

# Opera Warhorses

An appreciation and analysis of the 'Standard Repertory' of opera

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## **World Premiere: A Triumphant “Prince of Players” for Composer Carlisle Floyd, Baritone Ben Edquist – Houston Grand Opera, March 5, 2016**

**March 7th, 2016**

Composer Carlisle Floyd, who turns 90 this summer, created the lyrics and music for yet another master work for the Houston Grand Opera, the company in which so much of the Floyd Legacy is invested. The opera, “Prince of Players”, is based considerably on the 2004 movie *Stage Beauty*.

In Floyd’s deft hands and incorporating the inspired direction of Polish-born director Michael Gieleta, the opera is a profoundly moving psychological study of Edward Kynaston, a celebrity actor of London’s theaters of the 1660s. Kynaston suffered professional and personal crises when the theater traditions were overturned by an impulsive (though ultimately progressive) royal edict.

### ***Ben Edquist’s Edward Kynaston***

Baritone Ben Edquist, currently a Houston Grand Opera Studio Young Artist, is cast in the lead role of the actor Kynaston. Edquist is a lyric baritone with the vocal expressiveness to convincingly convey passion, anger and despair.

[Below: Baritone Ben Edquist; resized image of a publicity photograph.]



I was impressed with Edquist's work at the 2014 and 2015 Glimmerglass Festivals as Jigger in Rodgers' and Hammerstein's "Carousel" (a role he repeats next month in Houston) and Papageno in Mozart's "The Magic Flute".

However, Edquist's characterization of Kynaston provides him with a much wider range of opportunities to display his manifest acting abilities. That he has proved successful in this role will be recognized by the world opera community, and suggests he is at the threshold of a major career.

[Below: Edward Kynaston (Ben Edquist) has concluded that the edict banning men from playing women's parts on the English stage has destroyed his career, his livelihood and the basis of his celebrity; edited image, based on a Lynn Lane photograph, courtesy of the Houston Grand Opera.]



At the center of virtually every scene in the 90 minute opera, Edquist's Kynaston demonstrated the ancient style of performing Elizabethan era plays in the theaters of Restoration London. Kynaston, in his baritone voice spoke (sang) Desdemona's lines for the death scene in the Bard's "Othello". Such an actor would have been accepted as a woman by contemporary theatergoers because he was wearing a woman's costume and was using hand gestures that, by convention, conveyed specific "women's" sentiments.

[Below: George Villiers, the Duke of Buckingham (Scott Quinn, left), has enjoyed a physical relationship with Edward Kynaston (Ben Edquist, right) before familial considerations require the Duke to end his association with the actor, so that the Duke can marry free of scandal; edited image, based on a Lynn Lane photograph, courtesy of the Houston Grand Opera.]





In the effectively staged, succinctly written narrative, we begin to understand how Kynaston's celebrity masks deep psychological wounds that surface in his self-destructive behaviors in bawdy houses and seedy neighborhoods.

Kynaston's relationship with the Duke of Buckingham (sensitively sung and acted by Scott Quinn), if based on true affection, is carried out in secret and is ended as soon as the Duke's dynastic concerns outweigh the Duke's interests in sexual adventurism.

### ***Mane Galoyan's Margaret Hughes***

Soprano Mane Galoyan sings the role of Margaret Hughes, Kynaston's dresser, who through observation has learned Kynaston's acting techniques. After the royal edict banning men performing women's roles, she, without Kynaston's knowledge, achieves success as a woman performing women's roles. Importantly, Margaret becomes the countervailing force to Kynaston's downward spiral and rescues him when he is emotionally at his lowest.

[Below: Mane Galoyan as Margaret Hughes; edited image, based on a Lynn Lane photograph, courtesy of the Houston Grand Opera.]



Galoyan's Margaret was vocally effective, her lyric voice used with great sensitivity to convey a woman who can see the goodness that exists in a man whom others ridicule and demean. Galoyan's character is the emotional driving force in the opera, and Floyd's music, exquisitely performed by Galoyan, delineates a character as strong as she is sensitive.

