

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

DATE February 27, 2009
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Excitement builds for Vancouver Opera's
Rigoletto

A bold production that brings new dimensions to Verdi's dark, tender drama of
love and revenge

Vancouver, BC ~ Rehearsals are well underway for Vancouver Opera's production of *Rigoletto*, opening in just a few days! As last minute adjustments are made to the sets and costumes, and the performers get ready to thrill, audiences excitedly anticipate director **Glynis Leyshon's** bold new take on this Verdi classic.

Leyshon's innovative, imaginative treatment of this beloved opera drew rave reviews at its première in Calgary. In less than one week, this production will be presented on the Vancouver Opera stage for the first time. Leyshon's stunning new take on *Rigoletto* boasts bold visuals that twin beautifully with Verdi's dark, tender drama of love and revenge.

Opening night is **Saturday, March 7, 2009**, with subsequent performances **Tuesday, March 10; Thursday, March 12; Saturday, March 14** and **Tuesday, March 17**. All performances take place at the Queen Elizabeth Theatre, Georgia and Hamilton Streets, Vancouver, B.C. and begin at 7:30pm. Tickets are available exclusively at the Vancouver Opera Ticket Centre, online at www.vancouveropera.ca or by telephone (604-683-0222). See complete ticket information below.

For a closer look at the process of bringing *Rigoletto* to the stage, visit the Vancouver Opera Blog at www.vancouveropera.blogspot.com. Assistant Director **David Adams** will be posting a series of video dispatches that take viewers behind the scenes of this exciting production.

Multiple Grammy Award-winner **Donnie Ray Albert** brings power and presence to the role of Rigoletto, and the raw emotion of Gilda is sung with heart-stopping intensity by rising Cuban-American soprano **Eglise Gutierrez**. The chemistry between these gifted singers – and actors – catapults Verdi's work to new heights.

VO's Chorus Director and Assistant Conductor Leslie Dala steps onto the podium for his first large-orchestra engagement as conductor of the Vancouver Opera Orchestra and the Vancouver Opera Chorus.

This is a rare production that cannot be missed.

The Singers

Grammy Award-winning baritone **Donnie Ray Albert** (Rigoletto) has received accolades for his previous performances in this role. "From his first, world-weary appearance on stage as the overture concluded, Albert bore not only the hunchback jester's physical pain but his total transformation from mocking tool of the duke to blood-thirsty seeker of vengeance," raves the *Tuscon Citizen*, "His commanding baritone won the audience." He last appeared with VO in 1994, singing the title role in *Nabucco*.

Rising Cuban-American soprano **Eglise Gutierrez** (Gilda) has been praised for her "gorgeous, creamy soprano" (*Cinninnati.com*). She has impressed audiences with her performances as Violetta in *La traviata*, Lakmé in *Lakmé*, and previous appearances as Gilda, with many more engagements scheduled for next year. This performance is her début with Vancouver Opera.

Tenor **Bruce Sledge** (The Duke) has earned rave reviews for a variety of roles, including praise from *The San Antonio Express-News* for his "silky, almost sensual voice". He has appeared at the Metropolitan Opera as Almaviva in *Il barbiere di Siviglia* and New York City Opera as Ernesto in *Don Pasquale*, and recently appeared at a recital for the Marilyn Horne Foundation at Carnegie's Weill Hall. He last appeared with Vancouver Opera in the title role in VO's 2006 concert version of *Werther*.

California-based bass-baritone **Kirk Eichelberger** will sing the role of Sparafucile in his Vancouver Opera début. His past roles include the title role in *Le nozze di Figaro* for Opera Memphis and Méphistophélès in Opera San Jose's *Faust*, a role he will be performing again with Opera Grand Rapids.

Mezzo-soprano **Norine Burgess** (Maddalena) last appeared with VO as Madame Larina in *Eugene Onegin*, and before that as Siébel in *Faust*. She has sung Princess Marie Bolkonskaya with Canadian Opera Company. She appeared in the premiere of Glynis Leyshon's treatment of *Rigoletto* with Calgary Opera in 2007, earning praise from the *Calgary Herald*: "Norine Burgess is seductive and vocally elegant as Maddalena."

