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LEAP OF FAITH

An ambitious organization tries to reboot “the people’s opera.”

By Russell Platt





New York City Opera returns, with "Tosca," at the Rose Theatre.

Illustration by Sachin Teng

New York City Opera was once a radiant and seemingly indispensable part of New York's cultural life. But ever since its closure, two and a half years ago, the prospect of reviving the company has somehow seemed more questionable with each passing month. Years before City Opera filed for bankruptcy, in 2013, a big chunk of its audience had already fled—and they certainly aren't showing up at the Met, which is

having its own problems filling seats. Just because New York ought to support two established opera companies, as so many in the business contend, doesn't necessarily mean that it *has* to.

NYCO Renaissance, however, would beg to differ. The organization, which is headed by the investment manager Roy G. Niederhoffer, a member of the old City Opera board, and Michael Capasso, the former director of the long-admired but now defunct Dicapo Opera, has just won a legal battle for the right to bring City Opera out of bankruptcy, inherit its assets, and pay off its creditors. Based on the testimonials on the group's Web site—by such eminent figures as the director Harold Prince, the baritone Sherrill Milnes, and the soprano Carol Vaness—a revived City Opera could take on not only the old company's name but also much of its former agenda: developing young American singers, nurturing homegrown composers, and mounting theatrically innovative productions. It's true that scrappy but exciting groups like LoftOpera are giving young singers opportunities around town, and that contemporary-minded groups like Beth Morrison Projects are reinventing the chamber-opera genre from scratch. But Capasso believes that a reborn City Opera would still have a powerful role. "The standard American opera rep wouldn't exist if not for New York City Opera," he notes. "The niche opera companies are not going to produce large-scale works like 'Moby-Dick' and 'Silent Night'"—recent hits by Jake Heggie and Kevin Puts, respectively—"which are having success nationwide but which are notably absent from New York."

The tentative return of City Opera will take place at Jazz at Lincoln Center's Rose Theatre, the moderately sized and acoustically satisfying venue at Columbus Circle, which the organization is renting for a staging of "Tosca" (Jan. 20-24). "Our goal is to reengage by returning the company to a Lincoln Center venue, because the audience liked to associate the company with a permanent location," Capasso says. But will they bite? Those who long for Franco Zeffirelli's sumptuously conservative production of Puccini's masterpiece, which the Met replaced with the austere modernist Luc Bondy staging in 2009, might well be cheered by the NYCO Renaissance production: to evoke the three specific Roman locations in which the composer set each act, the organization has partnered with the Archivio Storico Ricordi, in Milan, to re-create the costumes and décor designed by the great Adolfo Hohenstein for the opera's world première, in 1900. The two casts for the run will include established up-and-comers

(the tenor James Valenti and the soprano Latonia Moore), young unknowns, and even a respected veteran (the baritone Carlo Guelfi)—just as the old City Opera would have done. For anyone in New York who loves opera, attendance is mandatory. ♦

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