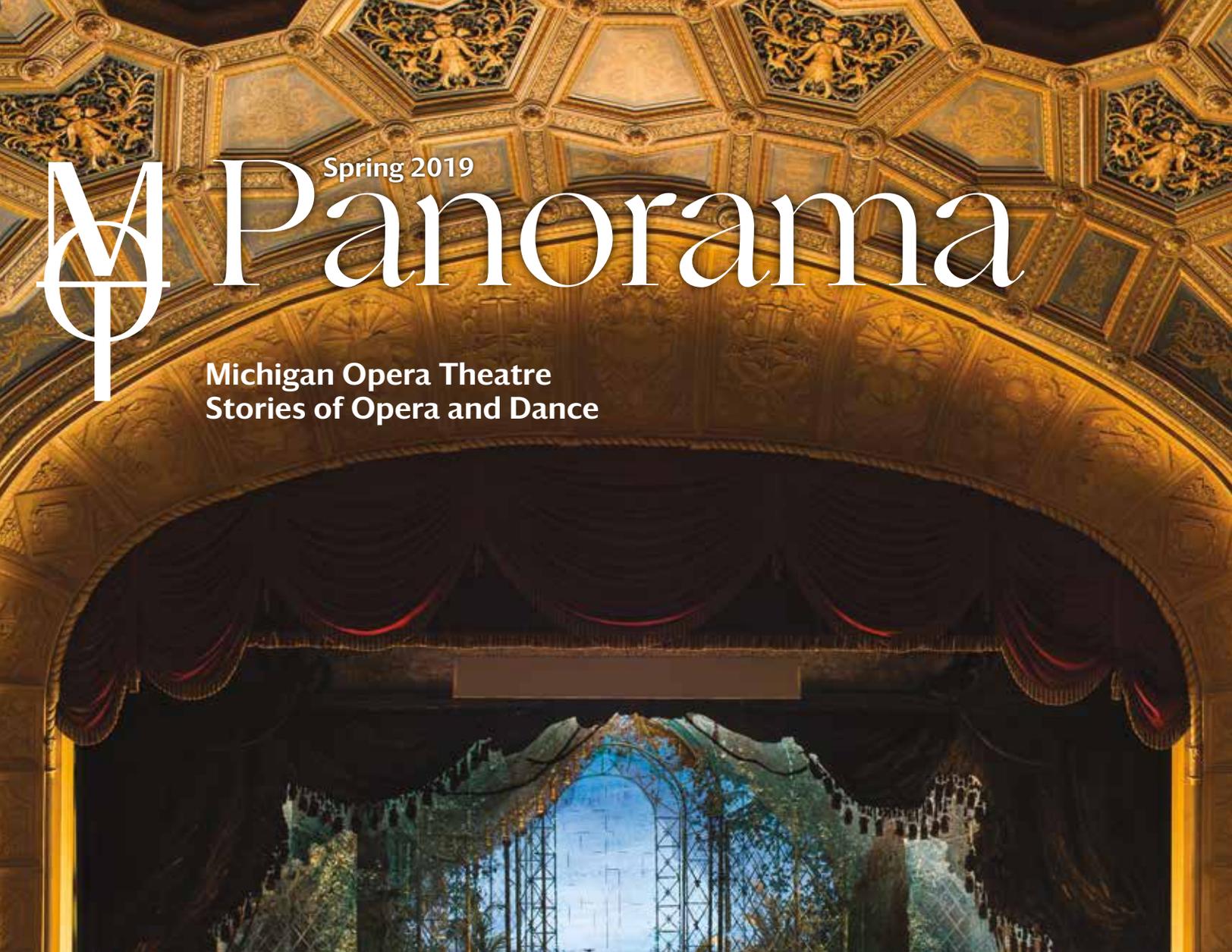




Spring 2019

# Panorama

Michigan Opera Theatre  
Stories of Opera and Dance



## Alessandra Ferri: A Prima Ballerina Assoluta Defined

Italian dancer Alessandra Ferri, at 55, has enjoyed a ballet career longer than most. The renowned ballerina has performed with the world's most prestigious companies including the Royal Ballet, American Ballet Theatre and La Scala Theatre Ballet, as well as with the best choreographers and dancers in the industry.

"Ballet is not my job, it's not my life," Ferri said. "Being a ballerina is my DNA."

