THE FACE ON THE BARROOM FLOOR
and EMPEROR NORTON CASTS

Molly Mostonen as Isabel/Madeline
Benjamin Robinson as Larry/Matt
John E. Callison as Tom/John
Rosa Betancourt as Diana

Vira Slywotsky as Marla
Justin Ryan as The Intruder
David Gordon as Michael

THE FACE ON THE BARROOM FLOOR

The Face on the Barroom Floor was commissioned by Central City Opera in 1978. Its libretto is drawn from an 1872 poem written by John Henry Tittes, supposedly inspired by an actual happening at Joe Smith’s saloon at Fourth Avenue and 44th Street in Manhattan. The “Old West” score for flute, cello and piano is equal parts honky-tonk piano and nostalgic lyricism. The three soloists become characters from the past in a flashback to explain why a woman’s face was painted on the barroom floor. Back in “today”, there is a tragic ending to the story. The New Yorker’s Andrew Porter wrote, “As a drama, The Face on the Barroom Floor ... is predictable but strangely powerful; the audience is gripped. I found it even more gripping a second time round. It is a very skillful score.”

 Emperor Norton was commissioned by San Francisco Opera and the Kurt Herbert Adler Award Fund. It is written for four solo singers, piano, violin and cello. The story is a fanciful encounter between Marla, a writer, and the subject of her play, Joshua Abraham Norton, the self-proclaimed Emperor of America: a colorful figure who actually lived in San Francisco in the mid-1800s. As they reenact scenes from Norton’s life, Marla is drawn to the charismatic stranger who takes her away with him into the shadows. Allan Ulrich of the San Francisco Examiner claimed “It is expressively and even beautifully written for the voice and the ensembles are cohesive, soaring affairs.”

Seated at the piano is composer Henry Mollicone, who was the music director for this work, and very much enjoys conducting from the piano. Should you be interested, I would be delighted to consider doing this.” Thus it was agreed to schedule both operas for November 7/8, 2014 to open Season Eleven and invite Mr. Mollicone to join the production midway through rehearsals.

For more information, write chelseaopera@aol.com or call 212-260-1796.

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SEASON ELEVEN NOVEMBER PRODUCTIONS

TWO ONE-ACTS BY HENRY MOLLICONE

Last year, West Coast-based composer Henry Mollicone contacted Chelsea Opera, seeking a company to give the NY premiere of his one-act opera Emperor Norton. Discussions resulted in an agreement to produce Norton with his more familiar work, The Face on the Barroom Floor. Both are scored for solo singers and piano trio, with libretti by John S. Bowman. Mollicone also wrote: “On several occasions, I have served as music director for this work, and very much enjoy conducting from the piano. Should you be interested, I would be delighted to consider doing this.” Thus it was agreed to schedule both operas for November 7/8, 2014 to open Season Eleven and invite Mr. Mollicone to join the production midway through rehearsals.

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Featured in the Barroom cast are Molly Mostonen and Benjamin Robinson making their Chelsea Opera debuts, and John Callison who sang in The Tender Land. The Norton cast includes returning Chelsea Opera artists Rosa Betancourt and Justin Ryan, plus debut artists Vira Slywotsky and David Gordon. Performances will be at St. Peter’s Church in Chelsea on Nov. 7 (7:30PM) and Nov. 8 (4:00PM). For discounted general admission tickets, use the promotional code SPOTLIGHT.
Reflections on the Tender Land

Kristen Kemp first joined Chelsea Opera as a rehearsal pianist in fall 2013 for Ballymore: Part One: Winners and La Piazza con Fanghi, and resumed that position for both the Mezzoline operas and Tosca. She has been a vocal coach and accompanist for over 20 years, working at Cincinnati Opera, Michigan Opera Theater, Opera Pacific, Opera New Jersey, the Opera Theater and Music Festival of Lucca, among others. At Sarasota Opera, she is the Program and Music Director of the Studio Artists.

In addition to her opera work, Kristen has given collaborative recitals in New York, Washington DC, Seattle, Cincinnati, and Sarasota. She has also been a member of the coaching staff for VOICE experience, directed by Sherrill Milnes and Maria Zouves. She received her Master’s Degree in Vocal Accompaniment and Artist Diploma in Opera Coaching from the Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music where she studied with Kenneth Griffis and Donna Loewy. She now lives in NYC with her trumpet husband, Andy Kemp, but returns to Sarasota every January through March for their winter program.

When you are coaching a singer on an operatic role, what kinds of things do you work on with the singer?

I like to start with the text so the singer can find the natural rhythm of the language, be it Italian, French, etc. Very often a singer will carefully study the text and the music together, but I find that singers can always spend more time simply reciting the text away from the music. This accomplishes many things: it simplifies the dramatic objective; it produces a natural legato [smoothness] once singing is added back into the mix; it speeds up memorization because it forces the singer to focus on just one aspect of the score, rather than immediately combining pitches, rhythm, and text; and finally, I think it gives a much greater insight into why a composer sets the text a certain way. The high notes are not always the most important part of the phrase.

