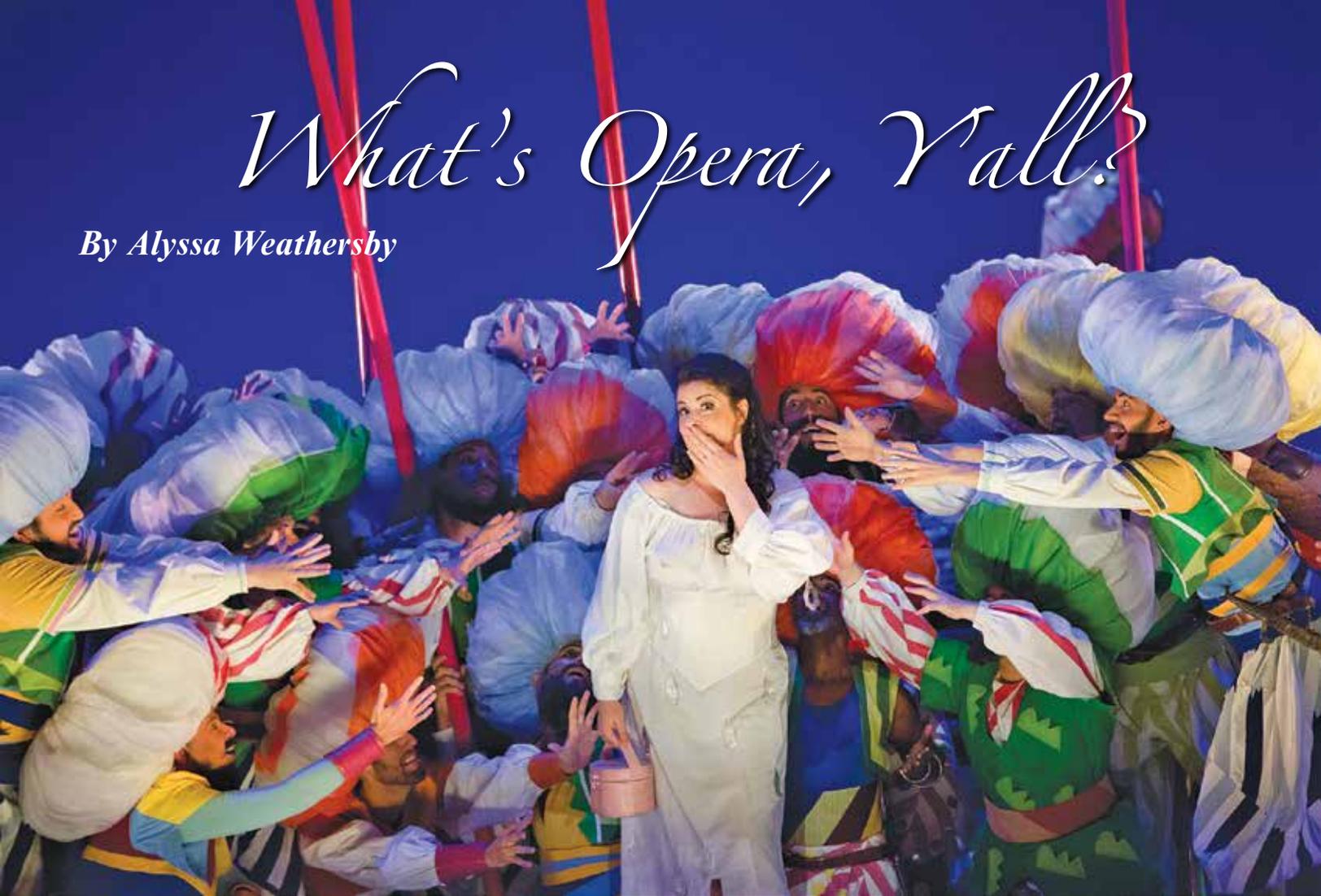


What's Opera, Y'all?

By Alyssa Weathersby



Daniela Barcellona as Isabella in *The Italian Girl in Algiers* at Houston Grand Opera (2012).

Photo by Felix Sanchez.