DNA or not, a long, successful career is not the only thing that sets Ferri apart from other dancers. She is also one of the few to be designated as a *prima ballerina assoluta*.

While many are familiar with the term *prima ballerina*, when it comes to a *prima ballerina assoluta*, the title can be as rare as its recipients. *Prima ballerina* literally translates to "first ballerina" from Italian and, in the United States, is better known as someone who is a female principal dancer. These dancers are the best in their companies who perform the lead roles in ballets, along with their male counterparts. Translating to "absolute first ballerina," a *prima ballerina assoluta* is the best of the best, a title so rare that only 11 women have held this honor since it was first recorded in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

"*Prima ballerina assoluta* is given to those whose art exuberates a level of achievement in their interpretation of characters and fame," said Marco Pelle, resident choreographer with New York Theatre Ballet and a director and

(continued)



photo: Nicolay Krusser

Alessandra Ferri: *A Prima Ballerina Assoluta* Defined (continued)

frequent choreographer with Michigan Opera Theatre. "They have to have an incredible personality on stage to have been awarded this title."

The history of the term goes back to the late 1800s with renowned French dancer and choreographer Marius Petipa. Considered to be one of the most influential ballet masters in ballet history, Petipa is known for choreographing the now iconic dances in ballets like *Swan Lake*, *The Sleeping Beauty* and *Giselle*. Petipa bestowed the first recorded use of the title to Italian ballerina Pierina Legnani in 1894, whom he considered to be the best in her generation. Legnani was renowned for her perfection of technique and execution, reputed to be the first dancer to perform 32 *fouetté* turns in a row, a difficult feat requiring a dancer to use their leg to whip themselves around in a circle.

But impressive turns are not what defines a *prima ballerina assoluta*. In fact, there are no definitive regulations on who may hold the title or who has the authority to bestow it. In fact, after Legnani, her contemporary Mathilde Kschessinska received the title from the Imperial Russian Court, a move Petipa attempted to block, considering Legnani to be the superior dancer.

"Most of them have been named after performing at high international level, above the rest of the prima ballerinas as a result of public and critical opinion," said Sergey Rayevskiy, artistic director of Ballet Detroit."

Since its inception, the title has been awarded by both ballet companies and the government, oftentimes the latter sanctioning the decision of the former. It is not used in the United States but has been awarded by

companies including the Mariinsky Ballet, Bolshoi Ballet, Kirov Ballet, Royal Ballet and, in the case of Ferri, La Scala Theatre Ballet in Milan. Awarding governments have included the Soviet Union/Russia, South Africa, the Senate of Berlin and the Queen of England.

With Ferri, Pelle said she goes beyond dancing a role, she becomes the role.

"You don't see Alessandra, you see the character she's portraying, you see the feeling, you don't see steps," he said. "You might have your own idea of Giselle or Juliet, but when you see her, you just see Juliet, or Giselle or Carmen; you have an insight to who they are inside."

When it comes to her signature roles, Ferri said she dances them well because she identifies with the characters and the choreography.

"The choreography suits you so well that it permits you to embody that role," she said. "It's not just an idea you have to embody through the choreography, it has to suit you. It's very hard to interpret something, if you have to be concentrated on the technical parts."

While honored by the title, Ferri said its largest impact has been giving her a sense of maturity as an artist and increasing her confidence on stage.

"I haven't lost touch with the magic of when I dance, so I'm never bored of it," she said. "I have total openness and courage and can be totally myself on stage."

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**ALESSANDRA FERRI: ART OF THE PAS DE DEUX**  
**FEBRUARY 16, 2019**

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# Inside Candide: Voltaire's Attack on Optimism

Voltaire's comedic work *Candide* has been a long-time favorite for opera and musical theater fans alike. Composed by Leonard Bernstein, whose centenary was marked in August, the music straddles the line between the two genres. Like his other works including *West Side Story* and *On the Town*, the music is bright and upbeat, though in a style that explores the limits of the human voice with higher notes, more expansive ranges and a significant amount of vocal gymnastics.

