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## Capital Opera is out to conquer Raleigh on a shoestring

*Underdog opera*

By Bob Geary

***La Traviata***

**Capital Opera**

**A.J. Fletcher Opera Hall**

**Oct. 19 and 21**

*Determined underdogs. Always a good story. It's a business staple (Iacocca). A hit in sports (Hoosiers). So why not opera? This weekend, Raleigh's upstart opera company—not the bigger one, we're talking about the up-and-coming one—will go for the glory at Fletcher Opera Hall armed with a little money and loads of talent and pluck. Oh, and music by Verdi.*



[Larger image](#) • Wayne Wyman directs a rehearsal of *La Traviata* inside Jones Auditorium at Meredith College.

Photo by Derek Anderson

It's an early rehearsal for Capital Opera's upcoming production of *La Traviata*. The main performers are gathering onstage for the first time in the Meredith College auditorium. They're loose. They're chattering. So is Wayne Wyman, the conductor-director, until he calls, "Places!" The players shuffle a bit, still small-talking. "Stop!" This time, Wyman's call is a forceful demand. "When we're having fun, we're having fun. But 'places' means we're

*working!"*

The cast snaps to and begins a walk-through of the opening scene. "*Stop!*" Wyman steps in again. He asks a cast member to translate the lyric he was singing—in Italian—to party girl Violetta Valery (Lori Lind). His answer: He's worried about her bad behavior. Wyman's response: Then why are you shrugging when Violetta waves you away? "Know what the words *mean*," Wyman tells his cast.

Wyman's a perfectionist, someone said—and a great find for the little company when it lured him to Raleigh from a school in Vienna. Wyman says he's "trying for the highest levels of excellence in all areas of the production." Which means, for this show, that the acting and staging should come as close as possible to the singing. Because the singing, when the cast comes to its first ensemble melody, is an absolute wow.

Hearing that melody in his second-row seat, Joel Adams glows like a proud parent, which to this company he is. Years ago, when Adams was still teaching music at Enloe High School, he'd dreamed awhile about starting a professional opera company in Raleigh that would be, well, just like this one. Its purpose would be to nurture young performers with college or apprenticeship training but not enough "experience" for the big time. His company would offer "experience." And ticket prices would be affordable—maybe regular folks would even come to love opera. There'd be programs in the schools too, helping kids see opera for what it is, which is pure entertainment.

True, Raleigh already had an opera company back then. Actually, it had two. But the older one, started by A.J. Fletcher of Capital Broadcasting fame (and fortune), was on its way out—it's since moved to Winston-Salem, where it's allied with the N.C. School of the Arts. As for the newer one, the Opera Company of North Carolina (OCNC), it was doing "grand opera," Adams says, with elaborate staging, expensive tickets and international stars brought in to take the leads. It, too, was underwritten by a wealthy family.

Adams thought his new company wouldn't be a rival to OCNC and could even help it by developing fresh audiences and talent in the region. He wasn't able to act on his dream, however, because as a high school teacher he had all the work he could handle.

Enter Madame Torchia (tor-kee-a). Four years ago, opera patron Kathleen Torchia came to Raleigh quite out of the blue—or out of some tall tale about an upstart opera company perhaps—from her home in Sacramento, Calif. She'd started one "capital opera" there. (Sacramento is the state capital.) She was working on a second one in Harrisburg, Pa. She thought every capital city should have one.

Invited here by the parents of one of her singers, Torchia was seeding her vision with a low-budget production of *La Bohème* on the old church stage at the Longview Center. Adams, who'd retired by then, signed on as soon as he heard. (He did the props.) Mezzo soprano Ellen Williams, head of the music program at Meredith, signed on as well. (She rounded up talent.)

How did that *La Bohème* turn out? "The voices were wonderful," Adams says. "The orchestra was a only a piano and four-five pieces, and it was very poor."

Ah, but mission accomplished for Torchia, because Adams and Williams were hooked. They quickly incorporated the new Capital Opera and became its co-artistic directors. As Adams says, it's been a roller-coaster ride ever since.



**Larger image** • Joel Adams, artistic director of Capital Opera, during a rehearsal for *La Traviata* inside Jones Auditorium.

Photo by Derek Anderson

## The Ups and Some Downs

What do you need for a successful opera company? You need talent, which Williams assures us that we have in abundance in the Piedmont region of North Carolina. "We've got great singers coming from the music programs at UNC-Greensboro, UNC-Chapel Hill, East Carolina and Meredith," she says. "Even when we couldn't pay them anything, wonderful performers were always coming out of the woodwork to be in our shows."

You also need money, however, for the costumes, the orchestra and—if you want to get better—professional direction. And the point of Capital Opera, remember, is to help young singers advance their professional careers. So Adams and Williams were determined to pay them too; and gradually, though not without struggle, they've been able to do so: In *La Traviata*, \$1,000 for each of the three principals; smaller amounts for the supporting cast; and, for the first time, stipends for the professional voices in the chorus. (Meredith College singers from Williams' opera workshop augment the chorus professionals.)

It's not a lot, obviously. Each of the principals is putting in a full three weeks of rehearsal and performances for their money, including doing a school show last week at Franklin Academy in Wake Forest. All three live somewhere else—Winston-Salem; Rock Hill, S.C.; Manassas, Va.—so while they're working here they're also living as guests of host families.

