

# **San Francisco Chronicle**

The San Francisco Chronicle (California)

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FINAL Edition

## **Mining passion, but not quite enough to strike gold; OPERA REVIEW**

**BYLINE:** Joshua Kosman, Chronicle Music Critic

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"La Fanciulla del West" "The Girl of the Golden West", Puccini's elaborate operatic oater, wants two things to make it work: a conductor in tune with the lush inventiveness of the score, and a soprano who can consistently bring vigor and vocal allure to the demanding title role.

The San Francisco Opera's new production, which opened at the War Memorial Opera House Wednesday night - its first presentation of the work in more than 30 years - has just one of those.

Music Director Nicola Luisotti has been an outspoken champion of "Fanciulla" for some time now, and his dedication to the piece was evident throughout an impassioned and forceful performance.

The Opera Orchestra sounded splendid - though Luisotti's enthusiasm sometimes led him to drown out the singers - and the harmonic and rhythmic fecundity of Puccini's writing came through at every juncture.

But things were more uncertain on the vocal front, with a strenuous and often acidic performance from soprano Deborah Voigt and capable but inconsistent contributions from her colleagues.

The result was an evening of undeniable rewards, but one that didn't quite make a fully convincing case for a work that is apt to be unfamiliar even to practiced opera buffs.

The reasons for the piece's comparative neglect are understandable but far from justified. Based like "Madama Butterfly" before it on a play by the American writer and impresario David Belasco, "Fanciulla" is set in a mining camp during the California Gold Rush.

It tells the tale of Minnie, a goodhearted tavern keeper who tends to the spiritual and emotional needs of the local men while keeping at bay the erotic needs of the sheriff, Jack Rance.

Love comes to her at last in the person of a bandit going by the preposterous pseudonym of Dick Johnson, and it triumphs thanks to a combination of built-up good will and the always-useful ability to cheat at poker.

Skeptics may giggle at the spectacle of the Italianate miners, even though the setting and plot are no more absurd on their face than anything in "La Bohème" or "Madama Butterfly."

More telling is the fact that "Fanciulla" finds Puccini stretching beyond the musical idiom of his early successes, and doing it in ways that are sometimes brilliant and sometimes not quite persuasive.

To listen to "Fanciulla" is to hear foreshadowings of the harmonic daring of "Turandot" - particularly in the frequent use of whole-tone scales derived from Debussy - as well as melodic shapes and formulas carried over from "Tosca" and "Bohème."

Luisotti did his best to integrate these strains, with frequent but not universal success.

Voigt, singing Minnie for the first time, brought theatrical vibrancy and considerable personal charm to the role - it was no stretch to imagine an entire troop of miners eating out of her hand - but her singing largely lacked the freshness and tonal bloom it once boasted.

Through the first two acts, her tone sounded pinched and constrained, with a sense of effort that kept the role's soaring phrases from conveying their full impact. The performance improved greatly in the third act, in time for her heartfelt plea for Johnson's life to have its effect.

Making his company debut as Johnson, tenor Salvatore Licitra also came into his own in that short final act. "Ch'ella mi creda libero e lontano," in which he asks the miners not to tell Minnie of his ignominious demise, emerged with a full flourishing of lyricism that was not always evident elsewhere.

Baritone Roberto Frontali was a potent Rance, singing with plenty of dark color and dramatic intensity, and the men of the Opera Chorus made a hearty, well-disciplined ensemble.

Kevin Langan Ashby and Steven Cole Nick were underpowered, but there were excellent smaller contributions from Trevor Schuenemann Jake Wallace, David Lomelí Harry, Brian Leerhuber Larkens, and Maya Lahyani Wowkle.

Director Lorenzo Mariani, working on a strangely fragmentary set by Maurizio Balò, didn't do much to make the drama cohere.

An opening tableau of miners rappelling down the mountainside was simply perplexing, and the pointless final appearance of a live horse, at what should be the opera's climactic moment, stopped the proceedings dead in its tracks.

**San Francisco Opera:** "La Fanciulla del West" plays seven more times through July 2 at the War Memorial Opera House. \$15-\$360. 415 864-3330. [www.sfopera.com](http://www.sfopera.com).

