

Island Beat

Your weekend guide to East Hawaii

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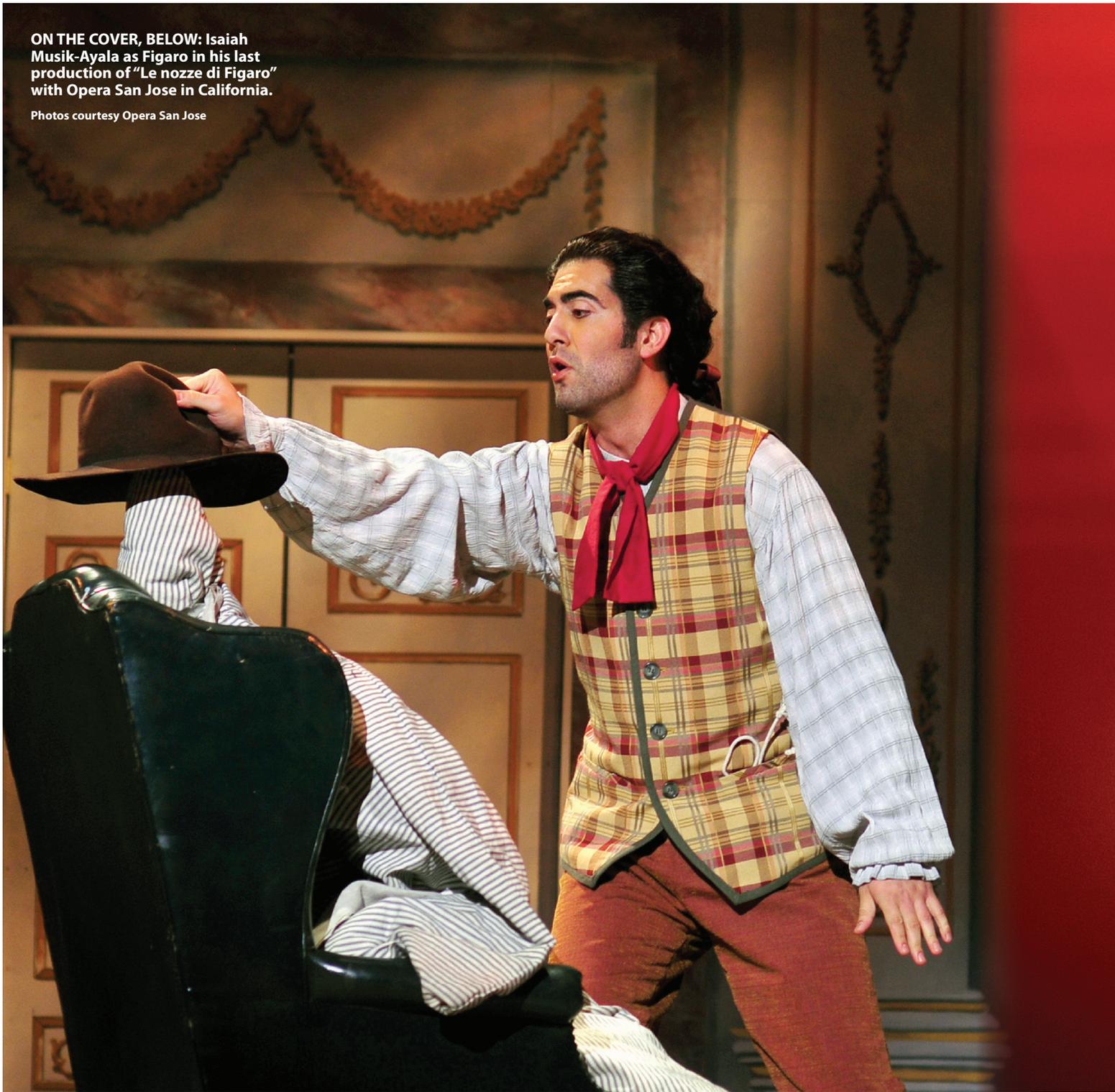
'The Marriage of Figaro'

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ON THE COVER, BELOW: Isaiah Musik-Ayala as Figaro in his last production of "Le nozze di Figaro" with Opera San Jose in California.