When most people think of opera, a blonde woman—traditionally overweight—wearing a helmet adorned with horns comes to mind. While the Houston Grand Opera (HGO) is familiar with Richard Wagner's works and producing a long term project of the *Ring Cycle* in which this stereotypical woman appears, the young opera company offers its city a much more modern taste of the fine arts. HGO began as a regional company that only produced two shows a season and steadily gained notoriety until its continuous expansion called for a new venue: the Wortham Center. Constructed specifically to house the opera and the ballet, the Wortham Center offers Houstonians a cultural hub that hosts a plethora of social events. Through the efforts and support of a handful of dedicated patrons, the Wortham Center came to fruition, putting Houston on par with its East and West Coast brethren. Moreover, this enterprising spirit of Houston pervades the Houston Grand Opera and catapults it ahead of its competition through innovative methods of management and design.

All photos courtesy of Houston Grand Opera.



Aida at Houston Grand Opera (1966).

During the seventies and early eighties, the Houston Grand Opera seemed very young compared to its earlier-established counterpart in the arts, the Houston Symphony Orchestra. Both the opera and the ballet coexisted with the symphony in Jones Hall, adapting to a stage not quite suited for the more physical performances of dance and musical theater. The number of shows per season grew from the initial two of *Salome* and *Madame Butterfly*, to five and six and even seven.

Booking an evening at Jones Hall became a major issue, as the three arts companies battled for prime performance dates. Social events vied for the location as well, putting even more stress on the strained venue. Rehearsal time became difficult to schedule. The ballet found more performance opportunities outside of Houston than inside. National companies had to bypass Houston on their tours. Non-subscribers to the opera were unable to get tickets, as HGO was already oversubscribed. All of these factors stifled audience growth, and the idea for a new space to house the opera and ballet became inevitable under these conditions.¹ The question remained whether or not the establishment of the individual companies was strong enough to support the new theater.

Thirty seemed quite young in comparison to older opera companies in the United States, but despite any doubts, HGO pushed onward. Its famed performances, like *Porgy and Bess* in 1976, gave credit to the southern opera company. Houston Grand Opera began its penchant for innovative performances with its production of this folk opera by George Gershwin—no opera company had ever performed it in its original form as an opera. Only musical theater companies hired the all-African American cast for which the score calls. Breaking racial boundaries in an art form

stereotypically stuck in a distant social past, HGO made its mark on a national scale, accruing a Grammy (the first awarded to an opera company) along the way.

The Houston Grand Opera was becoming too large and too notable to share Jones Hall with the Houston Symphony Orchestra. The Houston Symphony's home forced HGO to "[stage] works at intervals during the entire season." The company desired the accommodations to perform multiple shows on a simultaneous, rotating basis. Without this capability, HGO would never achieve national and international recognition.² To guarantee a high-class reputation, a world-class opera house was a must.

By the early eighties, the oil boom had dried up, and it left Houstonians in an economic slump to which they were not accustomed. Despite this, Houston pushed forward. Mayor Fred Hofheinz and City Council provided two blocks of land adjacent to the Alley Theatre, which solidified the soon-to-be-famed Theater District. Initially called the Houston Lyric Theater Foundation, the Wortham Theater Foundation was established in 1977 with the intent of building a new home for the HGO and the Houston Ballet. The budget was set at \$70 million.³

The funding for the Wortham Center came entirely from private sources. Glen Rosenbaum, a partner in Vinson & Elkins and chairman of the Wortham Center, helped with the financing of the establishment. In addition to donating upwards of \$150,000, the law firm was responsible for the negotiations and legal work surrounding the development of HGO's new space. Some interim financing was necessary, and the group agreed on an innovative solution to defray the massive budget cost. *Institutional Investor Magazine* even deemed this new form of bond "one of the most innovative bond advances of 1984." It "enabled the theatre center to



A Little Night Music with Frederica von Stade as Desiree Armfeldt at Houston Grand Opera (1999). Photo by George Hixson.

have a tax exempt financing ... and some advantage through arbitrage.”⁴

People bought bonds with the conviction that their city needed a strong fine arts community. Although the shape of the land donated by the City of Houston restricted the design plans to come, the generous donation freed the city from the stigma of a lesser-class, southern city in comparison to those in the North. Houston would be noticed—by the rest of the United States and internationally. With the beginning of construction, plans for the inaugural performance also began.

Many factors, such as space, budget, and most importantly (and uniquely), the performers themselves, contributed to the design of the Wortham Center for the Arts. Architects worked to create a functional, yet beautiful building that would endure future growth and changing demands. Several important features include the orchestra pit, the house (audience) of the Brown Theater, the backstage, and the stage itself. Designers based the Brown Theater on a larger-scale theater, more like the Metropolitan Opera at Lincoln Center in New York than the smaller theaters, like the famed Teatro alla Scala in Milan, Italy.

