

# Contemporary American Opera: An Exploration of American Operas of the Past 25 Years

## Faculty-Student Collaborative Research and Lecture-Performance



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### Abstract

The research team – two students and one faculty member – underwent an extensive study of American operas premiered since 1981, examining the operas themselves, the composers, and the history of American opera. The team then combined that research into a list of Operas, a research paper, and an hour long lecture performance. Finally, they answered the question “What is American about American opera?”

### The Research Process

#### Opera List

- ❖ The team compiled a list of full-length American operas that received a significant professional premiere in the US in the past 25 years
- ❖ Each opera entry, listed by composer, includes production, premiere, and role information

#### Example:

**Mark Adamo**  
**Little Women**  
Libretto: Mark Adamo  
Commissioned by: Houston Grand Opera for the Houston Opera Studio  
Premiere: March 13, 1998  
Houston Grand Opera  
Stage Director: Peter Kazaras  
Cast of Characters: Jo (Mezzo-Soprano); Laurie (Tenor); Amy (Soprano); Beth (Soprano); Meg (Mezzo-Soprano); Alma March (Soprano); John Brooke (Baritone)  
Notes: Based on the novel by Louisa May Alcott  
2 acts

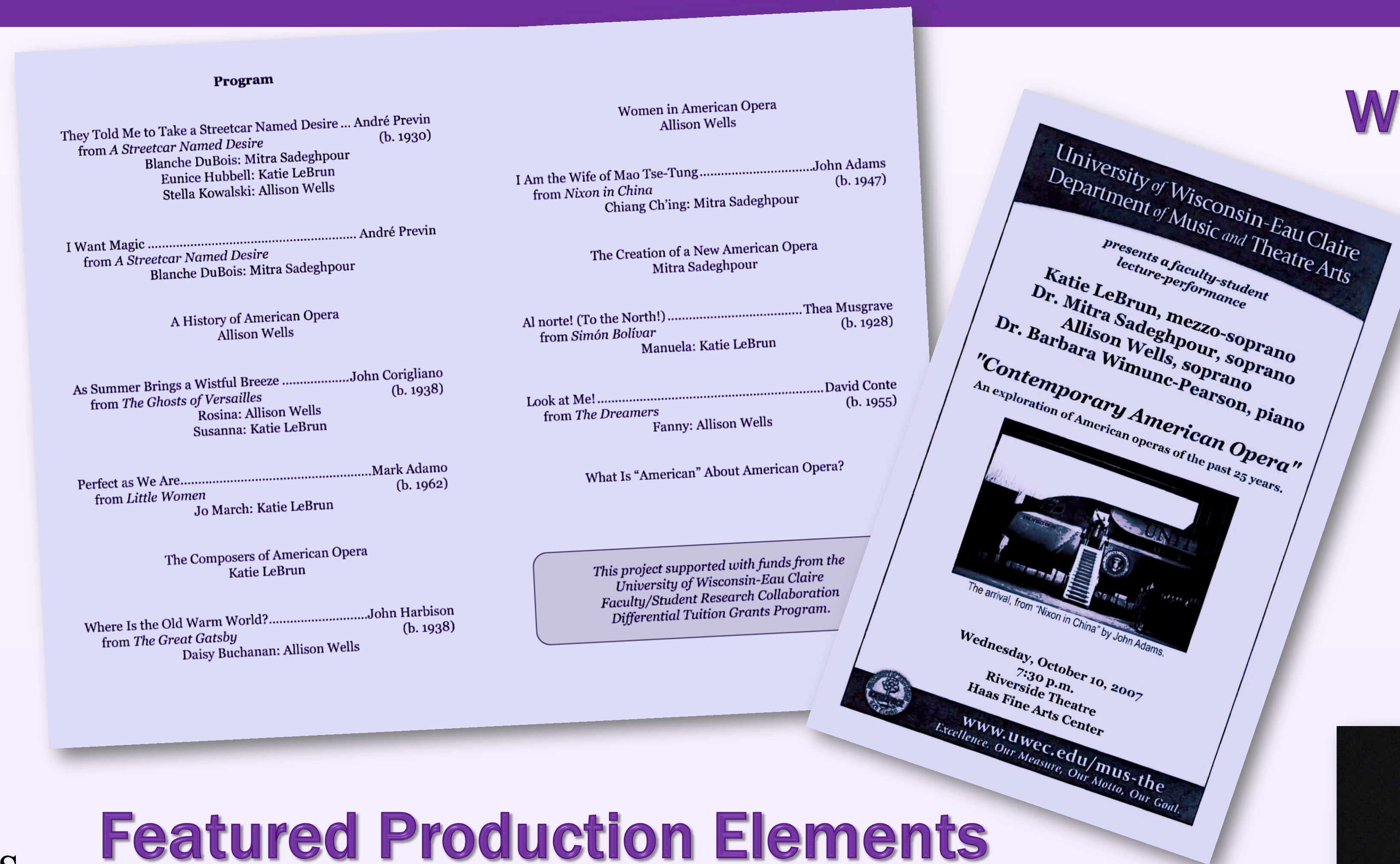
- ❖ The list is not exhaustive; it does not include one-act, chamber, or children’s operas. Additionally, operas with less publicized premieres regularly come to light, and new operas continue to enter the repertoire.