[Below: Having rescued Edward Kynaston (Ben Edquist, left) from the indignity of performing at a bawdy house and in being beaten by vengeful men, Margaret Hughes (Mane Galoyan, right) begins the rehabilitation process for him; edited image, based on a Lynn Lane photograph, courtesy of the Houston Grand Opera.]



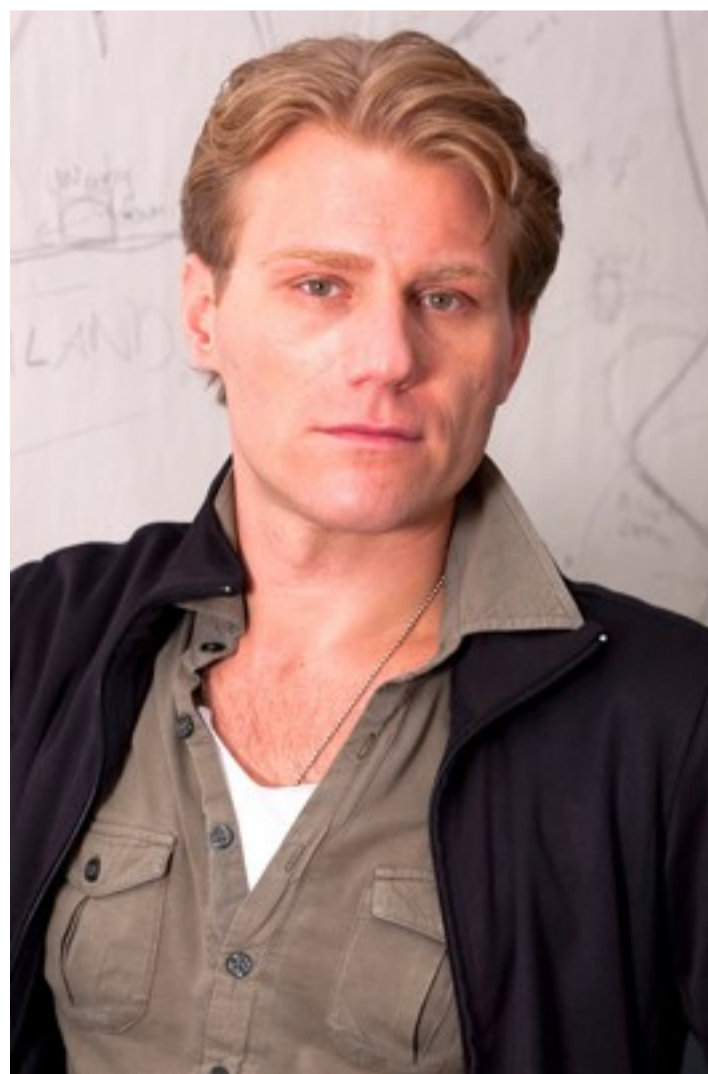
### ***Other Cast Members***

In addition to Scott Quinn as the Duke of Buckingham, Federico De Michelis was the lascivious Thomas Betterton, Chad Shelton was King Charles II, Sofia Selowsky was Nell Gwynn, Megan Samarin was Lady Meresvale and the Mistress of Revels, and Joseph Evans was Sir Charles Sedley. Others in the cast included Sofia Selowsky, Pureum Jo, Joseph Evans, Said Henry Presley, Megan Berti, Christopher Childress, Luke Fedell and Alex Boyd.

### ***Michael Gieleta's Direction***

The staging of Director Michael Gieleta was critical to the performance's success. I had admired his work on a double bill of disparate operas in Santa Fe [[Review: A Hilarious "Impresario" Creates a "Rossignol" Land of Enchantment – Santa Fe Opera, August 1, 2014](#)]. I found the flow of the action throughout the evening to be imaginative and theatrically effective.

[Below: Director Michael Gieleta; resized image of a publicity photograph from michaelmooreagency.com.]