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*"There are a great number of comic elements in it, but, in the end, it is full of heart and humanity..."*

*- Stephen Lord, Michigan Opera Theatre  
Principal Conductor*

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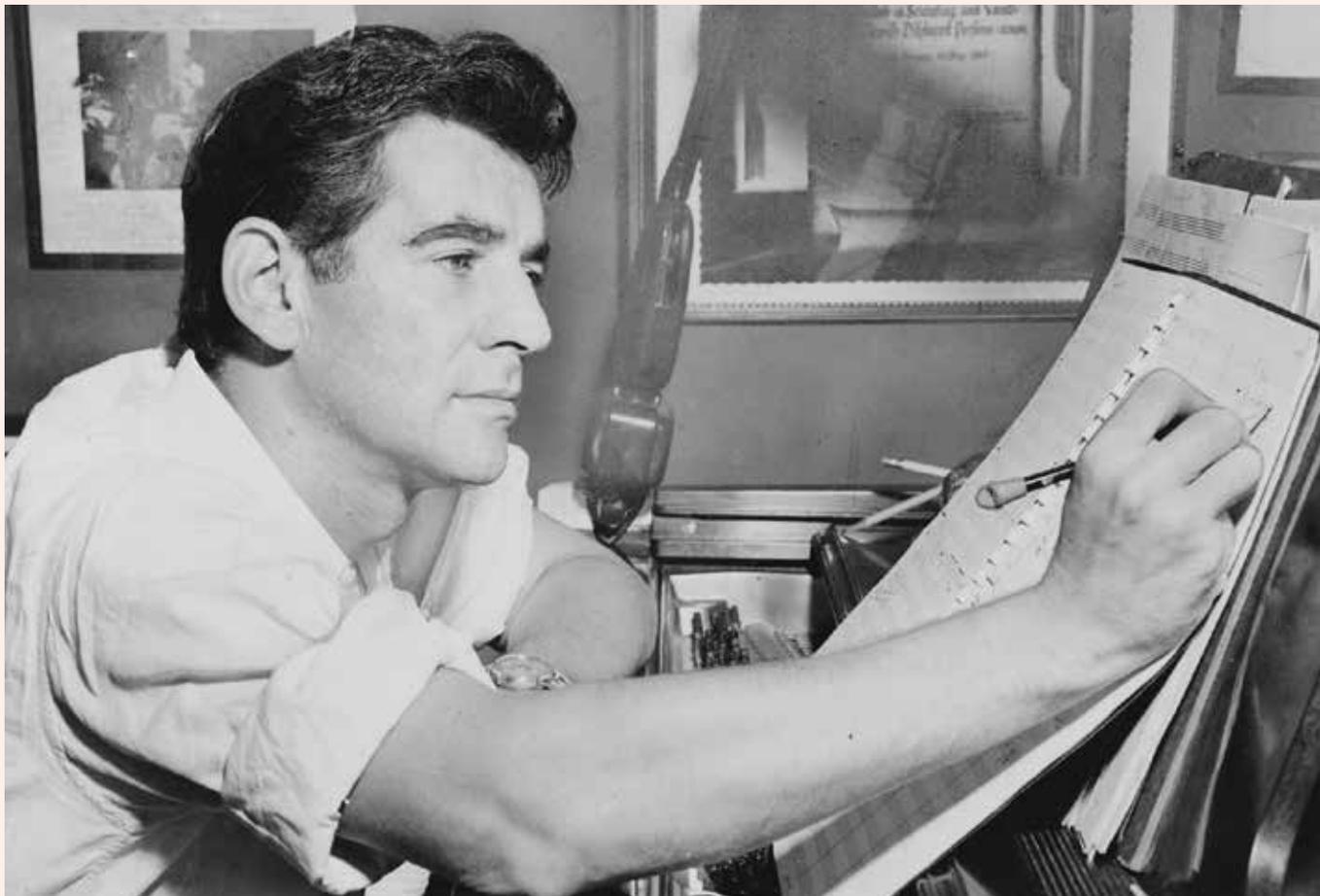
But beneath its shiny surface is a satire that challenges the concept of optimism and tests the limits of "looking on the bright side."

"The notion that everything was for the best, no matter what evils and tragedies befell a community, was preposterous to Voltaire," said *Candide* Director Keturah Stickann. "So he employed a wide-eyed Everyman - Candide - to go from tragedy to tragedy until he came to the same conclusion."

The plot follows the life of the young man and a cast of characters that includes his love interest Cunégonde, his foe Maximilian, the maid Paquette and their professor Doctor Pangloss, who teaches them that this world is the best of all possible worlds as it is the only world we have.