The Associated Press

June 10, 2010 Thursday 07:18 PM GMT

## **Voigt endearing as Puccini's "Golden Girl"**

**BYLINE:** By MIKE SILVERMAN, For The Associated Press

**SECTION:** ENTERTAINMENT NEWS

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**DATELINE:** SAN FRANCISCO

"La Fanciulla del West" is Giacomo Puccini's "American opera."

It is adapted from an American play by David Belasco called "The Girl of the Golden West" and takes place in gold-rush era California. The composer drew on American folk tunes for inspiration. And the work had its world premiere in 1910 at New York's Metropolitan Opera.

So it's fitting that in the opera's 100th anniversary year, one of the leading American sopranos of her generation, Deborah Voigt, is adding the title role of Minnie to her repertory.

And adding it in a big way. She sang her very first performance Wednesday night in a splendid new production at the San Francisco Opera. And she'll repeat it next season both at the Met and at Chicago's Lyric Opera.

Judging by the opening night results, audiences in all three cities are in for a treat.

Minnie, a spunky, romantically inexperienced saloon proprietor, is that rare Puccini heroine who doesn't die at the end of the opera. Far from it, she gets her man the reformed bandit Ramerrez (known as Dick Johnson) frees him from the hangman's noose, and rides off with him into the sunset singing "Addio, California."

Both vocally and dramatically, the role is almost ideally suited to Voigt's strengths large, gleaming high notes (most of which hit their mark squarely), and a stage presence that radiates an endearing charm, whether she's teaching Bible class to the miners, cheating in a poker game against Sheriff Jack Rance or riding in on a white horse to save her man.

Minnie makes her very first entrance firing a gun, and the vocal fireworks soon follow sudden and frequent ascents to high notes that must cut through a thick orchestral texture. In this opera, at least, Voigt's ability to deliver on the climaxes more than compensates for her major vocal weakness, a quavery, almost gurgling sound in the middle of her register.

The role of Dick Johnson is only slightly less punishing, calling for a tenor sound well beyond the weight of a lyric voice. Salvatore Licitra has volume and high notes to spare. What he doesn't seem to have is much vocal subtlety, and there is little warmth in his

phrasing. Nor was there much chemistry in the air between him and Voigt, even during their dramatic "first kiss," which Puccini sets to a tumultuous orchestral climax.

Baritone Robert Frontali snarled effectively in the not-quite-villainous role of Rance, and several of the other men who populate the Polka saloon made memorable contributions, including baritone Trevor Scheunemann as minstrel Jake Wallace, baritone Brian Leerhuber as the homesick Jim Larkens, tenor Steven Cole as Nick the bartender and bass Kevin Langan as the Wells Fargo agent, Ashby.

The production, directed by Lorenzo Mariani with sets by Maurizio Balo and costumes by Gabriel Berry, is a co-production with companies in Palermo, Italy, and Liege, Belgium. It's effective in evoking the setting and cleverly designed to focus attention on the action.

Mountain cliffs dominate the background in all three acts (we actually see miners with pickaxes suspended from ropes during the opening measures). The furniture in Minnie's saloon a bar, a piano, a card table moves to the sides near the end of Act 1, leaving Minnie and Johnson to sing their first love duet on a stage bare but for a few lanterns. Similarly, in Act 2, the furniture in Minnie's cabin eventually slides off to the edges of the stage, leaving just a small table for the poker game between Minnie and Rance.

The major hero of the night did not appear on stage until the curtain calls: the company's music director, Nicola Luisotti, who did wonders conducting the orchestra. The humor and the suspense, the turmoil and the tenderness that Puccini poured into this rhythmically and harmonically daring score all emerged in a seamless flow under his energetic baton.

Online:

<http://www.sfopera.org> .

June 14, 2010 Monday  
EDITION1

## **The melodies sparkle in Gold Rush story**

**BYLINE:** SCOTT CANTRELL, Classical Music Critic scantrell@dallasnews.com

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**DATELINE:** SAN FRANCISCO

SAN FRANCISCO - A Wild West saloonkeeper fought over by a sheriff and a bandit might seem unlikely grist for an opera. Puccini's *Girl of the Golden West* (*La fanciulla del West*) hasn't had the success of *La bohème*, *Tosca* and *Madame Butterfly*.

Puccini's usually deft sense of dramatic continuity and timing slips a bit in the California Gold Rush. The redemptive ending, with Minnie and the bandit "Johnson" (a.k.a. Ramerrez) singing "addio"s into the sunset, is a diabetic overload of corn syrup.

