

ENTERTAINMENT GUIDE

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## JOSE MARIA CONDEMI

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# Director creating magic with Opera S.J.

Condemì returns to where he made professional debut

By Richard Scheinin

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When he was a boy in Argentina, one of Jose Maria Condemì's favorite hide-outs was an abandoned house in his hometown of San Andres de Giles, not far from Buenos Aires. He would wander through the overgrown cat-tails, hunting for dinosaur eggs, while "exploring and making this house my own, imagining stories and finding all this magic."

Condemì, now 43 and a stage director whose career is rocketing, might be describing the approach he takes whenever he steps inside an opera house: exploring the territory, imagining new stories inside old ones and hoping to generate magic.

"I like the challenge of taking the dust off the material," he says. "I try to find a way to make this story fresh every time."

This month, he directs Opera San Jose's production of Verdi's "La Traviata," the tragic tale of the glamorous courtesan Violetta, opening Saturday at the California Theatre with sopranos Jouvancia Jean-Baptiste and Rebecca Davis alternating in the leading role. Also this month, he directs Seattle Opera's "Orphee et Euridice," by Gluck. Then he flies home to Oakland — he has lived in the Bay Area since the late '90s — "to switch luggage," he jokes, before heading to Denver (for Opera Colorado's "Florencia en el Amazonas" by Daniel Catan) and on to Santa Barbara. There, as artistic director of Opera Santa Barbara, he directs another production of "Orphee."

In only a decade, Condemì — who graduated in 2002 from San Francisco Opera's



JOSIE LEPE/STAFF

For stage director Jose Maria Condemì, storytelling is paramount: "It has to have some dramatic juice," he says.

Adler Fellowship training program — has put together a career in major houses, from San Francisco to Buenos Aires. He is a kind of X Factor: Productions tend to "sing" when he is involved, with smartly paced acting, strong singing and sparkling sets.

"Audiences go to the opera for some degree of splendor," says Condemì, sitting in the ornate lobby of the California Theatre before a recent rehearsal. "People like to see beautiful salon scenes, beautiful gowns, as in 'Traviata,' so we give that to them. And of course, the singing must be quality singing, and the story

must be powerfully told. I'm big into storytelling; for me, the story is the important thing. It has to have some dramatic juice," he says.

His productions often bear the mark of happy collaborations. While continuing to tuck in productions in recent seasons with West Bay Opera in Palo Alto and Festival Opera in Walnut Creek, he also has directed legendary soprano Deborah Voigt in Wagner's "Tristan und Isolde" at Lyric Opera of Chicago, during the 2008-09 season. Last summer, he directed Verdi's "Simon Boccanegra" at the Teatro Colón in Buenos Aires, where he at-



Condemì consults with assistant stage director Nicolas Aliaga during rehearsal. "Traviata" opens Saturday.

## OPERA SAN JOSE

Presenting Verdi's "La Traviata"

Jose Maria Condemì, director; David Rohrbaugh, conductor; with two rotating casts

**When:** Saturday-Feb. 26

**Where:** California Theatre, 345 S. First St., San Jose

**Tickets:** \$51-\$101, 408-437-4450, www.operasj.org

tended his first opera about 25 years ago, while in medical school.

Condemì — who switched career tracks toward the end of his medical studies — is "making the critical transition from being a revival director to being in charge of his own productions," says David Gockley, general director of San Francisco Opera, where Condemì made his main-stage debut in 2005 with Mozart's "Cosi fan tutte." Gockley has hired him to direct three productions next season: Puccini's "Tosca"; Mozart's "Cosi," again; and Nolan Gasser's "The Secret Garden," a world premiere (copresented by Cal Performances), based on the classic novel for young people.

Condemì (pronounced: cone-DEH-me) chalks up his success to "sheer chance." In San Andres de Giles, where his Italian grandparents im-

migrated a century ago, his father, Oscar, owned a small ranch, where Jose Maria hunted for birds with an air gun given to him as a present for his 12th birthday. His mother, Angela, was a schoolteacher and his motivator in the arts: There were painting and acting classes, as well as classical piano lessons from ages 6 to 17.

The family — not particularly musical — expected him to be a lawyer or doctor, so off he went to medical school in Buenos Aires in 1985. He was fascinated with cadaver dissections in anatomy class, less so with giving vaccinations to babies in clinics during his third year.

"And I will never forget," he says, "the look of terror on the face" of an AIDS patient. "I started questioning whether I had what it takes to be a doctor."

A "minor crisis" ensued, during which he wandered into a record store and was struck — no, overwhelmed — by a recording of Bizet's "Carmen," with the Spanish Catalan tenor José Carreras. This is when his opera "obsession" began. Soon after, walking past the Teatro Colón, he noticed a sign for a two-week course for the general public in opera directing. He en-

rolled, was thrilled with the experience and announced to his family, "Hey, I'm not going to be a doctor. I'm going to be an opera director."

He followed this up by studying directing for three years at Teatro Colón, graduating in 1993 with an undergraduate degree. Next, he went to Europe, scouting for graduate programs. While waiting for a connection in a New York airport, he picked up a copy of Opera News: "And flipping through, I saw this ad for a two-year master's degree program in opera directing at the University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music."

Yes, he applied. Yes, he was accepted. He moved to the Midwest in 1997, had his "mind blown" by his stage experiences, then moved on to San Francisco Opera's prestigious summer Merola Opera program in 1999 and 2000, before becoming an Adler Fellow. With Merola, he directed Puccini's "La Boheme," a production he still cherishes. And in 2000, he made his professional debut as a director, hired by Opera San Jose for a production of Donizetti's "The Elixir of Love" at the Montgomery Theater.

"I've always prided myself on being able to spot talent," says Irene Dalis, the company's general director. Dalis, once a star mezzo at the Metropolitan Opera, says Condemì "understands singers; not all directors do. He works with them, helps them to develop a character. He's a collaborator, not a dictator. And by God, he's come through every time. I'm thrilled for Jose Maria," she says. "I'm not surprised by his success. And let me tell you: We can no longer afford his normal fee. Now he is giving us a break."

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