But within the course of two hours, the characters face, in no short order: War, murder, rape, theft, illness and natural disaster. It also features the constant resurrection of its cast, who never stay dead despite repeated attempts to kill them.

*(continued)*



Purchase tickets online for CANDIDE at [MichiganOpera.org](https://MichiganOpera.org) or call 313.237.7464

Inside Candido: Voltaire's Attack on Optimism (*continued*)

"There are a great number of comic elements in it, but, in the end, it is full of heart and humanity," said Michigan Opera Theatre Principal Conductor Stephen Lord. "We - performers and audience alike - learn a tremendous amount about the human condition with some laughs and tears along the way."

The work premiered in 1956 with Bernstein seeing parallels in the story between 20<sup>th</sup>-century problems and those of Voltaire's time 200 years prior.

"Voltaire's satire is international," he wrote in a 1956 article in the New York Times. "It throws light on all the dark places...Puritanical snobbery, phony moralism, inquisitorial attacks on the individual, brave-new-world optimism, essential superiority - aren't these all charges leveled against American society by our best thinkers? And they are also the charges made by Voltaire against his own society."

Despite the heaviness of the material, the tone of *Candide* is anything but. With musical gems like "You Were Dead You Know," "Make Our Garden Grow" and "Glitter and Be Gay," the songs continuously poke fun at the dire circumstances of the story, challenging the characters to keep their chins up as the world falls apart around them.

"Candide travels the world, experiences so much pain, fear and loss, and in the midst of it all, is continually reunited with his love," Stickann said. "In the end, he rejects both optimism and pessimism for a more measured view of the world and his (our) place in it. This is the central theme of the piece: finding that balance means starting at home. "

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**CANDIDE**  
**MARCH 9 - 17, 2019**

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## A Cultural Icon Marks its 60<sup>th</sup> Anniversary



Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater, a favorite among local audiences, has been performing regularly at the Detroit Opera House since Michigan Opera Theatre's second dance series in 1998. In addition to being their 12<sup>th</sup> visit to the Opera House, this season the company marks its 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary, celebrating a history of pushing boundaries, defining modern dance and inspiring personal reflection.

Founded by Alvin Ailey in 1958, the company's work celebrates the uniqueness of the African-American cultural experience and the preservation and enrichment of the American modern dance heritage. From works championing Civil Rights, like *R-evolution*, *Dream*, inspired by speeches from Martin Luther King Jr., to an ode to Southern gospel churches in *Revelations*, Alvin Ailey both explores African-American experiences and shares the culture with the larger world.

"These are really honest explorations of Alvin Ailey's experience as a black person in this country," said Debra Bernstein-Siegel, a dance professor at Oakland University and an MOT Trustee, "the good, the bad and the ugly."

Born in rural Texas in 1931, Ailey grew up in poverty during a period of intense racial segregation and violence against African-Americans, experiences that would later be reflected in his creative work. His mother moved them to Los Angeles when he was 12, where he was introduced to dance. He studied and performed with Lester Horton, founder of one of the first racially-integrated dance companies in the United States, where he trained in styles ranging from classical ballet to Native American



photo: Andrew Eccles

Dance. Following Horton's death in 1953, Ailey took over the company and began choreographing his own works. When he founded his own company five years later, he had a vision of preserving the African-American cultural experience through modern dance.

Though Ailey himself choreographed nearly 80 works for his company, more than 90 choreographers have contributed to its repertory, which now includes more than 235 works.

"Alvin Ailey started the company to provide a place for his friends to dance, but it was always a repertory company," Bernstein-Siegel said. "He was always bringing in white choreographers and brown choreographers, it wasn't just his stuff. It transcends boundaries, it's just about human beings dancing."

Within the United States, Alvin Ailey's accolades have reached far and wide. The founder received a Presidential Medal of Freedom and the Kennedy Center Honor for Lifetime Contribution to American Culture. He also received the NAACP's Spingarn Award for an outstanding achievement by an African-American and the Samuel H. Scripps American Dance Festival Award for a lifetime contribution to American modern dance.