What is meant by “being a collaborative artist” when working with a singer?

I think that “collaborating” means having a plan, as well as the flexibility to adjust the plan in the moment. A singer’s voice is a singer’s voice; a pianist’s hands are a pianist’s hands. As their pianist, it is my priority to give them the musical support they need in order to deliver their best performance. I can hear when the voice is strong, which means I don’t run out of breath. These are split-second decisions that I am always weighing as I listen intently to the singers that I accompany.

Is there a performance experience that stands out in your mind?

If so, what made it so special?

I think it would be difficult to narrow this answer down to one performance. For me, performing is so much about the process leading up to the performance. As we rehearse the music and experience its evolution toward a final product, we are also forging a relationship of trust in creating that music together. This probably is an extension of my definition of “collaborative pianist”. I have so many special memories in mind, ranging from graduate recitals at Cincinnati Conservatory, to full-scale productions with numerous opera companies, to even simple outreach performances with singers to an audience of less than 30.

After 20 years of coaching singers, what one piece of advice would you give to a young artist?

Find your own artistic expression and your own interpretation of the music. Singers these days have voice teachers, coaches, directors, conductors, acting coaches, diction coaches, recordings and YouTube all telling them how to perform a certain piece of music. Young singers are so caught up in trying to be perfect that they forget that the rules are meant to be a guide in helping them sing well and discover their own strengths. Opera is storytelling and the audience wants to be taken on an emotional journey. It is the singer’s responsibility to be technically secure in their vocal production so that they are free to then paint beautiful stories through the emotional power of the voice.

As a volunteer with Chelsea Opera I have been privileged to see many amazing productions. Typically, I work the front of the house as an usher, getting to see the final full performances in all their polished glory. This season however, I had a very different experience, with not only the opportunity to volunteer in several different positions but also to see the development of a performance from auditions through to final performance.

I began my journey back in January when I was asked to greet singers at the auditions for The Tender Land. It was a wonderful way to start the season, listening to a huge variety of talented singers as they added their own individual touches to their audition arias. I’m glad I didn’t have to choose the final cast!! In March, I helped stuff envelopes and mail out the newsletters, not as musical as my usual jobs but a necessary part of the volunteer position. In May, I attended a rehearsal to help collect cast member measurements for costumes and that brings us to June, performance month!

A week of volunteer days started the Sunday before the final performance with organizing and labeling costumes. While audiences only see a final performance, they don’t see a week of hard work, preparations, last minute changes and a lot of fun! Each night leading up to the final performances, I was backstage listening to singers warm up, joke around and then perform each rehearsal as though it was the final show. I tended costumes, tied bows and ribbons, and helped singers to adjust their costumes. The atmosphere backstage is joyful. The rehearsals are intense. The final performance was sublime. I was delighted I was able to see The Tender Land develop from beginning to end. I now have a whole new perspective on the life of Chelsea Opera and a huge respect for the incredible work and dedication it takes to bring their wonderful productions to life.

Born in the UK, Rachael Skinner has been living in NYC since 2007 and works with students and adults with multiple disabilities and autism spectrum disorder. She has been a volunteer with Chelsea Opera since 2010, most recently as a costume assistant.

Buy your tickets to The Face on the Barroom Floor and Emperor Norton now.

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Reflections on the Tender Land

Audiences at two sold-out performances of The Tender Land were thrilled and appreciative to be treated to Aaron Copland’s only major opera in “a rare revival” (Woolfe/NYT). One audience member wrote that the production was “moving, strong, with optimal instrumentalists and a perfect cast!” Renowned dramaturg Cori Ellison shared her thoughts: “Chelsea Opera did yeoman work in giving us a chance to see this important but neglected piece of American operatic theater and resourceful storytelling, well-cast ensemble, and fine conductor and orchestra truly did justice.” Producer Nancy Rhodes agreed: “What a lovely and touching Tender Land! It was wonderful to hear the chamber orchestra version live with such a lovely and sincere cast of singers who brought such an authentic voice to the piece.” While some critics faulted the opera itself for not being “grand enough”, Chelsea Opera received consistent praise. Conductor Murray Sidlin, composer of the orchestra reduction used, attended the orchestra sitzprobe rehearsal and commented that despite some less than glowing comments from a few of the critics, “You got through [to audiences]! It’s a beautiful opera, and a very touching story as much for what is not said as what is sung.” In fact, Zachary Woolfe of The New York Times commended Chelsea Opera: “The finest passage in the score is the achingly beautiful quintet that closes the first act, and here the performance was at its finest, too: polished and eloquent.”