Beginning to end, however, melodies soar stirringly, and no opera has more glorious orchestral writing. By 1910, Puccini was no stranger to Debussy's *La mer*.

Commissioned and premiered by the Metropolitan Opera, *Fanciulla* is getting a centenary run this month with, appropriately, San Francisco Opera.

Music director Nicola Luisotti audibly loves the score, and he gets ravishing playing from the orchestra. In this opera, all-male except for Minnie, smaller roles among the miners are served up with some fine voices, notably Timothy Mix's aptly sonorous *Sonora*. Kevin Langan supplies an imposing bass for the Wells Fargo agent Ashby.

But none of the three principals quite lives up to expectations, and Lorenzo Mariani's staging passes up every chance to do something subtle. Designer Maurizio Balò's stone-wall backdrop is effective, but a mere platform crammed with furniture and steamer trunks is a poor stand-in for Minnie's cabin. And what's her bar doing at the bottom of the mine?

Deborah Voigt's formerly lustrous soprano hasn't been the same since her gastric-bypass surgery six years ago. At full tilt, and on high, the voice is still stirring, but in middle register it's often dry and brittle. She plays Minnie alternately as pistol-packin' momma, blushing teenager and old-school diva, none persuasively.

Both Voigt and Salvatore Licitra, playing Johnson, pumped out some desperate-sounding top notes Saturday night at the War Memorial Opera House. While Licitra provides power and Italianate tang, he suggests none of the suavity Minnie sings about.

The sheriff isn't supposed to be an evil character, just a lost soul trying to cover up his insecurities by intimidation. But, while Roberto Frontali has a persuasive balance of vocal brass and weight, he turns Jack Rance into quite a nasty piece of work, a Wild West Scarpia.

Costumer Gabriel Berry mostly dresses the cast persuasively, but he has Rance dolled up more like a robber baron than a Western sheriff. Minnie's red-leather outfit and baroque ball gown are a bit much.

Plan your life

Repeats at 8 p.m. Tuesday, Friday and July 2, at 7:30 p.m. June 24 and 29 and 2 p.m. June 27 at War Memorial Opera House, 301 Van Ness Ave., San Francisco. \$15 to \$360. 415-846-3330, [www.sfopera.org](http://www.sfopera.org).

Sacramento Bee (California)

June 13, 2010 Sunday  
METRO FINAL EDITION

## **S.F. Opera gilds 'Girl of the Golden West'**

**BYLINE:** Edward Ortiz eortiz@sacbee.com

**SECTION:** LIVING HERE; Pg. I6

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A chuckle ran through the War Memorial Opera audience Wednesday whenever any reference was made to Northern California in the San Francisco Opera's latest production of Puccini's "Girl of the Golden West."

It was a knowing laugh, the kind that comes when an audience knows more about a work's subject than its creator. Here the setting is a Gold Rush town circa 1849.

And so, seeing and hearing "Girl" is a fascinating experience for any Northern Californian familiar with history. In this 1901 opera we get an Italian channeling a mythical view of the American West. The result is as curious as the mythical mining camp that film director Sergio Leone put together in his spaghetti Westerns.

In the Puccini pantheon, "Girl" is one of his most underrated operas. It's a strong story married to resplendent music. And in this crisp production, the case is made that "Girl" deserves wider play.

It's too bad the production often underwhelmed in stating that case.

Based on a hit 1905 play by San Franciscan David Belasco, this production, directed by Lorenzo Mariani, is a technicolor stab at presenting a melodramatic story. This opera, which is as dramatically taut as it devoid of big arias, is a co-production with Italy's Teatro Massimo di Palermo and Belgium's Opera Royal de Wallonie.

The key here is selling a love triangle between Minnie, a prim saloonkeeper, the bandit she falls in love with and the sheriff who aggressively courts her. Central to that is tapping into the mythical status of headstrong women holding their own on the frontier.

That role falls to soprano Deborah Voigt, who distinguished herself with a strong performance with strong acting. The Minnie role is one of the more difficult soprano roles among Puccini's operas. It calls for a singer who must combine a Wagnerian sense of grandeur and gravitas with the lyrical softness of a Puccini soprano.

Voigt is known more for her work with Germanic repertoire, but here she proved worthy. She deeply embodied the role and gave it spark. Her voice was often radiant, especially in the three arias at the end of the first act. But her singing was marked by thinness in the less expressive passages.