Internationally, the company has been an American ambassador since its earliest years. In 1962, Alvin Ailey was chosen to go on an extensive tour of the Far East, Southeast Asia and Australia as part of President John F. Kennedy's progressive "President's Special International Program for Cultural Presentations." Since then, the company has taken numerous tours across the world, including a 10 country tour of Africa in 1967 and a tour of North Africa and Europe in 1970. In 1985, Alvin Ailey became the first modern dance company to go on a U.S.

government-sponsored tour of the People's Republic of China since the normalization of Sino-American relations. In 2008, a U.S. Congressional resolution designated the company as "a vital American cultural ambassador to the world."

Bernstein-Siegel said the company's global appeal is its exploration of humanity, beyond the African-American experience.

"Anybody who felt enslaved or under somebody else's thumb can relate to that feeling," she said. "They were Ambassadors for America trying to be better, that we were trying to understand and be better human beings through dance."

As part of their 60<sup>th</sup> anniversary tour, the company commissioned their first two-act ballet, *Lazarus*, which celebrates the life of their founder with a work inspired by his own experiences. It examines Civil Rights through time and questions how much has changed or hasn't changed since Ailey formed his company in the late 50s. It is the third in a series of works by acclaimed hip-hop choreographer Rennie Harris, following *Home*, about the club culture around AIDS, and *Exodus*, about police brutality and activism.

In an interview with the New York Times, Harris said *Lazarus* is about resurrection and Ailey's continual influence on different generations.

"He's still affecting folk: black, brown, white, indifferent, whatever," he said. "He's still affecting the world on a massive scale."

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**ALVIN AILEY AMERICAN DANCE THEATER**  
**MARCH 15 - 17, 2019**

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# Hansel & Gretel: Puppets Add Fantasy to Classic Fairy Tale

It's a tale as old as time. A young brother and sister are driven from their poverty-stricken family to fend for themselves in the woods, only to be nearly eaten by a witch who lives in a gingerbread house. In the opera, *Hansel & Gretel* presents the classic Grimm's fairytale in Grand Opera style, including a few new characters and set to folk music-inspired themes by composer Engelbert Humperdinck. With Michigan Opera Theatre's production, *Hansel & Gretel* takes the fantasy to a whole new level - with puppets.

"Whether that be a giant witch or a tree or just a piece of fabric, the craft of puppetry is the magic of making something come alive on stage," said director and master puppeteer Basil Twist.

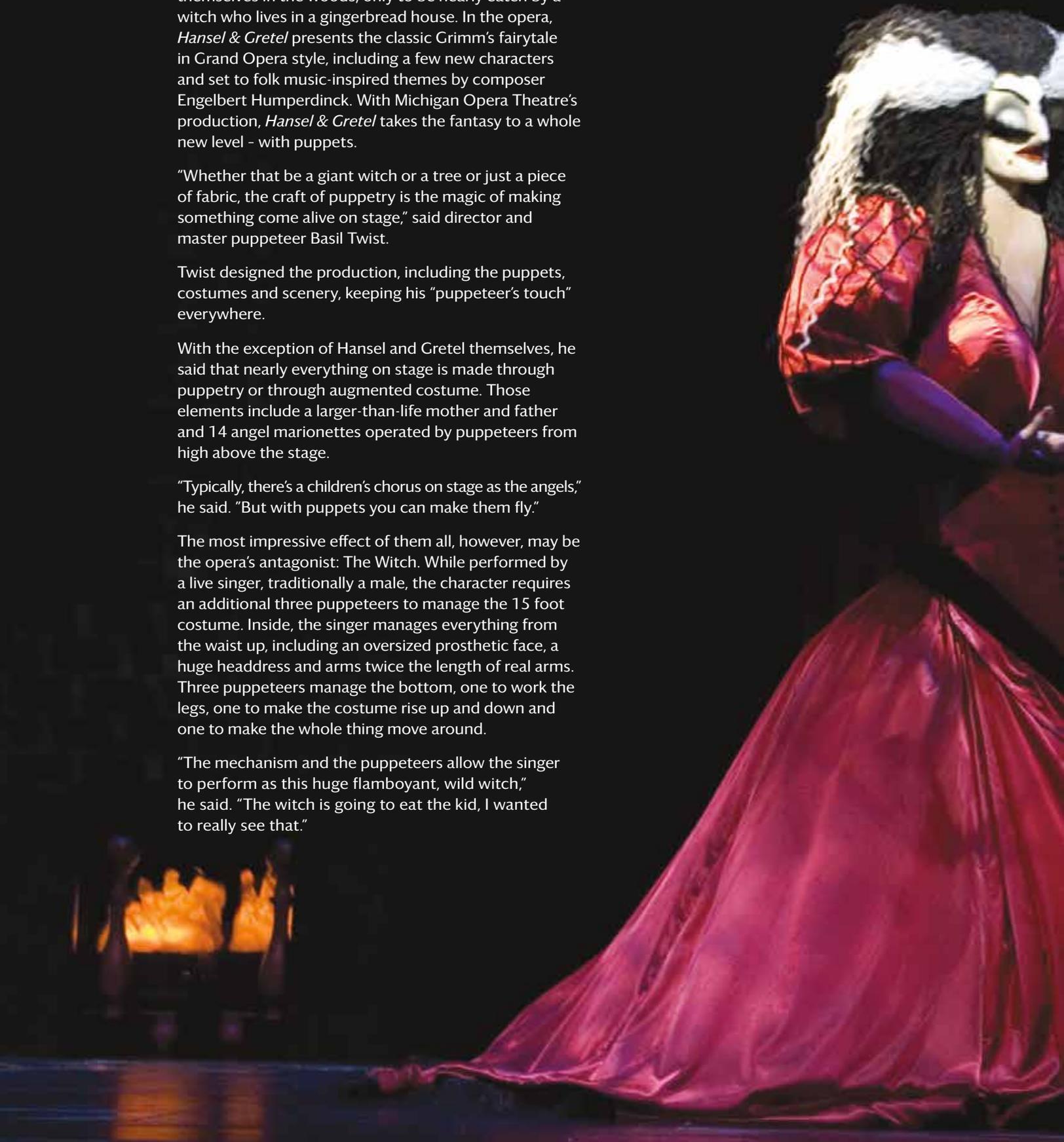
Twist designed the production, including the puppets, costumes and scenery, keeping his "puppeteer's touch" everywhere.