London, Ontario bass-baritone **Chad Louwerse** (Count Monterone) last appeared with Vancouver Opera as Captain Petrovich and Zaretsky in *Eugene Onegin*, and will return as First Nazerene in the upcoming *Salome*. Also from Ontario, baritone **Willy Miles-Grenzberg** will be singing Count Ceprano, and also returning to Vancouver Opera in *Salome*. Countess Ceprano will be sung by Vancouver-based soprano **Raphael Wagner**, returning to Vancouver Opera after her last performance as Cio-Cio-San's cousin in 2004's *Madama Butterfly*.

Also in the cast are baritone **John Conlon** as Marullo, tenor **Sam Chung** as Borsa, soprano **Sheila Christie** as Giovanna, baritone **W. David Collins** as the Herald and mezzo-soprano **Barbara Towell** as the Page.

The Story in Brief

Rigoletto is a jester in the court of a womanizing Duke. Gilda is his beloved daughter. When Rigoletto's jokes go too far, he becomes the subject of an angry Count's curse. Gilda is kidnapped by the Duke's courtiers and Rigoletto swears revenge. The jester's plan goes wrong and Gilda pays the price with her life.

Read a full synopsis at www.vancouveropera.ca.

Background

Giuseppe Verdi's *Rigoletto* is based on Victor Hugo's play, *Le roi s'amuse*, which opened in Paris on November 22, 1832. The reception was poor, to say the least: audience reaction ranged from icy silence to hoots of laughter, and the authorities shut it down after its first performance, citing immoral themes. Verdi never had the chance to see it on stage.

But Verdi was thrilled by the play, describing it as "great, immense, and it includes a character who is one of the greatest creations that theatre of all nations and all times can boast." Nothing since *Macbeth* had had such an effect on him. In 1850, as Verdi was about to sign a contract with Teatro La Fenice in Venice, he broached the subject of an operatic *Le roi* to librettist Francesco Maria Piave, with whom he had written the opera *Ernani* in 1844.

Ernani, also based on a Hugo play, had enjoyed great success, but the first draft of Piave's libretto for *Le roi s'amuse* appalled the Venetian censors. They were shocked that Verdi and Piave had squandered their talents on a subject of "such repellant immorality and obscene triviality" and immediately forbade its performance in Venice.

Piave had to rewrite the libretto twice before it satisfied both Verdi and the censors. Paris was rewritten as Mantua; the King became a Duke. Even the title went through multiple revisions. But through it all, Verdi fought to have the substance of the drama remain.

Opera of the time dictated that virtue be portrayed as beautiful and evil as ugly. Verdi's *Rigoletto* was much more complex: the misshapen jester is vengeful and repellent, but he is also the embodiment of selfless paternal love. Gilda is sweet and pure, but she condones her seducer's treachery by forgiving him and even commits the sin of suicide to save him. The characters are contradictory and complicated.

Rigoletto premièred at La Fenice on March 11, 1851. "The composer or his librettist have been gripped by a posthumous affection for the satanic school already out of fashion," attacked the *Gazetta di Venezia*, "They have sought the ideal in the deformed, the horrible...We cannot praise these tastes." Outside of Venice, censors permitted only alternative versions of the opera: *Viscardello*, *Lionello*, *Clara di Perth*. Some of these included a different ending, with Gilda emerging from her sack, perfectly healthy.

Within ten years *Rigoletto* had been staged in over 250 opera houses, and remains one of the most-performed operas in the world. Its variety, profundity and brave originality have made it impervious to critics and censors.

Full Ticket Information

Single tickets are available from the Vancouver Opera Ticket Centre, online at www.vancouveropera.ca, or by phone at 604-683-0222. Visa, MasterCard and American Express are accepted. Groups: For special pricing for groups of ten or more, call 604-683-0222.