Gieleta concentrates the visual focus on what he (and Floyd) intends for us to concentrate on at a given moment. Center stage has a raised platform (which can be turned to allow a rapid change of scene).

What Gieleta wants us to concentrate upon may happen on that platform or elsewhere, but we are always aware of what he wishes us to see. Whomever onstage is extraneous at the moment is darkened or at the periphery of one's vision. Thus the action is more akin to live theater or cinema than a big opera production with multiple events occurring simultaneously to compete for one's attention.

### ***Maestro Patrick Summers and Other Artists***

HGO music director Patrick Summers conducted the Carlisle Floyd world premiere proudly, with sympathetic connection with Floyd's shimmering orchestration.

Shoko Kambara designed the rather uncomplicated but effective sets. Gregory Gale was costume designer, Renee Brode, the lighting director.

[Below: Margaret Hughes (Mane Galoyan left) prepares her makeup and hair style for the female role of Desdemona, while Edward Kynaston (Ben Edquist, right) prepares for the male role of Othello; edited image, based on a Lynn Lane photograph, courtesy of the Houston Grand Opera.]



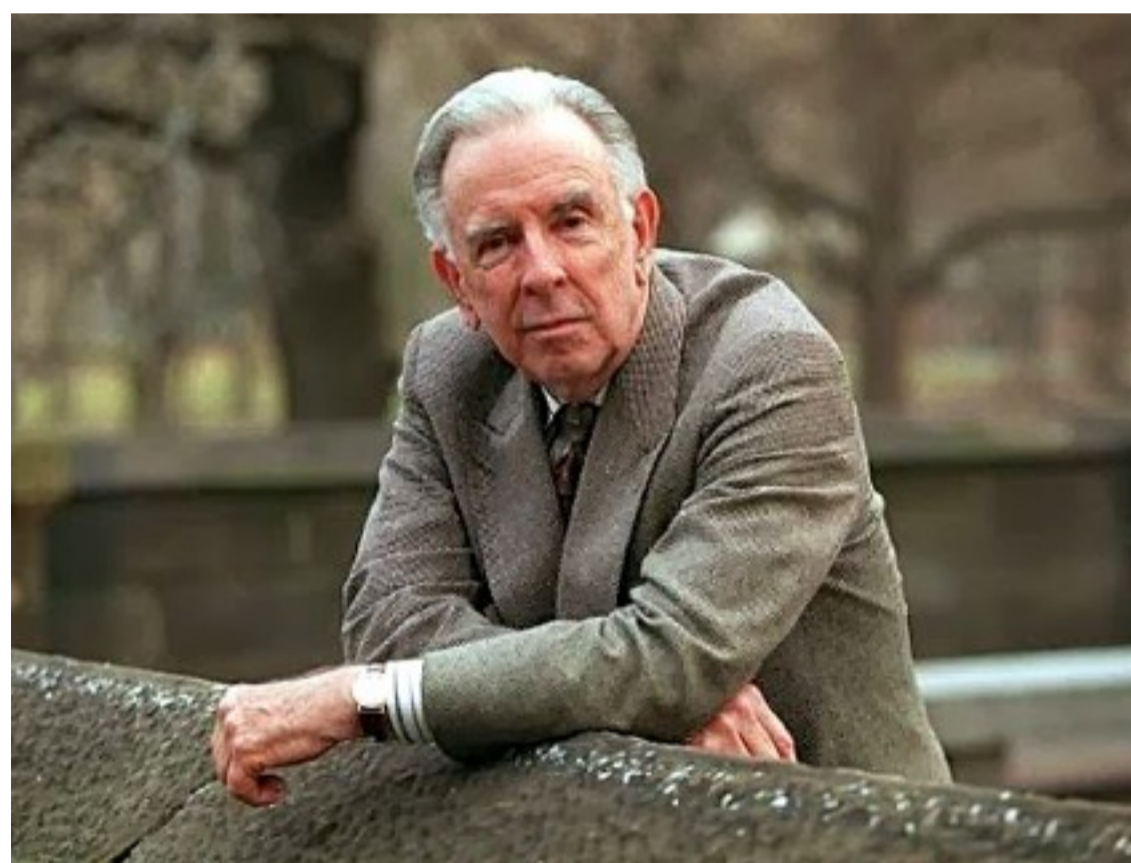


### *The Carlisle Floyd Legacy*

“Prince of Players” is a remarkable work, which Floyd has indicated is the capstone of a 67 year period of writing operas, that includes one of the two or three greatest American works – “Susannah”.