Photos courtesy Opera San Jose



COMIC OPERA

Hawaii Performing Arts Festival's
'The Marriage of Figaro' an
amusing, complicated love story

By **KATIE YOUNG YAMANAKA**
Special to the Tribune-Herald

Regarded as one of the greatest operas ever written, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's "The Marriage of Figaro" (*Le Nozze di Figaro*) is not what you might think of when you think of opera.

In fact, it's a bit of a screwball comedy, complete with disguises and surprises — and it's slated to be the comic opera showcased at the Hawaii Performing Arts Festival this year.

There will be three performances staged at two different Big Island venues: at 7 p.m. July 13 and 15 at the Hawaii Preparatory Academy campus in Waimea; and at 7 p.m. July 17 at the Palace Theater in Hilo.

Focused around a single day of madness, "The Marriage of Figaro" recounts how Figaro, a wily barber and part-time matchmaker, falls in love. But, like everything else in his life, it's complicated.

On the eve of Figaro's marriage to Susanna, his master, Count Almaviva, sets his wandering eye on the bride-to-be.

Countess Rosina devises a plan of her own once learning of her husband's desires, and Figaro and the Count go head-to-head in this tangled love story.

Catherine Turocy, recognized as one of today's leading stage directors and choreographers in 17th



Catherine Turocy

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Isaiah Musik-Ayala will take on the role of Figaro for HPAF's production.

Photo: VANESSA PREZIOSE

“If people have never been to an opera, this is the opera to see.”



Isiah Musik-Ayala as Figaro during a performance with Opera San Jose in California.

Photo courtesy Opera San Jose

FIGARO

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and 18th century period performance, will be the director for HPAF's "The Marriage of Figaro."

With more than 60 Baroque operas to her credit, Turocy choreographed a well-known production of "The Marriage of Figaro" under director Sir John Eliot Gardiner, but this will be her first time as stage director for the entire opera.

"If people have never been to an opera, this is the opera to see," says Turocy, who is returning to HPAF for her fourth season this year. "It has brilliant music, witty text and is about a subject that everyone can relate to, which is sex and love."

Though the opera is sung in Italian, Turocy says there will be subtitles and a plot summary in the program.

"I think it's a good idea to do a little homework if people have never been to an opera or don't know much about 'The Marriage of Figaro,'" she says. "But I also think even if people don't have time ahead of the performance that they will still be able to follow the plot and get the jokes."

"The music will probably sound very familiar, as well. You've probably heard these songs on commercials, in cartoons or other videos. It's in our culture, and we don't realize it's Mozart. People will be surprised how much they already know."

Turocy's husband, conductor James Richman, will provide musical direction for the

HPAF production, and Turocy, currently in Dallas, has been in touch with the singers who will come to rehearsals at the end of June having already memorized the music.

"It's a fast-paced opera so what's challenging will be getting everyone on board with that timing," Turocy says. "They have to play off each other quickly to keep the sparks flying."

Written as an "opera buffo" (comic opera) in 1786, "The Marriage of Figaro" was based on a play, "The Barber of Seville." Members of nobility were portrayed as being greedy and stupid in the play, explains Turocy, and it was banned in Vienna.

"You realize what a bold stroke it was for Mozart to take this on as an opera," she says. "He was a young composer who wanted to take on something topical but also political. He did take out some of the most controversial parts, and his opera gained popularity."

Joining HPAF's cast as Figaro is seasoned opera singer Isaiah Musik-Ayala, who previously played the same role as a resident artist in opera in 2010 in San Jose, Calif.

