

VIVA LA TRAVIATA

TWO HUNDRED YEARS LATER, COMPOSER GIUSEPPE VERDI IS STILL CONTEMPORARY

by Eileen Reynolds / GSAS '11

You might remember the movie in which Julia Roberts, dressed in elegant white gloves and a fetching red gown, is moved to tears as the swelling strains of an aria float up to the glittering opera box where she sits next to her date, the tuxedo-clad Richard Gere. That iconic scene is, of course, from *Pretty Woman*. But can you name the opera? The 1990 film makes no direct reference to Giuseppe Verdi, but the music is from his most commonly performed work, *La traviata*—and our protagonist’s weeping is no wonder: The “fallen woman” of the opera’s title, like Roberts’ character, Vivian, is a prostitute whose life changes drastically

when she meets a loving man of means. This year, as opera houses across the world mounted Verdi classics such as *Rigoletto*, *Aida*, and, of course, *La traviata* in honor of the bicentennial of the Italian composer’s birth, Francesco Izzo (GSAS '98, '03), co-director

that delighted and scandalized 19th-century audiences have continued to enthrall operagoers long after his death. The centerpiece of the celebration was “Verdi’s Third Century: Italian Opera Today,” a four-day conference—presented in partnership with NYU’s Casa Italiana and Humanities Initiative

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of NYU’s American Institute for Verdi Studies (AIVS), has geared up for a series of events that explore how the very same works

and timed to coincide with the composer’s 200th birthday on October 10—that brought together not only scholars and musicologists, but also dramaturges, directors, performers, and critics.

“What interests us today is how his music has infiltrated a number of contexts in really unexpected ways, from film to television commercials,” Izzo says. “And it is absolutely true that people know Verdi without even knowing that they know him—that there are certain tunes that one has heard. They’re just out there.” Chief among those is “La donna è mobile,” a bouncy, triple-meter aria to the fickleness of women originally sung by the playboy Duke of Mantua character in *Rigoletto*. With a couple of well-placed high notes, it remains a favorite show-

piece for the world’s great tenors, but the catchy tune has also been recorded by

study music with the local priests. By the age of 9, he’d landed the first of several posts as a church organist, and at 18 he moved to Milan to continue his studies. Verdi’s first opera premiered in 1839, with more than two dozen to come in the decades that followed. A month after Verdi died, in 1901,

had fueled the movement for the unification of Italy, which was achieved in 1861. “Va, pensiero” had become an unofficial national anthem.

It might come as a surprise to some that one of the world’s largest collections of Verdi paraphernalia is housed at NYU, in a small

honor of the NYU professor who founded the institute and began the painstaking work of acquiring materials for the archive. And in early 2014, Izzo will curate “Giuseppe Verdi: An American Tribute,” an exhibition of treasures from the archive to be displayed in the lobby of Bobst Library.

So why does Verdi’s music endure? Izzo has several theories. One has to do with the composer’s knack for emotional realism: For his 1847 *Macbeth*, for example, he read Shakespeare, studying the psychology of the characters and at times “really bullying” the

poet writing his libretto into shaping his vision. The result is a unity of words and music, Izzo says, that flies in the face of those who call opera “quintessentially implausible.”

And as Vivian discovered in *Pretty Woman*, Verdi operas also have a way of foreshadowing contemporary events. Izzo points to a scene in *I lombardi alla prima crociata* in which a Christian woman who has fallen in love with a Muslim accuses an invading band of crusaders of sacking a Muslim palace not out of religious piety, but out of a lust for gold. Izzo hears in her cry—“No, no!

It is not the just cause of God to soak the earth with human blood”—something of a precursor to the “no blood for oil” slogan adopted in the early 2000s by Americans who opposed the Iraq War.

“Of course Verdi had no idea that certain things were going to happen in today’s world,” Izzo says, “but we are able to draw connections, and that brings us closer to his operas.” ■



NINETEENTH-CENTURY VERDI LIBRETTOS FROM THE COLLECTION OF JOHN MAZZARELLA, RECENTLY BEQUEATHED TO NYU’S AMERICAN INSTITUTE FOR VERDI STUDIES.

the likes of Alvin and the Chipmunks and put to use as a taunting chant in soccer stadiums. Stephen Colbert even sang it with opera legend Placido Domingo on his show in 2012.