With the exception of Hansel and Gretel themselves, he said that nearly everything on stage is made through puppetry or through augmented costume. Those elements include a larger-than-life mother and father and 14 angel marionettes operated by puppeteers from high above the stage.

"Typically, there's a children's chorus on stage as the angels," he said. "But with puppets you can make them fly."

The most impressive effect of them all, however, may be the opera's antagonist: The Witch. While performed by a live singer, traditionally a male, the character requires an additional three puppeteers to manage the 15 foot costume. Inside, the singer manages everything from the waist up, including an oversized prosthetic face, a huge headdress and arms twice the length of real arms. Three puppeteers manage the bottom, one to work the legs, one to make the costume rise up and down and one to make the whole thing move around.

"The mechanism and the puppeteers allow the singer to perform as this huge flamboyant, wild witch," he said. "The witch is going to eat the kid, I wanted to really see that."



Twist created the costume in partnership with the Jim Henson Company to make his original design come to life, who he said are the best people to work with in the industry.

"They were excited to do something out there with me, because I tend to do somewhat out there stuff," he said.

Though based on a children's story, Twist said *Hansel &*

*Gratel* is not directed at kids, though it is accessible to them. He said the performance is still a Grand Opera with incredible music, and that everyone can love puppets.

"Puppets should not turn adults off to the shows," he said. "They should turn adults on to puppetry."

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**HANSEL & GRETEL**  
**APRIL 6 - 14, 2019**

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photo: Ken Howard

# The Grapes of Wrath: Transforming The Great American Novel into The Great American Opera

While historically a European art form, opera has expanded over the years to include works by composers and librettists from around the globe. These operas explore a broader range of human experiences, including American stories ranging from Civil Rights to baseball to life in Appalachia, often sung in English.

In *The Grapes of Wrath* opera, composed by Ricky Ian Gordon with a libretto by Michael Korie, John Steinbeck's Great American Novel is turned into the Great American Opera.

In the midst of the Dust Bowl and the Great Depression, the story follows the Joad family on their quest for survival, traveling from drought-ridden Oklahoma to the farms of California. Along with hordes of other migrant workers, the Joads struggle to find work and living wages, constantly facing starvation and injustice.

Korie said the novel explores themes of corporate indifference and the failure of the American dream.

"When people see the opera, they're bowled over how true it is, even though it took place 90 years ago," he said. "You realize these themes are cyclical in America. Inequities you believe to be resolved turn out not to be."