Tenor Salvatore Licitra, proved a solid if less-than- engaging tenor in the role of the bandit Dick Johnson. Licitra makes for a fine Puccini tenor; his voice is filled with expression and color. He proved so on "Ch'ella mi creda." But his was an underwhelming presence throughout. And there was little chemistry between Licitra and Voigt.

Baritone Roberto Frontali, as Sheriff Jack Rance, gave the most bracing performance, with a big onstage presence. His baritone was not thunderous, but it was always consistent, and there was a chemical spark between Frontali and Voigt.

This production also saw fine, but never outstanding, singing in smaller roles, such as baritones Timothy Mix as Sonora and Trevor Scheunemann as Jake Wallace.

Perhaps the most impressive performance was that of the San Francisco Opera chorus, which is asked to do quite a bit of heavy lifting in "Girl." Puccini treats his chorus like a solo instrument in this opera, and this chorus performed as a taut and musically inspired ensemble. They combined it with top-notch acting.

Although Puccini wrote few memorable arias for "Girl," it is filled with curious and wonderfully orchestrated music. All of the cinematic grandeur of the American West, or Puccini's idea of the West, was delivered by the San Francisco Opera Orchestra under conductor Nicola Luisotti. The only drawback was that the performance was so alive and rich that the orchestra often bested singers on sound balance.

This might not have been anywhere near the highlight opera of the San Francisco Opera's season; however, its good points put a positive shine on one of Puccini's most curious and underrated operas.

**GIRL OF THE GOLDEN WEST** San Francisco Opera When: 8 p.m. Saturday, June 15, 18 and July 2; 7:30 p.m. June 24 and 29; 2 p.m. June 27 Where: War Memorial Opera House, 301 Van Ness Ave., San Francisco Tickets: \$15-\$245 Information: (415) 864-3330; [www.sfopera.com](http://www.sfopera.com)



San Jose Mercury News (California)

June 10, 2010 Thursday

**Review: In S.F., Puccini's century-old Wild West opera strikes gold but misses the heart**

**BYLINE:** By Richard Scheinin [rscheinin@mercurynews.com](mailto:rscheinin@mercurynews.com)

**SECTION:** BREAKING; News; Stage; Columnists; Concerts; Music; Entertainment; Opera; Performing arts; Opinion; Fine arts

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SAN FRANCISCO Men dangle from ropes, high above the stage. They are gold miners, facing a rich red subterranean rock-face. But it's quitting time, and soon they flood into a Wild West saloon that materializes before our eyes. They wear cowboy hats and bowlers. They play poker. They cheat, dance and sing as richly colored veins of melody break out from the orchestra, the men now joining as a chorus, so whispery quiet and full of feeling that it's an astonishment.

That's the opening to San Francisco Opera's new production of Giacomo Puccini's "La Fanciulla del West (The Girl of the Golden West)" at War Memorial Opera House. Those first moments of Wednesday's opening performance were so full of motion and momentum, the music as dazzling as a piece of carnival glass, that one couldn't help but think, "This is a hit."

Sorry to tantalize, but it's not.

It's as visually spectacular a production as you will see, taking us deep under the earth and up into the blue-ice peaks of the Sierra Nevada. But, alas, this tale of lonely miners, rough justice and romance in California Gold Rush country is middling Puccini. The hand of a master is at work, but the story is too purely melodramatic to tug at the heartstrings. And the music veers through hot and cold streaks, as if Puccini were searching for (or outright avoiding) melodic pay dirt.

Director Lorenzo Mariani squeezes all the passion that he can out of it. And those sets designed by Maurizio Balo, lit by Duane Schuler are worthy of a James Cameron movie. But there's only so much to be done with "Fanciulla." If Puccini were the Beatles, this would be "Yellow Submarine," charming but not great.

Wednesday's performance had some parched dramatic stretches. And there was an overarching problem: The orchestra, conducted by music director Nicola Luisotti, played with brilliant color and precision but at such a volume that it consistently drowned out the high-priced cast.

Soprano Deborah Voigt, as Minnie, the pistol-packing owner of the Polka Saloon, might as well have been singing from the catacombs for much of the performance. Ditto for

tenor Salvatore Licitra in the role of Dick Johnson, the incognito Mexican bandit (a.k.a. Ramerrez), who is redeemed by Minnie's love.

