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**WOMEN ON THE VERGE**

UO Opera Ensemble's "A Tale of Two Women" looks at  
the lives of American women

**D**ivas and prima donnas rule the opera stage. But in real life, not so much, no matter what happens with Hillary in 2016. On Feb. 8 and 9, the University of Oregon Opera Ensemble presents "A Tale of Two Women: *The Old Maid and the Thief* and *Trouble in Tahiti*," a pair of delightful American one-act operas that explore — sometimes hilariously, ultimately poignantly — the psychology of mid-20th-century women and their roles in a changing America.



AUSTIN AND KATHERINE CURTIS  
IN *TROUBLE IN TAHITI*

American composer Gian Carlo Menotti's sly, funny and touching 1939 opera buffa (originally written for radio), *The Old Maid and the Thief*, involves a bitter never-wed older woman and her younger friend, who spend their days gossiping about the weather and other inconsequentialities, and whose lives and fortunes change dramatically (and often hilariously) when a charming young stranger arrives. Menotti's glittering score boasts some lovely arias and witty sung dialogue.

It's followed by Leonard Bernstein's clever 1952 mélange of satirical pop song, musical theater and operetta, *Trouble in Tahiti*, which recounts a day in the life of a suburban couple mired in domestic misery, bickering over burned toast and who'll attend Junior's recital. But it's also a moving character study in words and music; Bernstein brilliantly set some of the songs (especially the show-stoppingly hilarious "Island Magic") to '50s style TV tunes.

*Old Maid* is often played as a little charmer skewering small-town gossip and ennui, *Tahiti* as a potent early excoriation of the vapidness of mid-century America's suburban dream — the little white house, the gym, the psychiatrist's office, etc. But director and UO music professor Karen Esquivel views the stories through the lives of the two shows' main female characters: "Women [who] resort to different types of fantasies to avoid dealing with their unhappy lives." Though much had changed for American women in the generation separating the two shows' leading ladies, some things hadn't — and still haven't, at least for many.

Esquivel approached these intimate mini-operas as character studies as much as social satire, encouraging the graduate student performers to imagine the women's psychological backstories. What would cause Menotti's uptight Miss Todd to fantasize about abandoning her repressed small-town lifestyle to embark on an affair with a handsome young stranger and even a life of crime? Esquivel hints at an explanation, involving a turn-of-the-century young romance gone wrong (with attendant social opprobrium), via wordless action during the opera's overture.

"Then I looked at *Tahiti*, and you have two desperate people whose lives are miserable, trying to portray themselves as happy — another pathetic situation," she says. "I could see the women linked to each other. It's about what the culture does to the people."

Nor did she neglect Dinah's put-upon husband's motivation. "For me it was a struggle to like Sam at first because I'm a woman," she confesses. "'What a toad! You're not gonna go to your kid's recital?!' But that was what was expected of him — provider, money, house in the suburbs. If a man didn't do that, he was a failure. I tried to get into Sam's shoes and see his level of frustration."

In initial rehearsals, Esquivel asked her leads (both of whom are married, though not to each other) to speak rather than sing their lines to each other, as a married couple would, and to imagine how men and women of the time would deal with their mutual repressed anger — through violence and depression, respectively. "Then I told them, 'Don't go home and do this!'" she laughs.

Unlike Miss Todd's, Dinah's escape fantasy doesn't involve a handsome young stranger but rather that operatic standard for a century or more: an exotic getaway, and she used in particular one movie of the period, the Bob Hope-Bing Crosby *Road to Bali*, to help devise the look of the production. Because the show happens in the acoustically magnificent and appropriately intimate (for these domestic dramas) but theatrically limited (no dramatic lighting, orchestra pit, etc.) Beall Hall, the production relies on period costumes and simple props to evoke the eras portrayed.

Despite their historical trappings, the stories are universal and timeless. "It's no different than *La Traviata* — even if you weren't around in the 1830s, these are humans," Esquivel explains. "You can get a married couple today and have the same issues going on — they're very human issues. These shows are not preachy, but they deal with real human experiences and emotions, and that's why they keep being performed." — Brett Campbell

The UO Opera Ensemble performs "A Tale of Two Women: *The Old Maid and the Thief* and *Trouble in Tahiti*" 7:30 pm Saturday, Feb. 8, at UO's Beall Concert Hall; \$5 students and seniors; \$7 general.