The potential for acoustic disaster was immense, but Houstonian architects deftly sidestepped any unwanted drama. To economize on the limited space the city had graciously donated, the grand tier and mezzanine levels of the opera’s “house” were very steep. Though this caused some initial dissatisfaction with audiences, it promoted the high acoustic quality that is necessary for the duration of an opera house. The seats are placed in such a way that “less than 2 percent of the audience [is] more [than] 140 feet from the stage” —shocking when you consider the size of the Brown Theater.⁵ The hall is somewhat peculiar: an audience member will get more clarity of sound from the raised patron boxes, mezzanine, and grand tier levels than from the often

desired orchestra level. The only tradeoff is the view. The initial audiences it hosted perceived the hall as too “live,” causing reverberation to muddle the sound. Sound absorptive acoustic panels were installed to create the perfect aesthetic balance.

The seating and size of the two theaters in the Wortham Theater Center were designed to offer Houstonians a plethora of artistic experiences. The Brown Theater and the Cullen Theater seat 2,200 and 1,100 people, respectively. The ultimate marriage of artistic aspiration and physical capability was in the theaters’ design. Brown Theater would be recognized as “a not-too-large main house ... where true ensemble productions of large-scale-repertory [could] be realized,” and Cullen would be known as “a jewel of a second house ... where smaller-scale and more experimental works can be effectively produced with less financial risk.”⁶ With the vast difference in size, traveling shows (like musical theater productions or recitals) could offer a much more intimate performance in the Cullen Theater than what the Houston Grand Opera offered in the Brown Theater.

The designers also addressed the problem of balance in the placement of the orchestra pit, where the players and the conductor play for the duration of each show. Unlike many theaters of the time, the Wortham Center installed the Bayreuth pit.⁷ Modeled after the Bayreuth Festspielhaus, the opera house home to Richard Wagner’s works, the orchestra pit is inset underneath the stage. This allows for a larger orchestra size, as well as the previously mentioned balance of sound.

Above the orchestra, the theater’s architects took great care in the creation of the stage itself. Preparing for the presence of the Houston Ballet, they designed a stage that



The Wortham Center’s iconic arch during the early construction.

extended the career of professional dancers by up to ten years. Instead of building the stage over an unyielding, metal base like the stage in Jones Hall, architects used several layers of wood as a foundation, ensuring a softer and springier surface for the dancers. This change came much to the delight of the dancers, who applauded the improvements that few other stages offered.⁸ All of these features remain in excellent condition thanks to the permanently-staffed backstage crew.

