



Opera Untucked

Begun as a geologist's labor of love, West Edge Opera company is a cultural gem.

By Steven Winn

The Meta Opera: Heather Buck and Hadleigh Adams in *Quartett*, in which they play characters from *Les liaisons dangereuses* playing other characters.

CORY WEAVER

Music director Jonathan Khuner '70, M.A. '73, has been a shaping force for West Edge Opera company since the mid-1980s, when he began conducting for this vibrant troupe.

In his choice of repertoire, his own tastes and uncompromising outlook helped define the company's aesthetic, first in its original incarnation as Berkeley Opera and now as West Edge.

"To do a familiar opera even on a high level is not a thrill for me," said Khuner. "It's much more of a singular mark to take something that hasn't been done or that people may not appreciate and do it so they think about it in a new way."

Overall, in 37 seasons through 2017, the company has presented 100 operas by 54 different composers in more than 120 productions. Operagoers would have had to search long and hard to find a fair number of those works in other houses, large or small.

While West Edge fans could surely make a case for many other memorable productions in its history, the 2016 staging of *Powder Her Face* might well stand as the single clearest example of this East Bay ensemble's distinctive prowess and appeal. Everything came together, as it must for opera to shed its cloak of artifice and summon an essential vitality.

The choice to mount this opera in the first place was both daring and artistically sound. Composed by the contemporary British master Thomas Adès, with a libretto by Philip Hensher, the 1995 work unfolds the squalid tale of Margaret Campbell, real-life Duchess of Argyll (1912–93), with bluntness, caustic bite, antic musicality, and an undertow of heart-wrenching empathy. The singing and performances were fervent and intense. So was the orchestral playing by the ensemble Earplay, a valued West Edge collaborator. Director Elkhanah Pulitzer gave the show, set largely on an oversized bed, lighting that cast a bright-pink look of voluptuous rancor. It all took place in the gloriously fitting decrepitude of the long-abandoned Oakland train station, an environment-enhancing feat that has become an important trademark of this peripatetic company.

"For me, West Edge is all about the beauty, energy, and excitement of guerrilla opera," said tenor Jonathan Blalock, who appeared, sometimes scantily clad and sexually charged, in multiple roles in *Powder*. "It was one of the most gratifying and meaningful experiences I've ever had as a performer."

Compressed into an August festival of three productions, West Edge makes its big impact in a targeted and tightly focused way. It's sometimes possible, given the rotating repertory, for an audience member to see all three operas in two days. That's the kind of experience audiences seek out at such larger summer operatic destinations as Santa Fe Opera, New York's Glimmerglass Festival, or Glyndebourne in England.



Dynamic duo: Jonathan Khuner (left) and Mark Streshinsky in the Oakland train station.

This year's August 4–19 West Edge season features *Pelléas et Mélisande*, Debussy's haunting 1902 opera of subversive love and jealousy; *Mata Hari*, a 2017 genre-bender with dancer/actress Tina Mitchell in the nonsinging title role of the World War I temptress and spy; and *Quartett*, Luca Francesconi's 2011 work about sexual gamesmanship based on Heiner Müller's adaptation of *Les liaisons dangereuses*. (The day after the company announced receipt of a National Endowment for the Arts grant to support the *Mata Hari* staging, the work's 38-year-old composer, Matt Marks, died of heart failure on May 11; the season performances will be dedicated to him.)

All three shows will be mounted at the Craneway Conference Center, in a reclaimed automobile plant on the Richmond waterfront. It isn't a romantic bill in any conventional sense of the word. But love in various permutations and complications figures to light up the Craneway this summer.

San Francisco Opera general director Matthew Shilvoek sees the intrepid small company as an important part of the Bay Area's operatic ecosystem. "They have the ability to explore challenging aspects of the repertoire that others cannot and tell those stories in bold and dynamic ways," he said. Citing both the train station and the 2017 season's warehouse venue of Oakland's cavernous Pacific Pipe, Shilvoek praised the synergistic power of "marrying the

aesthetic of building and opera. It's very audacious and very operatic."

San Francisco Chronicle music critic Joshua Kosman, who has covered the company for three decades, calls West Edge "one of the region's most exciting cultural touchstones." That captures its genre-spanning hold on both opera cognoscenti and a post-Burning Man public avid for immersive events.

Shock value and "edginess"—a play on its name that the company's leadership embraces but doesn't oversell—do tend to garner attention. But West Edge's enduring assets are solidly grounded and thoughtfully curated. The production history ranges from Monteverdi's rarely mounted *Il Ritorno d'Ulisse in Patria* (1639) to Ambroise Thomas's neglected *Hamlet* (1868), to *As One*, a 2014 chamber opera with a transgender main character by composer Laura Kaminsky, co-librettist Mark Campbell, and co-librettist/filmmaker Kimberly Reed.

More familiar works, such as Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, Donizetti's *L'Elisir d'Amore*, and Janáček's *The Cunning Little Vixen*, have also made it to the stage. But even when a staple turns up on the company's program, it tends to get a particular spin.