Born in 1813 in a small village near Parma, Verdi was encouraged by his father, an innkeeper, to

thousands of mourners singing the soaring unison strains of “Va, pensiero,” the chorus of Hebrew slaves from his opera *Nabucco*, walked with his remains through the streets of Milan. Celebrated as national treasures, Verdi’s early operas had come to be viewed by some as revolutionary works that

been home to a growing archive of some 25,000 Verdi letters, contracts, and librettos, along with about 80 precious microfilm reels that were filmed by researchers at the composer’s home in Sant’Agata, a site not generally open to the public. At this year’s conference, the AIVS announced Gundula Kreuzer as the first-ever recipient of the Martin Chusid Award for Verdi Studies, a prize named in



THE METROPOLITAN OPERA’S 2013 PRODUCTION OF VERDI’S *RIGOLETTO* TRANSPORTS THE ORIGINAL STORY FROM 16TH-CENTURY MANTUA TO 1960S LAS VEGAS.

PHOTO © KEN HOWARD/METROPOLITAN OPERA

film

A Direct(ing) Descendant

by Jason Hollander / GAL '07



As an actress, Bryce Dallas Howard (TSOA '03) is used to being adorned in elaborate outfits and going through the ritual of hair

and makeup for each role. But recently, she's embarked on a different kind of transformation. As a co-director of the drama *Call Me*

Crazy: A Five Film, which premiered to acclaim on Lifetime last April, she adds another credit to her growing body of work behind the camera. It's a move that worked out fairly well for her father, director Ron Howard, and a creative process she enjoys because, she says, "You don't have to be the smartest person in the room; you just have to be a really good listener, and be discerning."

Howard—the Golden Globe-nominated star whose roles include the vicious Hilly Holbrook in *The Help* and the virtuous Ivy Walker in *The Village*—recently sat down with *NYU Alumni Magazine* inside the Cantor Film Center. She was here to screen a short film she created for Canon's Project Imaginat10n—a directorial contest she's judging along with her dad, and which includes submissions from celebrity filmmakers such as Eva Longoria and Jamie Foxx.

EVERYTHING KIND OF STARTED FOR YOU RIGHT HERE, DIDN'T IT?

Oh, big time. It really is all connected back to NYU. I met my husband [actor Seth Gabel] here. Dane Charbeneau, who wrote *When You Find Me* [a short that Howard directed in 2011], I met here. And Jason Lew (TSOA '03), who wrote the Gus Van Sant movie [*Restless*] that I produced, I met here. They were actually all roommates at one time.

AND YOUR ACTING CAREER JUST BLOSSOMED ONE NIGHT.

Yes. I did this show called *Hamletmachine* my sophomore year

and Meredith Wechter, who was an assistant at a boutique agency, saw it and then came up to me and said, "I would like to be your agent." I was 19 years old and was like, "Oh, that's cool!" So she became my agent, and she still is today.

WHAT WOULD YOU SAY TO THAT 19-YEAR-OLD NOW?

I would probably say: Chill! You're working hard enough [laughs].

WERE YOU NERVOUS ABOUT TRANSITIONING INTO DIRECTING?

I think that so much about being creative is being able to tolerate your own frustrations, and embarrassment, and sadness, and grief. I mean my dad says that every single movie will break your heart. Like, literally break your heart. So failure is not the thing that's scariest for me because I know you have to go through that. It's only going to inform everything else.

SO, WHAT DOES SCARE YOU IN THIS NEW ROLE?

I think the thing to be afraid of is not being realistic. Are you thinking that someone is capable of doing something that maybe they're not? Are you vetting everything properly? Are you creating an environment where you're empowering others to challenge you? Truly. Which is a scary thing to do. But if you don't do that, then the movie comes out and you think it's amazing and other people think it sucks. And it's because, well, you made everyone afraid to tell you the truth. ■

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CREDITS



ALUMNI STEAL THE SHOW

At the 2013 Tony Awards, *Kinky Boots*, produced by **ADAM S. GORDON** (TSOA '89) and **KEN DAVENPORT** (TSOA '94), was named Best Musical, while producer **ROSE CAIOLA**'s (TSOA '91) *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* took home Best Revival of a Play... ABC's White House drama *Scandal*, starring **KATIE LOWES** (TSOA '04), returns to TV this fall, while **KEN MARINO** (TSOA '91) can be seen on the final season of the HBO comedy *Eastbound & Down*... Also returning to the alphabet network is suburban-family sitcom *The Middle*, created by showrunners **EILEEN HEISLER** (TSOA '88) and **DEANN HELINE** (TSOA '87)... **BETHENNY FRANKEL**'s (WSUC '92) self-titled daytime talk show recently premiered on Fox... Executive producer **BRIAN K. VAUGHAN**'s (TSOA '98) *Under the Dome*, based on the novel by Stephen King, just wrapped its debut season on CBS. The network's latest thriller is writer/producer **ALON ARANYA**'s (TSOA '06) *Hostages*, which stars Toni Collette and Dylan McDermott.

—Renée Alfuso

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