



SEATTLE OPERA  
SPEIGHT JENKINS GENERAL DIRECTOR

## NEWS

For Immediate Release

### **Puppets Onstage In *Hoffmann*: Seattle Puppeteer Rob D’Arc Builds Marionettes For Show, Trains Singers Relyea and Elzinga**



**Seattle**—“Puppets and opera, they go together very well. And it is wonderful to bring back the combination of puppetry and opera in this country. It just is not seen too often,” said local puppeteer Rob D’Arc about the debut of his marionettes in Seattle Opera’s new production of Offenbach’s *Contes d’Hoffmann* (*Tales of Hoffmann*).

Rob D’Arc created four 30-inch puppets (three marionettes and one “stunt puppet”) for Seattle Opera for this new production, following the request of director Chris Alexander, who wanted to use marionettes in the final act of the opera. D’Arc also spent some time in April training singers John Relyea and Dean Elzinga in the art of marionette manipulation. The puppeteer is a familiar figure in Fremont and downtown Seattle, where he performs his puppet shows and neo-vaudevillian act, “Professor Humbug’s Flea Circus,” at the Pike Place Market and at the Fremont Moisture Festival when he is not on tour.

#### **Alexander Wanted Puppets In Act III Sorcerer Scene D’Arc Builds 30-Inch Marionettes for 2,900-Seat Hall**

D’Arc was approached by Seattle Opera when director Alexander decided to use marionettes (a type of puppet manipulated by pulling strings) to symbolize the sorcerer Dapertutto’s control over Hoffmann and Giulietta in Act III of the opera. Because the marionettes must be clearly visible in the 2,900-seat McCaw Hall, D’Arc designed his marionettes to be larger than normal, approximately 30 inches in height (most toy marionettes are 16- to 20-inches high) and then built them at his work space located in the Fremont Arts Council.





D’Arc built three marionettes (one Hoffmann and two Giuliettas) for Seattle Opera. “The Giulietta required a costume change, and since the strings go through the shoulders, it would require multiple pieces of Velcro and some type of puppet wrangler backstage to do the quick change,” explained D’Arc about the decision to create two fully costumed Giuliettas. The other Hoffmann puppet acts as a “stunt puppet” that can be tossed across the stage by the singers.

### **Singer’s Smile Inspires Marionette’s Look**

The marionettes are made of molded plastic so replacements can be created quickly if something is broken. D’Arc carved the head molds to resemble but not be an exact copy of the singers appearing in the Seattle Opera production. “I was not going exactly with a portrait of the singers, because the director said that this production would go to other companies. But there was something about Nancy Fabiola Herrera’s smile that I tried to capture [for Giulietta]. She has that very distinctive cheek-bone structure,” D’Arc said. “Because there are two singers portraying Hoffmann, I took the photos of the two on Photoshop and made an amalgam of the two. When I was finished, I was surprised that it almost looked like Harrison Ford! I backed off that look a bit.”



### **Puppets Dressed by Same Shop as Singers**

Seattle Opera Crafts Supervisor Lia Nouwen then clothed the marionettes and the puppet to match the costumes designed by Marie-Theresa Cramer for Hoffmann and Giulietta. Like any singer or supernumerary in the show, the marionettes underwent several fittings in the shop. The largest advantage of costuming marionettes, D’Arc advised the Shop’s workers, is that “you can staple a fold right to their bodies—you can’t do that with a singer.”

### **Singers Learn to Pull the Strings**

While the marionettes were undergoing their final fittings in the Costume Shop, D’Arc trained singers Relyea and Elzinga how to manipulate them by using practice marionettes. “It is a challenge, because there are a lot of strings and it’s hard when they have only one hand (for each puppet),” he said. The larger size of the marionettes also makes the manipulation more difficult than a smaller puppet. “If you have a long string, you can get a big movement. If you have a short string, it is a smaller movement. With a 30-inch marionette, you’re talking about very short strings, so the puppeteer will have to move the strings much more than he would have to with a smaller puppet. Imagine 14 yo-yos with

all separate points of balance and you're trying to get one yo-yo in the middle to turn one way rather than another way. It's tricky."

