

UC SANTA BARBARA

THE *Current*

February 11, 2019

Tom Jacobs

An Operetta for the #MeToo Era

In an unprecedented collaboration, the UC Santa Barbara Library and UCSB Opera Theatre will present the American premiere of a work by a proven master of music and theater.

Both performances of the operetta — which was selected from the library's Michael and Nan Miller Operetta Archive — will be performed in English by graduate and undergraduate students from the award-winning opera theatre program.

A comedy with a decidedly feminist slant, it promises to resonate strongly in the #MeToo era, as it portrays the conflicted emotions of independent-minded women navigating a male-dominated world.

Also of note: It was written in 1904.

The work is "The Mock Marriage," by Franz Lehár. Just one year after its world premiere in Vienna, the composer would pen his masterpiece, "The Merry Widow," which is still performed all over the world.

In the wake of that enormous success, "The Mock Marriage" was set aside and ultimately forgotten. Following its initial 39-performance run, it didn't have a single staging until an Austrian music festival revived it in 2016.

The UC Santa Barbara production will be performed at 8 p.m. Saturday, Feb. 16, and 2 p.m. Sunday, Feb. 17, in the Lobero Theatre in downtown Santa Barbara. Maxim Kuzin, of the campus's choral and orchestral conducting program, will conduct a cast

composed of graduate and undergraduate students, who will be singing a brand-new English-language translation.

“I have always found it interesting to work on rare and unknown works,” said stage director Steven Daigle. “I feel a little like I’m playing God. I take these works that haven’t been performed in 100 years and bring them back to life.”

Daigle is a professor of opera at the world-renowned Eastman School of Music in Rochester, New York, where he runs the Eastman Opera Theatre. He spends his summers staging less-serious fare as artistic director of the Ohio Light Opera.

He recalled including a couple of arias from “The Mock Marriage” in a revue of Lehár’s music. But the bulk of the show was unknown to him — and to virtually everyone else. That is one reason Benjamin Brecher, a member of UC Santa Barbara’s voice faculty who is producing the show, chose the show.

The production, he explained, celebrates collectors Michael and Nan Miller’s donation of more than 175,000 scores of operas, operettas, and other musical-theater works to the UC Santa Barbara Library.

“I had been to their home in Los Angeles to see their collection a few times,” Brecher said. “It is stunning! I said, ‘Let’s find something rare. That will show off the variety and depth of this collection.’ So we started looking at shows, and ultimately picked ‘The Mock Marriage.’ ”

Why this specific show? “It is very funny, and very pertinent,” Brecher said. “When we had our first read-through in December, the students were laughing as much as I was.”

Set among the high society of turn-of-the-century Rhode Island, the plot centers on Selma (Hailey Atwell), a wealthy widow whose bad marriage has soured her on the company of men. She has banded together with some equally angry friends to create a society named WHAM (Women Hating All Men).

Her billionaire father is heavily invested in her remarrying, and he sets into motion a complex, farcical plot involving, among other elements, cross-dressing.

“It’s a complicated plot in which she thinks she is marrying a woman, as a joke, when she is really marrying a man,” Daigle explained. “It does make sense. Everything is tied together in the third act.”

Daigle noted that female empowerment is a theme of the work, as it was in many operettas of the era. “The women are pretty powerful characters,” he said. “It’s the men who get duped. If you put a work like this in the context of the time it came out, you begin to see how it reflects the ways society is changing.”

He estimates the piece consists of one-third spoken dialogue and two-thirds music. “Lehár dabbles in a lot of different styles,” he said. “There are polkas and waltzes. There is a moment when you hear echoes of Wagner. In other sections, you can hear the influence of American composers such as John Philip Souse and Victor Herbert.”

The 2016 revival included some updated references, including one to then-presidential-candidate Donald Trump. Daigle demurred when asked if he would follow suit.

“The physical comedy is certainly updated,” he said. “The characters interact in a much more contemporary style. There is dance in it.

“There is also a little bit of updating of the text,” Daigle continued. “That’s a tradition in operetta; in Gilbert and Sullivan a patter song is often updated. But I want audiences to discover that for themselves.”

In conjunction with the UCSB Opera production of “The Mock Marriage” the UC Santa Barbara Library has created an operetta exhibition now on display in the library’s Mountain Gallery. A lecture and reception will take place at 4 p.m. Friday, Feb. 15, in the Sunrise Room, adjacent to the gallery. The exhibition continues through May 31.

Tickets for “The Mock Marriage” are available at lobero.org or by calling (805) 963-0761. Questions can be directed to Adriane Hill, marketing and communications manager for the UC Santa Barbara Department of Music, at adrianehill@ucsb.edu.

About UC Santa Barbara

The University of California, Santa Barbara is a leading research institution that also provides a comprehensive liberal arts learning experience. Our academic community of faculty, students, and staff is characterized by a culture of interdisciplinary collaboration that is responsive to the needs of our multicultural and global society. All of this takes place within a living and learning environment like no other, as we

draw inspiration from the beauty and resources of our extraordinary location at the edge of the Pacific Ocean.