The Legend of the Ring (mounted in 2004 and again in 2010) compressed Wagner's four-opera, 17-hour *Der Ring des Nibelungen* into a single 3-hour evening. In a 2014 *La Bohème* staged in the atrium of Berkeley's Ed Roberts Campus (an office building housing disability advocacy groups), Mimi's frantic search for her lost key in the first act of the Puccini classic included her rifling through audience members' purses.

West Edge general director Mark Streshinsky recalled that 2014 season fondly. In addition to *Bohème*, the company presented the Philip Glass/Allen Ginsberg *Hydrogen Jukebox* (1990) and Jake Heggie's *The End of the Affair* (2004). "Each time the audience came, the seats were configured differently," said Streshinsky. "They literally didn't know which way they were going to be facing. It made them feel like they were part of the opera."

Noting the challenge of performing in cavernous spaces that might be too cold or too hot or acoustically less than ideal, *Powder Her Face's* Blalock said, "We have to be more focused and raise the level of artistry to the next level." The audience feels it and comes right along. As Blalock put it, "You really are stepping into another world."

Opera Rocks

The science of rock mechanics may not be the most promising origin story for an opera company. But that's what made a name and ultimately some money for Richard Goodman, Ph.D. '64, a professor of geological engineering. An amateur bass-baritone who loved opera as much as he loved rocks, Goodman was sufficiently determined to sing onstage and to hear and see others do the same that he founded a company. The Kensington Unitarian Church played host in 1980 to the first Berkeley Opera production, a double-bill of William Walton's *The Bear* and Samuel Barber's *Knoxville Summer of 1915*.

Soon enough, in a pattern that's persisted, Berkeley Opera sought new places to perform—a junior high school auditorium, another church, the Hillside Club, the Julia Morgan Center, and the El Cerrito Performing Arts Theater. The train station was an inspired and brand-making move in 2015 that audiences adored. The fact that there was no running water or electricity, deficits addressed by portable toilets and generators, only added to the sense of adventure.

West Edge thrived there for two seasons, upped its budget, and wanted to stay.



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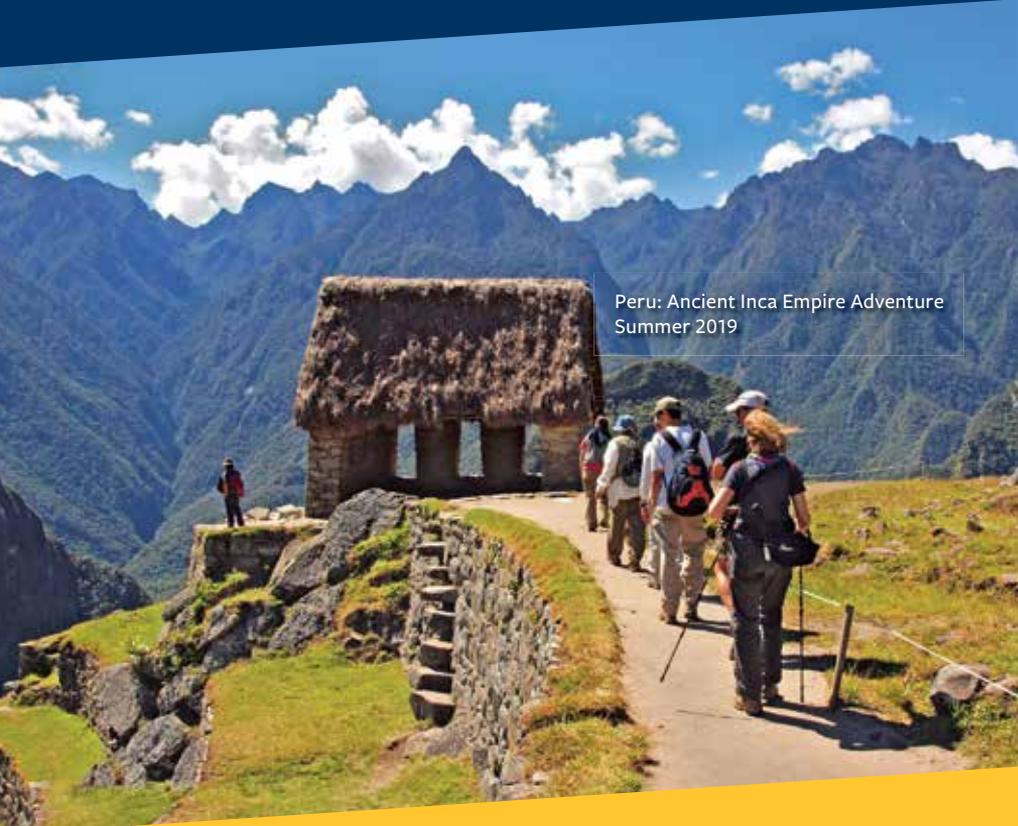
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But city authorities withdrew the public assembly permit. The 2016 Ghost Ship fire in an Oakland artists' warehouse space that left 36 dead was never cited in the decision, but it was only natural to speculate that the tragedy might have played a role in closing access to the station. The company, as it had done so many times in the past, set out to find a new perch. Plans to produce Benjamin Britten's *Death in Venice*, which would have been the largest undertaking in the troupe's history, had to be tabled.