But plain and simple, Capital Opera has no rich patrons, and raising money remains its

biggest challenge. "We were sort of put down at first," Adams says, naming no names. "There've been many days when our board would meet and say We can't do it; we've got to throw in the towel." The company's current budget of \$130,000 a year is supported by a grant from United Arts of Raleigh and Wake County that pays for, this year, 25 school performances; a Raleigh Arts Commission grant pays Wyman a half-time salary to be the company's managing director. Ticket sales and a short list of private donors provide the rest.

Still, if the downs on the roller coaster are about money, all the ups are about the shows, which after a "somewhat amateurish" beginning, says veteran music critic John Lambert, "have gotten better and better." Capital's performance of *Madame Butterfly* in May, which ended its fourth season, was excellent and won rave reviews from *The News & Observer's* Roy Dicks and from Jeffrey Rossman, writing for Lambert's online journal, Classical Voice of North Carolina ([www.cvnc.org](http://www.cvnc.org)). Rossman said the company had finally "arrived" by finally filling Fletcher Hall with "a shining example of artistic excellence."

"I am really looking forward to this *Traviata*," Lambert says. "The fact that what this company is doing is so important, and it's getting better all the time, I think is cause for real celebration."

*Madame Butterfly* marked the first time Capital Opera was able to afford Fletcher Hall, with its superb acoustics and—a big advantage over the free stages the company uses otherwise—a full orchestra pit. Unfortunately, Fletcher was only available over Memorial Day weekend, which meant the 600-seat theater was little more than half full for both shows.

Nonetheless, *Butterfly* marked the high point in Capital Opera's short history, surpassing even the *Faust* that it mounted in 2005, with a 120-member chorus that flowed up to the balcony singing Marguerite's soul to heaven. ("The audience walked out with tears just streaming down their faces," Adams recalls.) That *Butterfly* production was also good to Suzanne Grest, who sang the lead. Shortly afterward, she called Adams to report that she had been signed to a Chicago talent agency, thanks to her opportunity in Raleigh. An exultant Adams thought to himself, "That's exactly why we're here."

If *Butterfly* was Capital Opera's best production yet, it also raised the bar for *La Traviata*, which opens its fifth season. This new show features Capital's biggest orchestra ever, 25 professional pieces (including 10 strings) at a cost of almost \$16,000. (Most of the players are paid union scale.) The cast is the best ever too, Adams says, led by a trio of young performers on their way up. (see below) "It's going to be a fabulous show."

Both Williams and Adams marvel at the distance they have traveled since they started Capital Opera. As they often joke, "We didn't know what we were getting into, and it's a good thing we didn't because we might not have done it."

Adams's only worry now is how they're going to pay for this fabulous *Traviata*.

Would two sell-outs help? "That would help a lot," Adams answers, his former glow returning.

*Tickets for La Traviata are \$25, \$20 for students and seniors. To order, go to [www.brownpapertickets.com/event/20768](http://www.brownpapertickets.com/event/20768) or call (800) 838-3006 or 760-8237. For more information about Capital Opera, visit [www.capitaloperaraleigh.org](http://www.capitaloperaraleigh.org).*

## ***La Traviata*: Cast and Crew**

The principal players exemplify the young talent Capital Opera exists to showcase.

The least experienced of the three, **Daniel Stein**, plays Alfredo Germont. Stein is an Ohio native with a master's degree from UNC-Greensboro (2005) who's performed with numerous regional opera companies since, including a small role in Capital Opera's *The Marriage of Figaro*. But this is his first chance at a starring role, which is what young singers need to be considered for the same roles with the bigger opera companies, Stein says. Stein's ambition: The Metropolitan Opera in New York. But for now, he's waiting for his wife, also a singer, to finish her master's at Winthrop, in Rock Hill, S.C. Then they'll travel to Europe and look for auditions there. In the meantime, he's been waiting tables to make ends meet. But coming here for three weeks cost him his latest job. He'll need a new one when he goes back. Stein "has great potential ... a fine tenor voice," according to William Thomas Walker, one of [cvnc.org](http://cvnc.org)'s reviewers.



**Larger image** • Lori Lind as Violetta during a rehearsal for *La Traviata*  
Photo by Derek Anderson

The most experienced is **Lori Lind**, of Manassas, Va., who plays Violetta Valery. She's had leads with regional companies and chorus positions with big ones like the Washington Opera. This is her first chance to sing a Verdi lead, however, which is critical to her career because she is a "Verdi soprano," with the power and agility to handle the composer's difficult music. And, like Stein, she says it's all about doing Violetta somewhere before any big company will consider her for Violetta. "They don't easily trust a new voice in a leading role," Lind says, "because opera is so expensive to stage." With her singer husband, she's already able to "cobble together a living" in opera. Her ambition: To "go step by step ... doing what I love to do."

The third principal is **Krassen Karagiozov**, a native of Bulgaria who plays Giorgio Germont. A baritone, he was deemed "a wonder and a delight" by Walker for his title portrayal in *Don Giovanni* with the A.J. Fletcher Opera in Winston-Salem, where he lives. He also won good reviews as Sharpless in Capital Opera's *Madame Butterfly* and is a star on regional recital stages.

Says Ellen Williams of the trio: "We think they have just as much potential as the stars OCNC has brought in. They just need more experience."

As for the rest of the cast and crew, they're all locals, with credits that range from regional opera to church-choir directing, and they're the talent pool Williams was talking about—singers and set designers who live in the community and are professionals too. Having work for them is another important contribution Capital Opera makes to the "fabric" of our region, she says.

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