#### Papers

- ❖ Three major research areas
  - ❖ Major and recurring themes found in contemporary American operas
  - ❖ How major American composers were inspired to compose opera
  - ❖ The collaborative process of creating a new opera

### The Lecture-Performance

- ❖ A multi-media lecture-performance featuring music of seven prominent American composers, mini-lectures on major research areas, and video images that complemented the dramatic and educational elements of the performance
- ❖ A collaborative artistic process involving:
  - ❖ Singers
  - ❖ Dancers
  - ❖ Technology coordinator
  - ❖ Pianist
  - ❖ Lighting designer



### Featured Production Elements

#### Staging Techniques

- Use of concert staging and semi-staging showed alternatives to a full-staging that are still dramatically effective
- ❖ Concert staging for opening scene of “*A Streetcar Named Desire*.” Music stands doubled as the barrier between indoors and outside
- ❖ Semi-staging of scenes and arias using minimal props and set pieces in different areas of the theatre

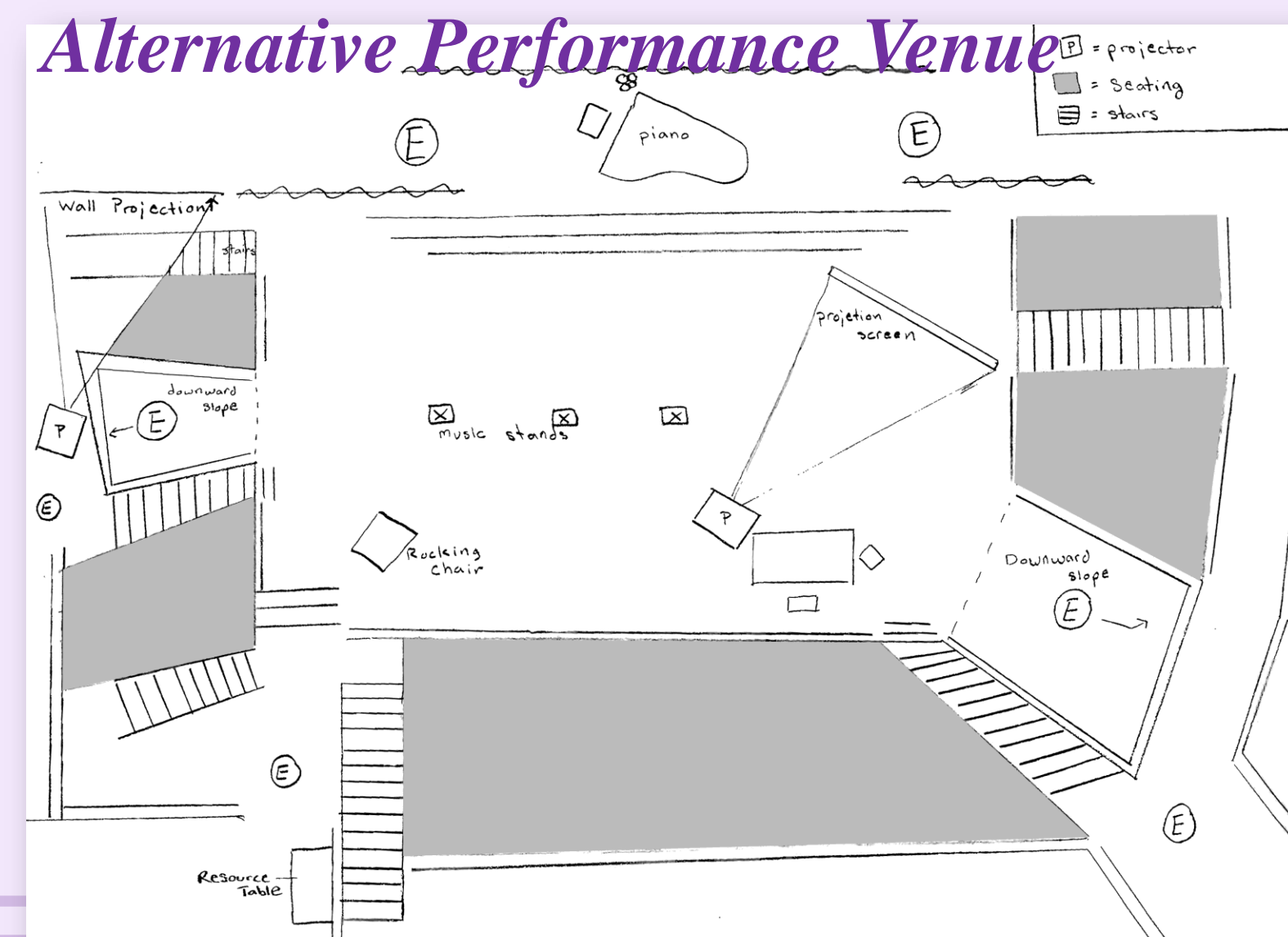
#### Video Projection Technology

- Used to create sense of location and mood, provide visual images for the mini-lectures, and facilitate transitions
- ❖ Black and white movie version of “*A Streetcar Named Desire*” projected on the wall of the theatre created a sense of place without any literal set pieces
- ❖ Slide show during mini-lectures and aria performances set the scene and supplied supporting information
- ❖ Pre-recorded videos of sections of lectures to provide smooth transitions
- ❖ Video excerpts from operas before and after the performance