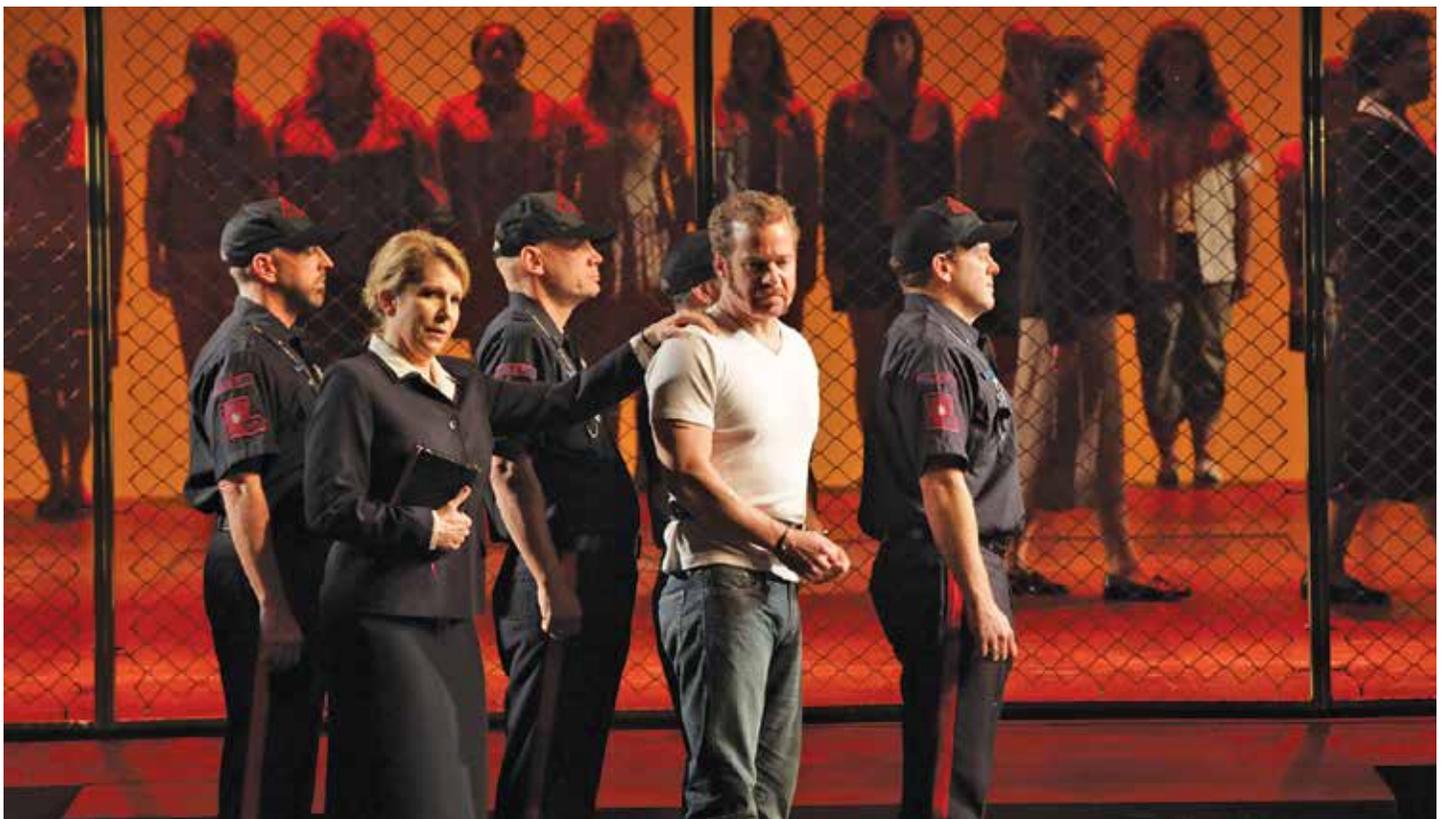
Backstage itself is a paradise for performers in comparison to many other performance halls. Space to hold the sets of multiple coinciding productions enables the Wortham Center to book more than one show during the week. This opens up endless possibilities—the opera can play on the same weekend as the ballet, resulting in a higher performance capacity and thus, more ticket sales for the ever-growing audience. Designers employed a still-functioning backstage crew for the various light, sound, and recording systems to keep them up to date. Whereas many opera houses pay an endless amount of their funds to replace equipment, the Houston Grand Opera aimed to maintain its property, lengthening the equipment’s duration. With all of these promising new features, the Wortham Center catapulted toward its opening date. Maybe thanks to the fervid anticipation or simply the private dollars, the theater construction finished ahead of schedule.⁹

Society’s elite waited in anticipation for the opening of the Wortham Center. Invitations were delivered for the gala inauguration black-tie event that took place on May 19, 1987.¹⁰ A series of opening performances, first by the ballet, and later by the Houston Grand Opera (with the new

work *Nixon in China* as well as the crowd-favorite *Aida*), christened the new theater. In accordance with Texan flare, a longhorn steer appeared at the event, offering a sense of Texan pride and humor in the face of national criticism. The question of Houston’s ability to pull off a high-class fine arts center (located between Prairie Street and Buffalo Bayou, to the amusement of many) was laid to rest.

Audiences raved during cabaret-like performances of artists, including Texas-native Tommy Tune. Countless articles of “who’s who” appeared in the city newspapers. The performance of John Adams’s *Nixon in China* garnered various polite, witty reviews, but more importantly, set the stage for HGO’s tradition of innovative performance and new works. Critics could not keep from commenting in their reviews on the “brick behemoth” itself, however. Amidst admiration for the new facility and all of its improved wonder, some believed that “lightness and grace [were] not the leading virtues of [the Wortham Center’s] main facade’s single, heavy, huge arch [... and that] inside, the vast foyer [was] either expecting an airplane or a decorator.”¹¹ *Aida* weathered the criticism well, albeit with some dissatisfaction over the lack of live elephants on stage. International super-stars played title roles, such as Plácido Domingo as Ramades and Mirella Freni as Aida. This stellar cast, mixed in with HGO studio artists, set the high standard to which the opera company still adheres today.

