

Nightingale Opera Theater to stage Gian Carlo Menotti's *The Consul*

by Daniel Hathaway



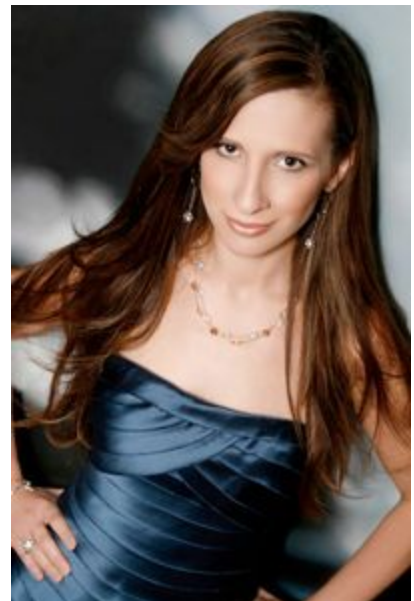
At the same time last year that Nightingale Opera Theater executive director Melissa Davis was thinking about a title to produce in 2017, she was also feeling distraught by stories she read about the emerging refugee crisis.

“I listened to Menotti’s *The Consul* and was so moved by it that I thought there was no better time to perform the work than

this summer.” That plan has now come to fruition: two performances are scheduled for Friday, July 21 at 7:30 pm and Sunday, July 23 at 2:30 pm in the Barlow Center in Hudson. (Read a plot synopsis [here](#).)

Davis’s plans soon took on another dimension. “I decided that if I was going to stage this work, it needed to be more than just another opera performance in Northeast Ohio,” she said in a conference call, joined by stage director Marla Berg. “I decided I wanted to donate all the proceeds from ticket sales to refugee children fleeing from war-torn situations.”

Berg didn’t know the work, but *The Consul* cast its spell on her as well. “It’s been a real journey from opening the score for the first time to hearing the songs in my head when I fall asleep at night,” she said. “I think it’s an important work that asks whether human beings can really hope to change in the future. As I told the cast one day,



not only is this an incredible theatrical and musical experience, but it plants the idea that we can make a change in the world by even one act of kindness every day.”

The Consul was Gian Carlo Menotti’s first full-length opera. He wrote both its libretto and score in response to news stories and personal encounters with individuals and groups who fled Europe after World War II. One report chronicled the fate of refugees trapped on a bridge between Austria and Hungary. Another story dealt with a Polish immigrant who hanged himself on Ellis Island after being denied entry to the United States. A third was more personal — the difficulties related by an older Italian woman Menotti met on a flight to New York.

After its premiere in 1950, the opera, set in an unidentified European totalitarian country, ran for eight months on Broadway, winning both a Pulitzer Prize and the New York Drama Critics’ Circle Award. “The fact that it made it to Broadway in the first place is amazing,” Berg said, “but I’m not surprised by the length of its run. It’s so strong theatrically that you’re compelled to watch it. If there were no music at all, the text could run as a play.”

But there *is* music, and it’s equally impressive. “You hear influences from all kinds of composers,” Davis said. “There are incredible ensembles and glorious Puccini-like moments.” Berg added that the composer has also created magic with his recitatives. “He represents conversations so beautifully that you almost forget that the singers are singing.”

Davis said that she has a clear vision when she selects singers for roles in her opera productions, and that she was lucky to secure just the right cast for this production. That roster includes Brian Keith Johnson (as John Sorel), Diana Farrell (Magda Sorel), Sandra Ross (the Mother), Robin Rice (Secret Police Agent), Cynthia Wohlschlagel (the Secretary), Frank Ward (Mr. Kofner), Lara Troyer (the Foreign Woman), Melissa Davis (Anna Gomez), Kaylee Nichols (Vera Boronel), Timothy Culver (the Magician), and Jason Howie (Assan).

“The ‘Papers Aria’ is Wagnerian in scope, and requires a very dramatic soprano voice,” Davis said. “Luckily we were able to bring in Diana Farrell from California for three weeks.”

Davis has cast herself in the “small but important role” of Anna Gomez. “She sings in ensembles and has one recitative when she’s in the waiting room to see the Secretary, and it’s revealed that she’s spent three years in a concentration camp and no one knows where her husband is being kept prisoner. The Secretary says, ‘We can’t help you because you don’t have any documents.’ There’s a beautiful moment when she says,

‘There must be someplace for me to go in this huge world.’ That’s a very powerful scene.”



Berg noted that the Nightingale Opera Theatre production respects the original time frame of the plot, “Right at the end of World War II, with its remnants of Fascism, Naziism, and the resulting societies whose people are oppressed, afraid, and don’t know who’s watching them. Our designer, Jeff Ridenour, has included two cameras in the set that are constantly watching what’s going on.”

The director also noted that the Barlow Center theater is a small, intimate place perfect for this production, but one that calls for some vocal adjustments. “Opera singers are used to filling a large space with sound. Here, we’ve needed to find the balance between how far they can go emotionally without risking their ability to sing. We want to make the audience feel like they’re in the same room with the characters.”

Berg is also thrilled by the work of Nightingale’s Young Artists, who have been covering the parts and will step into their roles in *The Consul* for a special performance on Thursday evening. “They’ve learned a difficult score with little stage time, and we’ve all benefitted by having them around.”

In looking for a conduit to channel donations for refugee children, Melissa Davis discovered the [Preemptive Love Foundation](#). “They’re not affiliated with any political entity or religious organization,” she said. “They provide life-saving heart surgery for children who otherwise wouldn’t receive medical care, and relief for families affected by ISIS. They drop off food, make grants for small business owners to restart after losing everything, provide education for at-risk children, and promote peace in conflict zones.” Besides forwarding ticket proceeds, David will include donation information in the program this weekend, and provide a box outside the theater for contributions.

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