When Streshinsky came on as artistic director in 2009, a year before the name change to West Edge, the annual budget was \$200,000. Today it's \$700,000. Among other things, the increase has funded better-paid and more skilled instrumentalists, some top-flight soloists, enhanced directors' fees, and production costs.

Greeting a visitor at his Oakland apartment, in a complex that was formerly a jellybean factory, Streshinsky, 50, projected a forthright confidence and enthusiasm. The company, he asserts, "wants to think about the future of the art form and how people consume it, react to it, and relate to it." Tall with a welcoming, open face, he is both a committed director of operas old and new and an adept administrator. "I've discovered that my other joy, besides directing," said Streshinsky, "is raising money. It turns out that I love hanging out with people who love opera and want to support it."

Nothing could suit musical director Khuner, who turns 70 in June, better. Like his father, a longtime violinist in the San Francisco Bay Area, Khuner wants to make music and leave the business details to someone else. He happily gave up his West Edge nonmusical administrative duties when Streshinsky came on board.

Sitting in the book- and score-filled house in the Berkeley hills where he grew up and still lives, Khuner, pleasantly disheveled with tousled gray hair and a full beard, mused on his migration from a math B.A. to a musicology M.A. "I was afraid I wouldn't have the right stuff to be a creative mathematician," he said. "Since I'd been playing music and studying it since I was young, I migrated to performance." He also spent 35 years as a prompter at the big opera houses—San Francisco, Chicago, and New York—a demanding job that requires precise command of score, production, and singers.

Khuner is a chronic self-doubter who accounts himself "asocial, shy, and inward-looking" and claims to find opera "a difficult medium to be serious about." Yet on the podium he blossoms. Both for West Edge

and the other ensembles he conducts, he taps his ruminative nature to give keenly considered and richly layered performances.

Streshinsky was working as an assistant director at San Francisco Opera when he and Khuner, up from the prompter's box, fell into conversation during a 2002 *Carmen* rehearsal break. Did Streshinsky want to direct Tchaikovsky's *Eugene Onegin* for Berkeley Opera, Khuner asked more or less out of the blue. He did indeed. A partnership was born.

Streshinsky's interest in early opera led to productions of Monteverdi and Handel. New and/or neglected operas occupy the company's other artistic pole. The one thing West Edge audiences shouldn't expect is straight-up productions of opera standbys like *Tosca* or *La Traviata*.

For artists, West Edge is a place to stretch and make a distinctive mark. Director Elkhanah Pulitzer, whose company credits include *Lulu*, *Powder Her Face*, and this summer's *Quartett*, praises the adventurous West Edge spirit. "Mark and Jonathan are both willing to endorse a director's risks even if they don't fully understand them," she said. "It's OK, it's encouraged to be a little wild here." After reading a review of her *Lulu*, composer John Adams reached

out to Pulitzer. That meeting led to some invitations to direct staged concerts of his works for the San Francisco Symphony and Los Angeles Philharmonic. And after Adams saw *Powder Her Face*, there were more engagements for Pulitzer.

Mezzo-soprano Kindra Scharich (Minerva in Streshinsky's *Ritorno d'Ulisse*) loved the balance of "seriousness and lightness" the director induced. "One of the reasons the public responds so positively," she said, "is that the productions are a little kooky, always accessible, infused with humor, and very beautiful."

Packing all those riches into a single month can leave audiences hungry for something more in the rest of the year. In 2017, West Edge replaced its off-season "Opera Medium Rare" series of semi-staged and semi-obscure works with "Snapshot," a sampler of excerpts from new operas: eight in that first year, five this year. In a well-attended and warmly received performance at Berkeley's Oddfellows Hall in February, the audience got a bracing taste of widely diverse works in the making.

Composer Cyril Deaconoff and librettist David Yezzi's adaptation of F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Last Tycoon* unfurled some jazzy glissandi and the aching aria "I

am not done loving you." Katherine Saxson's *452 Jamestown Place* used a pulsing, febrile score to burrow inside the mind of a woman with multiple-personality disorder. A musical funeral for Hugh Hefner, Brian Rosen's *Death of a Playboy*, came after intermission. Khuner and Earplay conductor Mary Chun shared podium duties. Most of the composers and librettists were in the house to take bows and answer audience questions later.

It's not surprising that "Snapshot" would prove popular with the West Edge faithful. In both the character and quality of their work, the company rewards audiences who want to see and feel things operatic in a different way. When someone asked Streshinsky about wearing a coat and tie to a performance, the director answered that he wasn't going to tuck his own shirt in. "Opera Untucked" wouldn't be a bad tagline for the West Edge experience. **L**

Steven Winn is a writer and critic whose work appears in the San Francisco Chronicle and San Francisco Classical Voice. He is the author of Come Back, Como: Winning the Heart of a Reluctant Dog (Harper), which has been translated into nine languages.

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