D'Arc, however, is confident that the singers and the marionettes will do well in Act III. "If you make marionettes that are well-balanced and strung well, then, even if they are standing still, their natural weight (pulling on the strings) will make them seem very graceful," he said. "And, as the director has told me, their first segment is one minute and 23 seconds according to the score and the second one is about the same. So there's a lot of work going into about three minutes here."

### **Opera and Puppets Have a Long History**

The combination of opera and marionettes is not new, D'Arc noted. In Europe, a number of puppet theaters stage full operas using only marionettes onstage. "Traditionally, marionettes and opera developed along a parallel path in Germany," he said. "In France, there is a theater that still uses a type of inverse marionette (operated from below) and they do opera with those. I don't think there's any big movement to replace opera singers with puppets, but it is an alternative!"

### ***Hoffmann* Opens May 7**

Seattle Opera's new production of *Les contes d'Hoffmann* (*Tales of Hoffmann*) opens May 7 and plays through May 22. After the opera closes here, the entire production, including D'Arc's marionettes, will travel to Arizona Opera, Cincinnati Opera, Dallas Opera, and Minnesota Opera (Seattle Opera's co-producers for this production).

### ***Les contes d'Hoffmann* (*The Tales of Hoffmann*)**

#### **New Production**

Music by Jacques Offenbach

Libretto by Jules Barbier

(after the play of the same title by Barbier and Michel Carré,

based on the stories of E.T.A. Hoffmann)

In French with English captions

This new production is dedicated in memory of Gertrude E. Sprenger

#### ***Performances***

Nine Performances: May 7, 8 (matinee), 11, 13, 14, 18, 20, 21, and 22 (matinee), 2005

Approximate Running Time: 3 hours and 30 minutes with 2 intermissions

Evening performances begin at 7:30 p.m. and matinee performances begin at 2:00 p.m.

All performances in Marion Oliver McCaw Hall

## **Ticket Information**

Ticket Prices: \$42–\$129

Student Matinee Tickets for May 22: \$15

Ticket Office: 206-389-7676/800-426-1619

Group Sales: 206-676-5587

Online Orders: [www.seattleopera.org](http://www.seattleopera.org)

## **Artists**

Conductor: Dean Williamson

Director: Chris Alexander

Set Designer: Robert A. Dahlstrom

Costume Designer: Marie-Theresa Cramer†

Lighting Designer: Robert Wierzel

Hair and Make-up Designer: Joyce Degenfelder

Choreographer: Karen Kellett

Marionette Preparation: Rob D'Arc†

Hoffmann: Vinson Cole/John Uhlenhopp\*

Lindorf/Coppélius/Dapertutto/Dr. Miracle: John Relyea/Dean Elzinga\*†

Antonia: Marie Plette/Heather Parker\*\*

Olympia: Harolyn Blackwell/Julianne Gearhart\*\*

Giulietta: Nancy Fabiola Herrera†

Crespel: Arthur Woodley

Schlemil: Scott Hogsed

Andrès/Pitichinaccio/Frantz/Cochénille: Doug Jones

Spalanzani: Steven Cole

Nicklausse/Muse: Helene Schneiderman/Linda Pavelka

Antonia's Mother: Ann-Katrin Naidu†

Luther: Archie Drake

Nathanaël: Leodigario del Rosario†

Hermann: Michael Todd Simpson†

Stella (mute): Carolyn Kahl

Scenery: Seattle Opera Costumes: Seattle Opera

† Seattle Opera debut \* May 8, 13, 20, and 22, 2005 only

\*\* Julianne Gearhart and Heather Parker will sing May 8, 13, and 22, 2005 only

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Founded in 1963, Seattle Opera has developed into one of the leading opera companies in the United States. The company is recognized internationally for its theatrically compelling and musically accomplished performances, especially the Opera's interpretations of the works of Richard Wagner.

This new production of Offenbach's *Contes d'Hoffmann* (The Tales of Hoffmann) is co-produced by Seattle Opera, The Dallas Opera, Arizona Opera, The Minnesota Opera Company, and Cincinnati Opera.

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**Photos (in order) by Rosemary Jones, Bill Mohn, and Monte Jacobson. To receive photos for this story, contact Monte Jacobson, [monte.jacobson@seattleopera.org](mailto:monte.jacobson@seattleopera.org).**