Assuming that Luisotti makes adjustments, Voigt and Licitra just might emerge during the rest of the run as a neatly yin-yang romantic pair. Superstar Voigt's gemstone voice has often struck me as cold over the years. Yet her passionate chasteness suits Minnie, an innocent seeking true love. Stick her together with bandito Licitra – sexily mellow-voiced in his San Francisco debut – and you've got both ends of an electrical connection.

Finally, add in the biting baritone Roberto Frontali – he's Sheriff Jack Rance, randy for Minnie – and the love triangle is complete.

The cast doesn't lack for stars, but just as impressive were singers in the miners' chorus: wistful baritone Trevor Scheunemann as balladeer Jake Wallace; gusting tenor David Lomeli, as Harry; bold baritone Timothy Mix as good-hearted Sonora. And in Act II, mezzo-soprano Maya Lahyani – as Wowkle, Minnie's Native American servant – was so honey-voiced that she outclassed Voigt.

Exactly 100 years old, "Fanciulla" was last staged by San Francisco Opera in 1979, with Plácido Domingo as bandit Johnson. Puccini based the opera on a stage play, "The Girl of the Golden West" by David Belasco, a Broadway heavyweight who originally hailed from San Francisco and whose father was a forty-niner.

It's been said that the play's Wild West landscape inspired the vastness of Puccini's orchestration, a spectacle in sound, mixing in the composer's fascination with Debussy, with Japanese music, with American cakewalks and popular song. When the miners break out singing "doo-da, doo-da day" – an Italian-inflected adaptation from "The Camptown Races" – it's one of the opera's charms.

Then there are the long Minnie-and-Dick love duets, which touch on classic Puccini melodiousness in the first two acts, as does Dick Johnson's desperate final aria, "Ch'ella mi creda," a favorite of Italian soldiers marching off to battle in World War I. Voigt and Licitra were fine with these numbers, hoisting those high notes, but not yet finding the aforementioned electricity.

With "Fanciulla," Puccini once said, he moved away from the "sugary" melodies of "Madama Butterfly" and his other earlier works. We hear him in a moment of late-career transition or experimentation, building long sound-bridges that dazzle with their cinematic breadth. But they don't always reach the heart.

Contact Richard Scheinin at 408-920-5069.

San Francisco Opera

"La Fanciulla del West (The Girl of the Golden West)"

Through: July 2

Where: War Memorial Opera House, 301 Van Ness Ave.

Tickets: \$15-\$360, \$10 on day of performance for standing room; 415-864-3330, [www.sfopera.com](http://www.sfopera.com)

## Theater Mania

### The Girl of the Golden West

Reviewed By: [David Finkle](#) · Dec 8, 2010 · New York

When Giacomo Puccini finished [The Girl of the Golden West](#) a century ago, he wrote a friend, "The Girl has come out, in my opinion, the best opera I have written." So far history has yet to agree with the maestro's judgment, and the return of Giancarlo del Monaco's 1991 workman-like production at the Metropolitan Opera -- with Deborah Voigt debuting in the title role -- is unlikely to convince large numbers of Puccini lovers to his side.

Because the opera (also known as *La Fanciulla del West*) is an unabashed melodrama, it isn't the heated quality of the tale that keeps it from wowing audiences. Nor is it the abundance of the plot's holes. On the contrary, what doesn't sit with many opera fans is that, as opposed to *La Bohème*, *Madama Butterfly*, and *Tosca*, Puccini chose to keep his music virtually aria-free and concentrated instead -- often with great subtlety -- on brooding orchestral passages.

Unquestionably, however, there are bracingly dramatic moments in both Puccini's music -- well conducted here by Nicola Luisotti -- and in the libretto crafted by Carlo Zangarini and Guelfo Civinini from David Belasco's hit play *The Girl of the Golden West*. For example, there's the tense poker game played by saloon owner Minnie (Voigt) and jealous sheriff Jack Rance (Lucio Gallo) for possession of the bandit Dick Johnson, also known as Ramerrez (Marcello Giordani). It's a game that the normally upstanding Minnie wins by cheating!

There's also the high C Minnie hits when the dashing Johnson gives her a first kiss. Or how about the moment when Rance arrives, spills the beans about Dick's being the marauding Ramerrez, and subsequently shoots the outlaw -- after which the disillusioned Minnie realizes she loves the galoot anyway. And one must mention the beautifully composed, conciliatory third act, in which Rance and his posse are about to hang Dick (here on Michael Scott's stunning forced-perspective California mining-town set) before the inevitable happy ending occurs.