As a cosmopolis, Houston relies on its fine arts community to endure as a world leader. International stars stop in the vibrant city during tours, and the Houston-based arts culture remains overwhelmingly strong. Whereas many arts programs across the nation are shutting down due to finan-



Dead Man Walking with Joyce DiDonato as Sister Helen Prejean and Philip Cutlip as Joseph De Rocher at Houston Grand Opera (2010-2011 Season).

Photo by Felix Sanchez.

cial failure, HGO has succeeded in remaining relevant to its mercurial society. Incredibly forward thinking, the Houston Grand Opera performs a much higher ratio of new shows per season than any other company—even the Metropolitan Opera. HGO pursues new productions by composers who write to address current societal issues and appeals to broader audiences. For example, the first ever mariachi opera, *Cruzar la Cara de la Luna*, reflects the large Mexican American population in Houston. HGO has broad appeal, producing music for the sake of their Houston audience and presenting outreach performances in various nearby towns. HGO became one of the first companies to produce modern political operas, like the controversial *Dead Man Walking*.

While the state of Texas may have the stigma of the Old South, the arts in the city of Houston blaze ahead with their progressive approach. Even in the difficult economy, the Houston Grand Opera has maintained its tradition of making opera an accessible art form. Early in HGO's growth, the tradition of free outdoor performances at the Miller Outdoor Theater began to help those unable to afford the not-so-dazzling cost of tickets. With the philosophy that ticket prices should never exceed a reasonable amount, even to support the expensive productions, and the contradictory philosophy that the production itself should never be sacrificed due to a deficit of funds, HGO relies on the graciousness of its patrons. Currently, HGO offers tickets at a discounted rate to students and other new-to-opera audience members. The durability of the company lies within its ability to grow with each new generation.

Singers who desire to perform with HGO have several avenues they can pursue. After extensive study in the vocal arts, they can audition for the Houston Grand Opera Studio, which offers more training and ample performance opportunities. Studio artists are often called on to cover smaller roles in the main stage operas. Sometimes, they fill in as understudies. HGO offers competitions, such as the Eleanor McCollum Competition for Young Singers, that help aspiring singers get noticed.¹² Word of mouth, auditions, and luck are the formula for a singer's success.

Even if a singer does not crave the hard-won fast track to stardom, ample opportunities to perform with the Houston Grand Opera are available. HGO staffs its chorus with many talented singers—while it does not cover the entire cost of living expenses, it gives singers time to work elsewhere (often by teaching voice lessons) or attend school. HGO offers other performance alternatives, such as its Opera-to-Go program spearheaded by HGOco. Four to five singers bring the joy of opera to Houston's youth, presenting high-energy opera to schools, libraries, and community centers. Each show is fully staged and forty-five minutes, making the performance accessible to children and teens. Classic stories are adapted, such as *Strega Nona*, *Rapunzel*, and *Hansel & Gretel*.¹³

A common audition consists of arts songs and arias (usually with the expectation of an Italian aria and contrasting pieces in other languages), references, and often a pre-screening video performance. After several rounds of live auditions, singers are either called back or cut. Once a singer reaches the pinnacle of the operatic world, a contract with a major opera company, which can last anywhere from two to nine months, can pay as much as the value of a small house, with all amenities included—from housing to car insurance.

HGO's dedication to the development of the fine arts is evidenced by its artistic plan: "Houston Grand Opera has made its reputation by producing high-quality productions of the traditional opera repertoire in which all elements are rarities ... and introducing them to America; by producing new American operas on a more consistent basis than any other American opera company; by introducing into the opera house repertoire the classic works of the American musical theater; ... by pioneering in-house development of new American works through commissions and workshops; and by training young American operatic talent in several disciplines through the Houston Grand Opera Studio."¹⁴ The most remarkable milestone in the Houston Grand Opera's history is its move into the top-notch home, the Wortham Theater Center. Ever growing and adapting, HGO transcended its small roots in the basement of Jones Hall and flourished until it became recognized as an internationally acclaimed company.

Alyssa Weathersby is a senior vocal performance major at the University of Houston, Moores School of Music and Honors College. She performs with the Moores Opera Center as well as Mercury and Ars Lyrica in association with University of Houston's Concert Chorale. She will continue her vocal studies to support the growth of the classical music industry.



A behind the scenes look at the Wortham Center rehearsal room.