new collaborations."

Set in Paris circa 1830, "La Bohème" pairs Puccini's music with an Italian-language libretto by Luigi Illica and Giuseppe Giacosa. (They based the story on Henri Murger's "A Vie de Bohème," a French collection of short stories.) The opera premiered in Turin, Italy, in 1896.

"This is an opera about people who have chosen to have their art be their faith. They live this existence because they believe in it so much," explained director [Heather Mathews](#), who made her Opera San Luis Obispo debut last fall as the director of "[Cavalleria Rusticana](#)" and "[Pagliacci](#)." "That means giving up a lot in life but you get to live for the craft of whatever your art is."

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The quartet of artists at the center of “La Bohème” are poet Rodolfo ([Nathan Granner](#)), painter Marcello ([John Viscardi](#)), philosopher Colline ([Gabriel Vamvulescu](#)) and musician Schanard ([Babatunde Akinboboye](#)). They share a threadbare garret owned by philandering landlord Benoit (Opera San Luis Obispo board member Jim Seeber).

When a neighbor knocks on their door seeking a light for her candle, Rodolfo instantly falls for the lovely Mimi ([Katharine Gunnink](#)).

The two soon start a passionate affair — one that serves as a contrast to the love triangle between Marcello, his on-again, off-again girlfriend, singer Musetta ([Jennie Litster](#)), and her wealthy and elderly admirer, Alcindoro (Sergey Khalikulov). But poverty, and Mimi’s worsening illness, conspire to keep Rodolfo and Mimi apart.

For “La Bohème,” Alhadeff has assembled a creative team that includes choreographer [Andrew Silvaggio](#), artistic director of [Civic Ballet San Luis Obispo](#), and set designer Richard Adamson, stage and technical director at [California Opera Association](#) in Fresno. The rest of the crew includes chorus master Paul Osborne, costume designer [Randon Pool](#), lighting designer Nathan Deack and stage manager Justine Prado.

Also participating in the production are the [Central Coast Children’s Choir](#), [Deyo Dances](#) and [Studio @-Ryan’s American Dance](#).

Although Opera San Luis Obispo’s production of “La Bohème” adds a ballet, Alhadeff and Mathews described it as an otherwise traditional take on the opera. For instance, it sticks to the original time frame of 1830.

“I fancy the opera house as being a time machine — but not the kind where you step in and you go to another place and you walk around in that time,” Alhadeff said. “The curtain is a window that opens up to a place, a time, a theme, an idea.”

That’s why he enjoys presenting productions that are as close to the creators’ original vision as possible.

“These pieces have been successful for years now — many, many years. I like to think that the reason why they’re successful is they were home runs in a certain style to begin with.”

Still, he acknowledged, “There are some modern updates that have been really effective.”

They include the rock musical “[Rent](#),” which opened on Broadway in 1996, and the 2001 movie “[Moulin Rouge!](#)” Australian filmmaker [Baz Luhrmann](#)’s 2002 Broadway production of “[La Bohème](#)” kept the original score and libretto but updated the setting to the late 1950s.

Alhadeff, who’s tackling “La Bohème” for the third time, remarked on “how this piece has (woven) itself into pop culture so beautifully,” with references in everything from “Moonstruck” to “Awakenings.”

“This is a perfect piece,” said Mathews, who’s been involved in past productions of “La Bohème” as a director and a singer. “There are only some operas where, after experiencing the work as a singer or a director, you think there isn’t a measure you would change.

“Literally from the moment you start to listen it to the moment the curtain drops in Act Four, it’s sublime. Every moment is lovely.”

Plus, she added, “It can be repeated and it never gets old. You just discover another layer of it.”

According to Alhadeff, “La Bohème” is the first in a series of operatic greatest hits in store for Central Coast audiences.

Coming next season are Opera San Luis Obispo productions of another Puccini opera, “[Madama Butterfly](#),” and “[The Pirates of Penzance](#),” which features music by Arthur Sullivan and a libretto by W.S. Gilbert. (The latter is a collaboration with [Cal Poly Student Opera Theatre](#).)

2018 will bring “[Carmen](#)” and “[Oklahoma!](#)” Alhadeff is also collaborating with Civic Ballet on the ballet “[Sleeping Beauty](#),” slated for 2018.

“We want to build brand-name recognition with the community (so) that they’ll begin to trust our product,” Alhadeff explained. “The goal, within 10 years, is to see this company on the path to be an opera destination nationally.”

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