



THE MERRY WIDOW

SPARKLE AND SEDUCTION

Renée Fleming stars in Susan Stroman's sumptuous new production of Lehár's *The Merry Widow*, a romance for grown-ups set against a glittering Belle Époque backdrop.

BY ERIC MYERS

When Franz Lehár's *The Merry Widow* had its world premiere at Vienna's Theater an der Wien on December 30, 1905, no one knew that it was ushering in the remarkable so-called "Silver Era" of Viennese operetta. Since the "Golden Era" of such 19th-century hits as Strauss's *The Gypsy Baron* and Millöcker's *The Beggar Student*, Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung had come to the fore, shaking up Europe's attitudes toward sanity and sex. Vienna, newly clothed in the vines, tendrils, and flowing-haired maidens of Art Nouveau, had become a center of ideas and new artistic movements. There was no way that the popular young operetta composers of the day were going to remain unaffected.



From top left: Broadway's Kelli O'Hara makes her Met debut as Valencienne. Julian Crouch's sets evoke the glamour of Belle Époque Paris.

Perhaps the door had been gently opened by Johann Strauss himself 30 years before with *Die Fledermaus*, a tale of upper-class philandering in a troubled marriage, swathed in humor, revelry, and beguiling song. With the 20th century, the new crop of popular operetta composers like Lehár, Kálmán, and Oscar Straus retained the lightness of their predecessors but were unafraid to create characters who could sometimes be deceptive, even calculating in their pursuit of love, money, and sexual fulfillment. And still, their operettas were drenched in a seemingly endless, irresistible flow of melody. Lehár's *The Merry Widow* is one of the pinnacles of this school of music-theater, and, in the Met's new production of the work—with Renée Fleming starring in the title role of Hanna Glawari—Tony Award-winning director and choreographer Susan Stroman intends to embrace all its romance, wit, and melodic charm.

"I've always adored the score," Stroman says. "The music is what I'm most attracted to, especially as I'll be choreographing as well as directing. We have the waltzes, plus Slavic dances, and of course the can-can at Maxim's. Audiences are really going to get caught up in the beauty and the joy of it all. I know I am, every time I hear the *Merry Widow* waltz."

Stroman's star is similarly enthusiastic. "The score is just packed with unforgettable melodies," Fleming says. "The *Merry*

Widow waltz is known and loved all over the world. But most people don't realize until they see the whole operetta how many other famous tunes come from this piece. And who doesn't want to be transported back to the glamorous, Belle Époque milieu of *The Merry Widow*—Paris, Maxim's, grisettes, the can-can? It really is everything an operetta should be." In fact, Fleming gets to sing an aria from another Lehár operetta, *Paganini*, in the production's final moments, and other music of the composer has been added to allow for choreographed transitions.

Lehár was himself a great admirer of Puccini, and his works are so full of lush, refulgent tunes that he was unofficially dubbed "the Puccini of operetta." The son of a military bandmaster, he had grown up surrounded by music. His father hauled Franz along on assignments all over the Austro-Hungarian empire, and Franz became enraptured with the panoply of musical traditions he was exposed to in places like Hungary, Transylvania, Prague, Vienna, and the Balkans. A prodigy, he was already studying at Prague's Bohemian Conservatory of Music at age 12; while he was there, he received encouragement to compose from Antonín Dvořák. By 18 he was a musician in the Barman-Elberfeld municipal theater orchestra, and soon he was involved in an affair with a glamorous singer twice his age. His father put a stop to that

by enlisting him in the army, where, not surprisingly, Franz wound up playing in his father's band. At 20, he moved on to lead the Infantry Regiment Band in Hungary, becoming the youngest bandmaster in the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

Before *The Merry Widow*, Lehár composed several operettas, a few of which were failures, a few of which achieved a fair degree of success. Nobody was expecting *The Merry Widow* to become an enormous international hit, least of all the management of the Theater an der Wien. Lehár had been the second-choice composer of the librettists, Victor Léon and Leo Stein, when the first fell through. The operetta was given a sorry production for its world premiere, with recycled sets and threadbare costumes. And it was by no means an instant hit, despite good reviews (excepting one critic who found it "distasteful"). But momentum built over the next several months, and by its 300th performance, it got the lavish new production it deserved. It had become a box-office bonanza, and soon was being produced by theaters all over the German-speaking world.

It went on to enormous success in London in the West End, and even bigger success in the U.S., where it turned into a phenomenon, taking the country by storm with countless productions and even starting fashion trends. ("Merry Widow" hats and corsets became all the rage.) Nearly a half-dozen film versions would follow, as would five Broadway revivals, including a legendary 1943 staging with soprano Marta Eggerth in the title role of the widow Hanna Glawari. (Even Ingmar Bergman dreamed of doing his own version of *The Merry Widow* for the screen, with new English lyrics to be penned by Stephen Sondheim. Unfortunately, the project never got beyond the discussion stage.)

Clearly, the world's love affair with *The Merry Widow* whirls on. What makes this 110-year-old piece remain so appealing? "I think a key to its enduring appeal is the way it balances sentimentality with sophistication," Fleming says. "Flirtation and sexual



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William Ivey Long makes his Met debut designing the production's costumes.

power plays drive the story—but of course true love conquers all."

Stroman too cites the operetta's "sly romance and mistaken identity—the fun of it" as essential to its ongoing allure, and she's put together a remarkable creative team to bring out all the charm. "My friend [the six-time Tony Award winner] William Ivey Long is designing the costumes," she says. "He loves and understands dance. His costumes move and flow so well. I know the performers are going to love working with him." Sets are designed by Julian Crouch (the man behind the Met's recent unforgettable designs for *The Enchanted Island* and *Satyagraha*), with the brilliant Paule Constable creating the lighting design. The new English libretto is by Jeremy Sams. Sir Andrew Davis will conduct.

Stroman is not only thrilled to be working with Fleming, who, she says, "sparkles—she was born to play this part," but also Broadway star Kelli O'Hara (*South Pacific*, *The Light in the Piazza*), in her Met debut as Valencienne, and, as Hanna's love interest, Danilo, baritone Nathan Gunn. "Nathan will be a fabulous Danilo," Stroman says. "Of course, he's not bad on the eyes, and he and Renée have a great chemistry."

That chemistry is key. *The Merry Widow* appeals through music, grace, and charm, not to mention its nostalgic evocation of a bygone world. But there is an underlying quality that also accounts for its durable success: a subtle eroticism. This is a story of adults with adult urges. The music swirls; heads spin; hearts are lost. At the end of Act I, Danilo even teasingly woos Hanna with his irresistible enticement to join him in a waltz. Speaking in her late 90s, soprano Marta Eggerth—Broadway's Hanna in 1943—remembered well the sexual spell this work could weave. She sighed, "*The Merry Widow* is about...well, how should I say this? Seduction!" ■

ERIC MYERS is the author of three books, including *Uncle Mame: The Life of Patrick Dennis*, and his writing has appeared in such publications as *Opera News*, *Time Out*, and *The New York Times*.

New Production Premiere December 31, 2014



Director Susan Stroman and members of her cast join Peter Gelb for a discussion in the Met auditorium, on **December 10 at 5:30pm**.