"It's an accrual of incidents that are unbroken and supported by constant music, so it grabs hold of you and doesn't let go," he said. "When you read a novel you can say, 'This is too much, I need a rest, I'll come back to it.' With the opera, you can't come in and out of it, you're swept up in the whirlwind."

This is not the first adaptation of the novel, which also includes a film in 1940 and a play in 1990. But Korie said the opera is unique in that it can provide more context to the story. He said the novel includes documentary-like background chapters, which provide insight into the larger plight of the farmers outside of the characters. While these chapters are largely omitted from other interpretations, Korie said the opera is able to convey these chapters through use of the chorus, reminiscent of ancient Greek choruses, and inserting the primary characters.

The prologue of the opera, based on the first chapter of the book which provides background information on the drought and the Dust Bowl, is presented by the principal characters mingled in among the chorus. Another example dramatizes the middle Joad brother, Al, buying a lemon of a used truck, reinvented from

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*"When you read a novel you can say, 'This is too much, I need a rest, I'll come back to it.' With the opera, you can't come in and out of it, you're swept up in the whirlwind."* - Michael Korie

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Gordon said the novel is significant, because its themes resonate worldwide, even though it is an American story.

"The story is about people who have very little who are asked to give it up by the people who have a lot. Those who have nothing give their bodies and their kindness and generosity, while those who exploit them live off of their sacrifices," he said. "The story is current, universal and biblical."

Korie said *The Grapes of Wrath* opera offers a compelling perspective on the work, because it is experienced in one sitting.

Steinbeck's background chapter on how car lot dealers took advantage of desperate migrants.

"It's a more complete *Grapes of Wrath* than the play or the film," he said.

Novel, opera or otherwise, Gordon said one of the glories and tragedies of *The Grapes of Wrath* is its utter and extreme resonance at this moment in time.

"People never change. There are always kind and compassionate people and always exploitative people." He said. "It's the story of mankind."

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**THE GRAPES OF WRATH**  
**MAY 11 - 19, 2019**

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photo: Nicolay Krusser

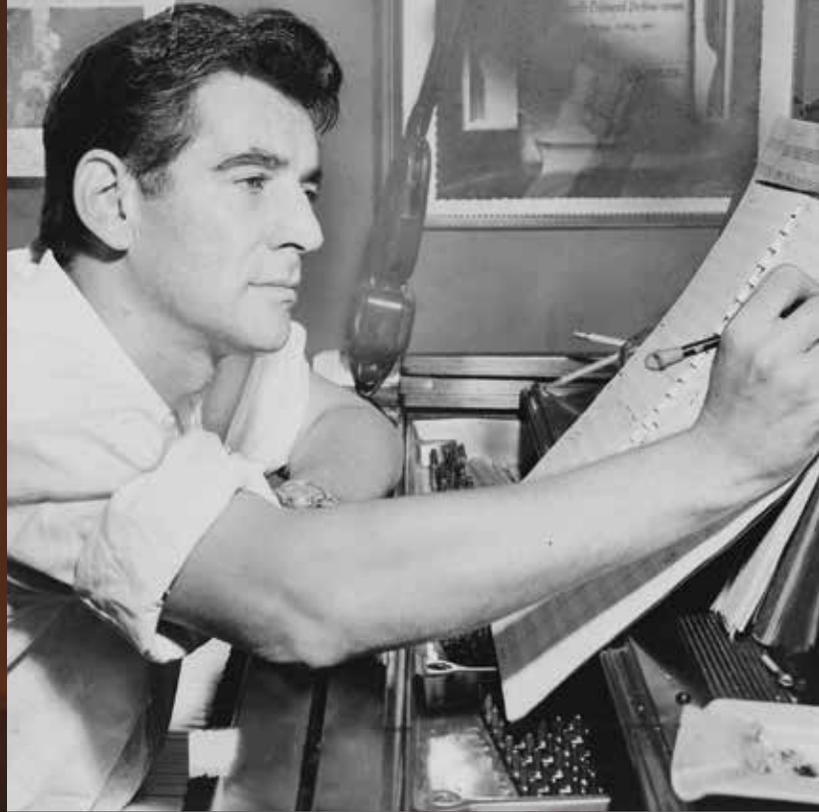


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