As might be expected, Voigt nails that high C and a few others with golden assurance, although there were times when, because her middle range is less grounded, she seems to seize with excessive enthusiasm any opportunity to go into her upper range. Meanwhile, Giordani serves up the evening's most robust and sympathetic singing, especially delivering the aria "Ch'ella mi creda" with tender force.

As the brooding and conniving Rance, Gallo cuts a commanding figure, but his voice frequently gives the impression of a large bird attempting to escape from a small cage. Of the other men stomping around in the first and third act, Edward Parks convincingly plays Jim Larkens' mad-miner scene, and Oren Gradus -- with the aid of the male chorus

-- makes Puccini's version of a Stephen Foster-like folk song about old folks at home quite poignant.

Over the years, wags have dubbed this work, Puccini's "horse opera." Since not one but two horses swell the cast in this mounting, the phrase is literally true. Still, this revival proceeds not at a gallop but at a canter.

## Opera Warhorses

### **Voigt, Licitra Lead Sizzling San Francisco Centennial Celebration for “Girl of the Golden West” – June 9, 2010 June 10th, 2010**

The San Francisco Opera, a company with deep roots in the traditions of Italian opera, serving a city that was created by the California Gold Rush, launched a spiffy new production of “Girl of the Golden West (La Fanciulla del West)” – Puccini’s masterpiece about a love affair in a community of ’49er miners.

Vocal gold was lavished on the production, with important role debuts by Deborah Voigt (Minnie), Salvatore Licitra (Dick Johnson in his San Francisco Opera debut) and Roberto Frontali (returning after a 17 year absence as Jack Rance).

In a cast where ten miners, two Indians and a *desperado* all have names and personalities, care was taken to make certain every role was in competent hands. San Francisco Opera’s Music Director Nicola Luisotti, one of the opera’s ardent admirers, conducted.

The new production, designed by Lorenzo Mariani, is a co-production with the Teatro Massimo di Palermo (which constructed the sets by Maurizio Balo), and the Opera Royal de Wallonie of Liege, Belgium.

As part of the centennial festivities, Voigt and Luisotti will travel to New York City’s Metropolitan Opera, which will include a performance on December 10 of this year, marking the opera’s 100th anniversary of its world premiere at the Met. (The Met’s production will be used.)

Later that month, the Mariani production debuts in his home company in Palermo (with Licitra and Frontali reprising their roles). Then Voigt will again don buckskins for Lyric Opera’s “Fanciulla” revival in January and February of 2011.

### ***Puccini’s Best Opera – Source: Puccini***

Puccini famously described “Fanciulla del West” as his best opera. It is harmonically one of the most complex of Italian operas, with Tristanesque chromatics, Debussyeen whole tones, and a mixture of dissonance with imminently accessible music in the style of folksongs (which one has no problem believing would have been sung by miners had the tunes existed at the time of the story).

Puccini uses the Wagnerian technique of *leitmotifs* (of which Julian Budden, the great musicologist and student of the works of Verdi and Puccini, identified nearly two dozen), and subscribes to Wagner’s principle of using the orchestra as a key element in telling the opera’s story.

Even with its sophisticated harmonic structure, the opera is as melodious as the other

great Puccini works. Unlike almost every other Puccini opera, it is a “feel good” piece, in which no one is really a villain (nor, for that matter, a saint). If the lead tenor is wounded and is momentarily in danger of being hung, he gets to sing the opera’s great aria and to ride off in the sunset with the heroine.

### *Notes on the Performance*

With the swirling opening bars, the curtain rises on a vertical rockface from whose top five miners with pickaxes are rappelling. (One may have reservations on the production as a guide to either the mining country’s geology or economic history, but the image, which seems to have been inspired by Yosemite’s El Capitan, was theatrically quite impressive.)

Soon Sheriff Rance is engaged in the two matters that interest him most – capturing a notorious gang of bandits, and capturing the heart of Minnie, the mining town’s “never-been-kissed” sweetheart and proprietess of the Polka Bar. Frontali has an attractive light baritone and acting style that fits this rather ineffectual, probably psychologically depressed, law enforcement officer. Frontali’s portrayal of Rance was spot on.