Like “Susannah’s” hymns, Appalachian ballads and Southern twang, “Prince of Players” incorporates speech patterns of 17th century London and incorporates songs that sound like folk or popular music of the opera’s period (such as the bawdy house ballad that the humiliated Kynaston is forced to sing), but are actually inventions of Floyd himself.

[Below: Composer Carlisle Floyd; edited image of a publicity photograph from [sinfoniaresonance.org](http://sinfoniaresonance.org)]




What is unparalleled in operatic history is composer Floyd’s artistic longevity. To have premiered a work shortly before his 90th birthday is truly remarkable. If Mozart had lived and composed operas until age 90, that opera would have been contemporaneous with Wagner’s “Tannhäuser” and preceded by several of Verdi’s early successes. Vincenzo Bellini would have composed his opera at 90 during the year that Puccini’s “Manon Lescaut” premiered. George Gershwin’s 90th birthday opera would have premiered after Adams’ “Nixon in China”.

I suspect that “Prince of Players” will be a respected work, often performed, particularly by smaller opera companies and the vocal performance curricula of universities, because of its modest stage requirements, minimalist orchestra, and, of course, brilliant libretto and affecting music.

I have predicted that the whole canon of Floyd’s works, certainly including “Prince of Players”, will gain a greater popularity than they currently have, when the whole body of works becomes better known by the opera audiences and the wider operatic community.

[For my interview with Carlisle Floyd, contemporaneous with San Francisco Opera’s new production of Floyd’s “Susannah”, see: [Dean of American Opera Composers: An Interview with Carlisle Floyd.](#)]

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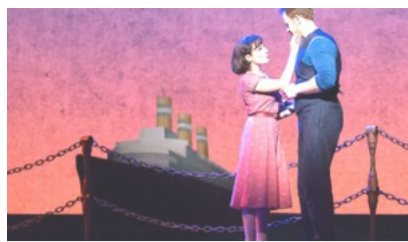
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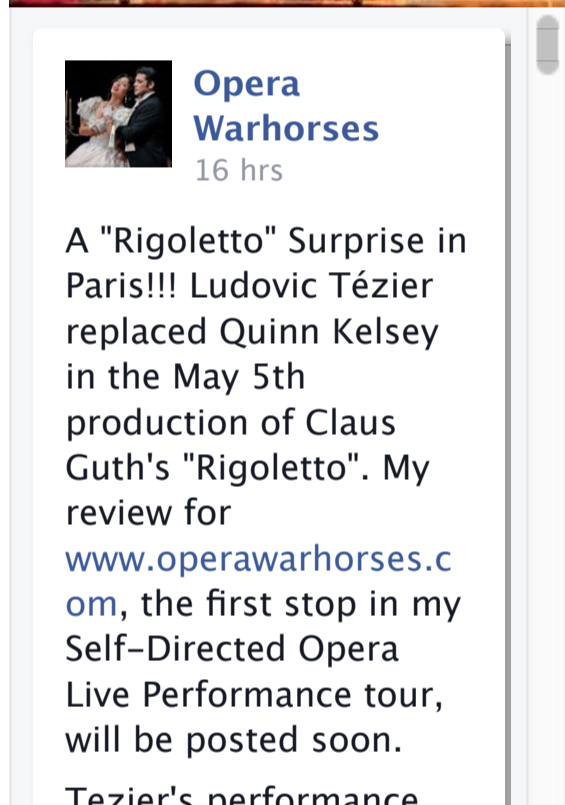
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