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## Font Of Lyricism Flows Again In New Floyd Opera

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Composer Carlisle Floyd, 89, has written his fifth opus for Houston Grand Opera. (Production photos by Lynn Lane)

By William Albright

HOUSTON — [Carlisle Floyd](#) turns 90 on June 11, but [Houston Grand Opera](#) started celebrating his birthday early. For the fifth time, the company commissioned a new opera from him. And it gave the resulting work — *Prince of Players*, a two-hour chamber opera in two acts — a popularly priced but handsomely staged three-performance, world-premiere run in Wortham Theater Center's [Cullen Theater](#). But the icing on the cake came on March 5, when the opening-night audience erupted in loud, prolonged appreciation as the composer joined the cast, conductor, and production team for onstage bows.



Carlisle Floyd was 29 when he introduced 'Susannah.'

[Giuseppe Verdi](#) astonished the world with his still-vibrant creativity at ages 73 and 79 with *Otello* and *Falstaff*, respectively. *Prince of Players* is no

*Falstaff* (what is?), but the work, HGO's 59th world premiere since 1973, is a remarkable achievement by a composer who burst onto the operatic scene in 1955 with *Susannah* and hasn't written a new opera since *Cold Sassy Tree* was launched here 16 years ago. Floyd's 14th music drama is dappled with the lyricism that has been a hallmark of his proudly accessible style from the beginning. It is ingeniously orchestrated. It offers singers rewarding musical and dramatic challenges. And the composer's libretto (he always writes his own) touchingly proclaims the value of artistic commitment and truth.

*Prince of Players* is based on American playwright Jeffrey Hatcher's 1999 *Compleat Female Stage Beauty*, the inspiration for Sir Richard Eyre's 2004 film *Stage Beauty*. The title character is Edward Kynaston (c. 1640–1712), one of the last Restoration "boy players" or actors who performed women's roles. Homeless as a child, he was taught the acting craft of his day by a thespian rendered jobless when the Puritans closed the theaters.



Peg (Mane Galoyan) and Kynaston (Ben Edquist) learn new way to play 'Othello.'

Kynaston suffers the same career loss in the opera. After the playhouses were allowed to reopen, King Charles II ended the ban on women onstage in 1661 and royally decreed that "No He shall ere again upon an English stage play She." Begged to switch to male roles, Kynaston refuses to abandon his female impersonations. There is no art or skill involved, he insists, when a woman plays a woman. (In truth, the historical Kynaston always played both male and female characters.) Reduced to singing bawdy songs in drag as Lusty Louise in low taverns, he is rescued from poverty and disgrace by his former dresser, Margaret "Peg" Hughes, who loves him and becomes one of London's first actresses. Now both costars and a couple, they abandon the artificial, gesture-based style of acting he had laboriously perfected and pioneer a more natural theatricality. Encapsulating the dramatic arc of the story, *Prince of Players* opens with Kynaston and a colleague enacting the final scene of Shakespeare's *Othello* in the old, bloodless way and closes with Kynaston and Peg playing the scene with far more passion and impact.



Kynaston (Edquist) teaches Peg (Galoyan) how to be Desdemona.

The bulk of the story is told in recitative over a purling orchestra that is an encyclopedia of colors and textures. But there are many pages of Floyd's trademark lyricism. Perhaps because a love interest calls for such writing, Peg is a major beneficiary of this particular musical style. Her confessions of love for Kynaston, both in a first-act soliloquy and later to his face when he's down and out, are moving. He in his turn becomes expansive when telling her about his childhood and explaining his dedication to art as he has always known it. Actor-manager Thomas Betterton also waxes eloquent when pleading with his stubborn former prima donna to take a new career path. And Floyd gently hints at 17th-century musical styles with a few little embellishments and humorously evokes period ballads in the Lusty Louise scene.

Floyd has enjoyed a decades-long connection to Houston and Houston Grand Opera. He taught at the University of Houston for 20 years. HGO previously commissioned *Bilby's Doll* (1976), *Willie Stark* (1981), the revised version of *The Passion of Jonathan Wade* (1991), and *Cold Sassy Tree* (2000). He and long-time general director David Gockley created the *Houston Grand Opera Studio* in 1977, and two Wortham Theater Center rehearsal rooms are named in their honor. Thus, it was perhaps fitting that most of the *Prince of Players* singers were current or former Studio members and provided evidence of the program's effectiveness.



Kynaston (Edquist) enacting Desdemona in Michael Gieleta's lavish production.

[Michael Gieleta](#) was once apprenticed to *Stage Beauty* director Sir Richard Eyre, and his fluid *Prince of Players* staging was more than a museum of Restoration-era acting and movement. Further, his production was top-drawer. With candle-lit stages and nighttime strolls in the park expertly conjured by lighting designer [Renée Brode](#), the centerpiece of [Shoko Kambara's](#) set was a platform that included drawers for quickly needed props and could double as a theater stage and Kynaston's room. But the most spectacular visual contribution was [Gregory Gale's](#) sumptuous costumery of gowns, robes, and cascading wigs.

HGO artistic and music director [Patrick Summers](#) staked a claim on *Prince of Players* when Floyd mentioned in April 2012 that he was working on a new opera. Summers' conducting coaxed out the work's meticulous scoring and moments of lushness, and his 19-member cast gave solid vocal and dramatic performances. As Kynaston in *Stage Beauty*, Billy Crudup elevated his voice's natural pitch when playing Desdemona, but [Ben Edquist](#) mercifully didn't color his sturdy baritone with falsetto here. Floyd's score is peppered with high notes and, as Peg, [Mane Galoyan](#) tapered her ripe soprano for two limpid pianissimo examples. [Federico De Michelis](#) poured out resonant bass-clef sound as Thomas Betterton, and tenor [Chad Shelton](#) was a ringing King Charles II. Other tenors providing strong support were [Joseph Evans](#) as Kynaston nemesis Sir Charles Sedley and [Scott Quinn](#) as the Duke of Buckingham, Kynaston's pre-Peg love interest. Royal mistress and future actress Nell Gwyn was perkily played by [Sofia Selowsky](#), and fellow mezzo-soprano [Megan Mikailovna Samarin](#) and soprano [Pureum Jo](#) twittered brightly as Kynaston groupies Lady Meresvale and Miss Frayne, respectively.

*William Albright is a freelance writer in Houston who has contributed to The Los Angeles Times, The Christian Science Monitor, American Record Guide, Opera, The Opera Quarterly, and other publications.*

Date posted: March 10, 2016

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-  [Rodney Punt](#)

I have admired Carlisle Floyd, a genuinely American musical force, since I met him at a San Francisco conference several decades ago. Over a whisky we had a lively discussion about art and life that went into the wee hours. His is a brilliant mind and a unique sensibility shaped in part, like that of Tennessee Williams, by the cultural climate of America's South. Bravo this review and an opera of such reported creativity from a

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Barbara Jepson  
MCANA President

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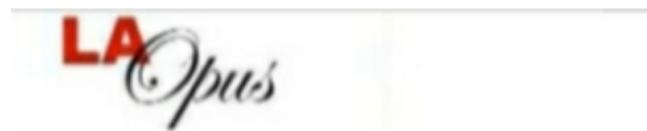
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