#### Educational Materials

- ❖ Scores of all music on the program available for perusal following performance
- ❖ Extensive program notes provided

#### Alternative Performance Venue



Kirk's book *American Opera* (University of Illinois Press, 2001) served as the text for the research team's weekly seminars.

The use of Riverside Theatre allowed many options for staging not possible in a typical recital hall setting.

### What is American about American Opera?

What truly defines American opera is the very diversity that doesn't allow it to be defined. There is no single school of American opera composition and no dominant style. While there are prevalent themes, there are many operas whose stories don't fall into those categories. Elise Kirk writes: “American opera tells us a great deal about who we are as a nation, and since we are so diverse . . . our operas are diverse as well.”



Perfect as We Are from “*Little Women*”



Katie LeBrun, Dr. Barbara Wimmunc-Pearson (piano), Allison Wells, and Dr. Mitra Sadeghpour following the lecture-performance.



I am the Wife of Mao Tse-Tung from “*Nixon in China*” with video projections



Lecture: “What is American about American Opera?”



Where is the Old Warm World from “*The Great Gatsby*” with dancers

### Conclusion

Contemporary American opera is a flourishing genre growing at a steady pace each year. Although it is difficult and expensive to study and perform full operas, the collaborative research and lecture recital containing individual arias makes this genre assessable.

**Questions?** Contact us at [msadeghp@uwec.edu](mailto:msadeghp@uwec.edu)