

## Community comes together to produce classy 'La Traviata'



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What's black and white and Verdi all over?

NOVA Center for the Performing Arts' production of Giuseppe Verdi's "La Traviata" is a classy reimagined staging of one of the most-produced operas in the world.

Gone are the elaborate rented sets and period costumes of the Rimrock Opera Co. era. What appears on stage Saturday night at the Alberta Bair Theater are black evening gowns and tuxedos, set off by a backdrop of sparkling starlight. It's director Matthew Haney's modern twist on the 1853 opera.

The focus, now more than ever, is on the performers without heavy makeup and stiff wigs. This makes "La Traviata" more relatable.

You may see yourself in insincere Flora, played with a sharp understanding of the role by Michelle Berger, and the best friend of the lead character Violetta, played by Lynell Kruckeberg.

Flora is absent from Violetta's side as she suffers from physical and emotional trauma; heartbreak cripples her psyche and tuberculosis steals her energy. Kruckeberg, of Red Lodge, owns this role with her stunning vocals. The opera was written about a real-life courtesan who died of tuberculosis after being pushed away from her only love.

Or maybe you relate to the father, Giorgio (Cory Neal Schantz), trying to orchestrate the life of his son, Alfredo (Christopher Bengochea). Schantz, a baritone, takes on this challenging vocal role with notes that sound more like they're coming from a tenor. Bengochea has sung the role of Alfredo many times, and it shows with his mastery of the role.

It's fun to see and hear the locals, the community members who stepped up to keep opera going in Billings. They make up members of the orchestra, led by Barbara Day

Turner, and the 15-member chorus, led by Rocky Mountain College graduate Janie Sutton.

Steve Green and his daughter Deyja sing in the chorus, and Sutton's brother Jubal Rife plays the Barone Douphol, who challenges Alfredo to a duel.

"La Traviata" marks West High senior Erica Noble's fourth opera — a run that started with "Tosca."

"Opera is definitely something that I'd like to keep doing," Noble said.

Skyview senior Siriana Lundgren is also in the chorus.

"I love the passion behind the opera," Lundgren said.

If you follow football, you might recognize former Rocky nose guard Jacob Scharbrough, who plays Gastone.

"I think he's a count," Scharbrough said.

He may not know if his character is a count or some other royalty, but Scharbrough knows his vocal range and explores the upper reaches of it with a fresh, dynamic quality.

"My dad wanted me to wrestle, but my mom wanted me to go into music," Scharbrough said. "I started wrestling and piano the same year, when I was 5."

Scharbrough, who will play for the Billings Wolves next year, fits in well in the opera world with his massive chest, so wide that his size 56 tuxedo jacket was hard to find. On Wednesday, he was still waiting for a ruffled shirt that fits.

## **Opera at the ABT**

Verdi's "La Traviata" is being performed Saturday at 7:30 p.m. at the Alberta Bair Theater. Call the ABT at 256-6052 for tickets, which range in price from \$21 to \$46.



JAMES WOODCOCK/Billings Gazette.

Performers act out a scene from the opera "La Traviata" at the Alberta Bair Theatre Thursday morning.