"Figaro is such an iconic character," says Musik-Ayala, who sings in the register of bass-baritone. "I like that he's a fusion between a buffo (comic actor) and a romantic lead. It's a rare thing in opera. The lower voices are not usually given the romantic characters. I don't know that it exists

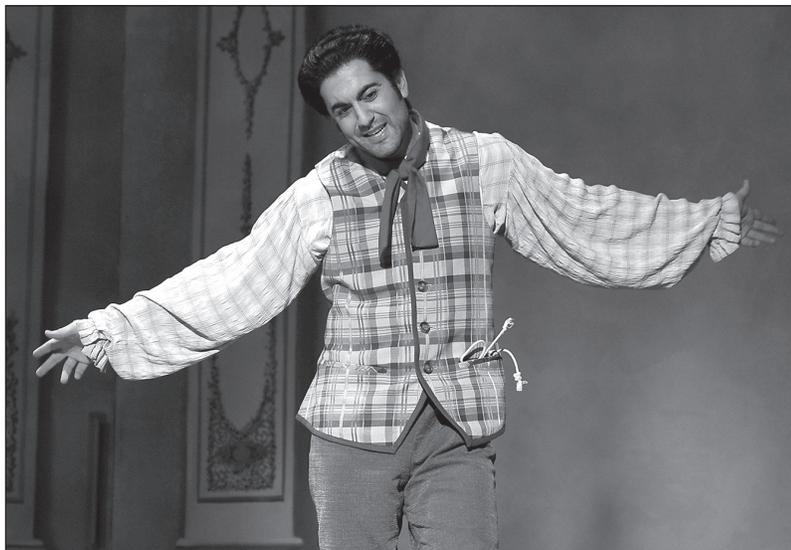


Photo courtesy Opera San Jose

Isaiah Musik-Ayala as Figaro with Opera San Jose in California.

in any other opera like it does in this one.

"This is one of the most approachable operas because it's a comedy, it has a great story and it has some of the best music ever written."

Musik-Ayala says he's always felt an affinity for Figaro.

"He's the original 'everyman,'" he says. "On TV nowadays, we have all these other characters that are so popular because people can relate to them. Figaro is one of those original characters. He's like a Ray Romano meets a leading man like George Clooney. He's funny and smart and, in the end, we see that he has real feelings. There's something timeless about him."

Audiences also will get to know Mozart a little more through this opera, says Musik-Ayala, who is joining HPAF for the first time this

year as a professional fellow.

"I think everything that's touched on in any opera is just getting to the core of our human experience, just like any good song," he says. "I think the reason I love opera so much is because when it's done well, it gives me 'all the feelings.'"

"Every show I do it's almost like I'm choosing to do this as a career all over again because it's not an easy path. But I've always loved music and singing opera is one of the most beautiful and most difficult things to do."

For 14-year-old Parker School student Stacey Firestone, opera has been an unexpected calling.

"When I was 8, my mom had cancer and she wanted to go see the production of 'The Magic Flute' at HPA," Firestone recalls. "I heard the 'Queen of the Night'

aria and I completely fell in love. That's how it all started."

Firestone, who will play the role of flower girl in "The Marriage of Figaro," says singing opera makes her feel free, although it wasn't an easy life path because she was teased for her choice.

"HPAF is really giving me a chance to be who I want to be," she says. "This is my third year with the festival, and opera is definitely something I want to pursue as a career. I think every experience I can have with opera is a good experience. Everyone in the festival is so supportive it makes me feel at home."

Firestone says "The Marriage of Figaro" will be a production that can appeal to all ages.

"You can experience a new language and a new way of singing," she says. "Before, I thought opera was just

like all the stereotypes — just a weird way of singing. But I've grown out of that."

Firestone suggests ignoring the subtitles, even if you don't understand the language.

"Don't pay attention to the words, pay attention to the beauty, the technique and the sound," she says. "That's the most amazing part, in my opinion."

Turocy says HPAF offers students and performers an opportunity to grow their talent.

"This festival allows for a freer atmosphere to study and create," she says. "Singers are able to take risks without the pressure of critics or an opera house. They are more willing to try something they've never done before."

All of this creative freedom equates to some fantastic productions, Turocy says.

"Any of the operas that come out of HPAF has this glow about them," she says. "I have worked in so many productions, so I don't say that lightly. But it's truly unique, what happens in Hawaii with this festival."

"It's a workshop of experienced performers and people who've done a lot of thinking about the work. HPAF provides this unique campus of intellectual thought and integrity. It's an amazing thing."

Tickets for the HPA shows are \$25 general admission; tickets for the Palace Theater production are \$15. For more information, visit www.hawaiiperforming-artsfestival.org.