The play on which the opera is based is by San Francisco-born David Belasco (whose parents had immigrated there during the Gold Rush). A Belasco play is as inappropriate as one can imagine for revival in our century, but has many “local color” details that suggest an understanding of what went on in the mining camps.

So too does the opera have an often authentic feel, as when Jake Wallace (sung by Trevor Scheunemann in his San Francisco Opera debut) sings a forlorn ballad and the miners pass the hat to pay for the travel costs for the homesick miner Larkens (Brian Leerhuber) to return to his wife and kids.

But this is Puccini, and, once the local color is nicely painted (as is done for a Nagasaki neighborhood in another Belasco-inspired Puccini work), the soprano and tenor must be brought together for songs of love. Sequentially, we meet Voigt’s Minnie and Licitra’s Dick Johnson.

Minnie (arriving with the rifle she carries when traveling to her bar, even though she seems to prefer a handgun for around the house) is a role that requires a gleaming top on a soprano voice, a requisite that Voigt met handsomely.

Licitra has one of the *tenore di forza* voices for which the War Memorial Opera House seemed to have been built. Luxurious in tone, full-bodied throughout its range, one can readily understand why he was the tenor the Met offered to dismayed patrons as the replacement for Luciano Pavarotti, when that great tenor canceled his two farewell performances of Cavaradossi in Puccini’s “Tosca”.

Even as an admirer of Licitra’s performances for the Los Angeles Opera (see my review of his Luigi at [French Connection: Friedkin’s Cinematic “Tabarro” – L A Opera](#)

[September 6, 2008](#)) and Lyric Opera of Chicago ([Licitra, Radvanovsky Gleam in Lyric Opera's Glorious New "Ernani": Chicago, November 5, 2009](#)), I was amazed at the resonance of his voice in the War Memorial, which caresses a great voice, but is not always kind to some tenor voices of lighter weight. Those who write that when Placido Domingo retires, the era of great tenor voices will be over, just aren't paying attention when Licitra sings.

Voigt and Licitra are savvy actors and their interplay in the second act made what might seem sentimental or melodramatic in the hands of others into an intensely rich theatrical experience.

Superbly done, also, was what to many is the opera's most memorable scene – the poker game in which the desperate Minnie cheats on cards and plays on the emotions of the hapless Rance to gain freedom for the first man for whom she has felt passion.

Massimo's stage direction here is magical, Minnie's cabin splitting into three parts with its two ends moving to each side of the stage while the middle, in which the poker game is played, is the center of everyone's attention.

Minnie, in my experience, has always been sung by great singing actresses, all of whom, once the outwitted Rance has left with his touch of grace, end the second act with relish by throwing the deck of cards into the air.

The third act provides the mining community yet another chance to kill Johnson, and, about to be hung while standing on the coffin in which he is to be buried, he sings the opera's great showpiece, *Ch'ella mi creda libero*, Licitra evoked the memory of two other great dramatic tenors, Sandor Konya and Placido Domingo, whose voices had resonated throughout the War Memorial Opera House with this aria.

Puccini had several years prior to writing "Fanciulla" considered composing an opera on a different subject which would have had a scene in which a soprano pleads with a mob for the life of her lover. No such scene exists in Belasco's play, but the final scene of "Fanciulla" which incorporates that idea is brilliantly effective and affecting.

Voigt, with *homage* to Dorothy Kirsten who rode horseback onstage as Minnie in the San Francisco Opera "Fanciulla" Golden Anniversary celebrations in 1960, rode astride a carriage horse (whose owners walked discreetly at its side).

In a successful display of lynch mob nullification, Minnie one by one plays on the emotions of each of the individual miners, and wins Dick Johnson for one last and final time. Mariani shows us yet another inspired stage effect to end the opera, the lovers bidding farewell to California and the Sierra snows.

Serious, and even casual, operagoers who have resisted the charms of this masterpiece to date should invest the time to see a performance in this production, which I believe, should help this piece attain greater popularity.

The opera that Puccini wrote before this, “Madama Butterfly”, also based on Belasco, is the most popular 20th century opera. If, on more occasions, opera companies would forgo a season of “Butterfly” and mount “Girl of the Golden West” instead, audiences will find the genius of Puccini goes beyond those works with which they are most familiar. I recommend the San Francisco Opera’s new production unreservedly.