

## Houston

HOUSTON GRAND OPERA's fifth commission from Carlisle Floyd is rooted in 17th-century British history. Premiered on March 5 in Wortham Theater Center's CULLEN THEATER, *Prince of Players* is based on the American playwright Jeffrey Hatcher's 1999 *Complete Female Stage Beauty*, the inspiration for 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. When King Charles II ended the ban on women on stage in 1661 and royally decreed that 'No He shall ere again upon an English stage play She', Kynaston was out of a job.

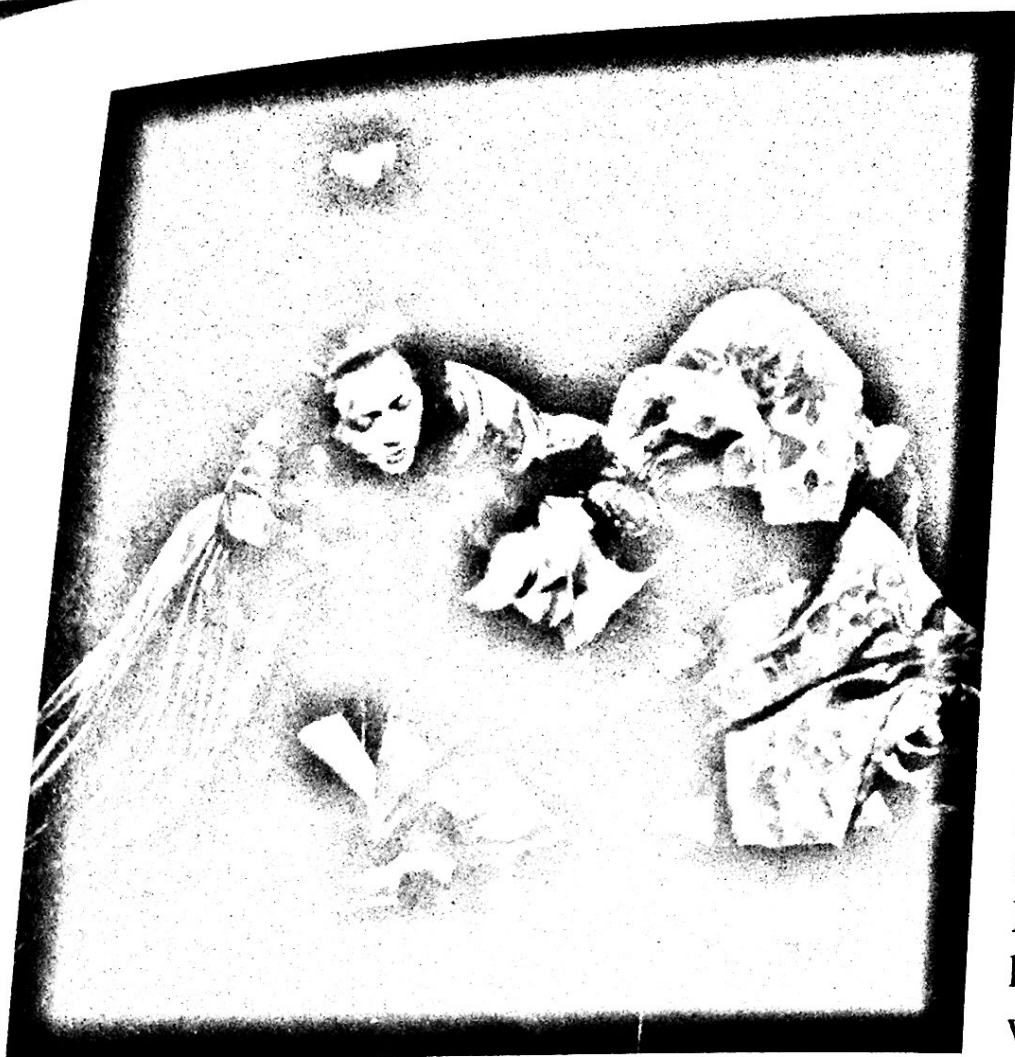
The historical Kynaston always played both male and female characters but his operatic alter ego refuses to start playing men. Reduced to singing bawdy songs in low taverns in drag as Lusty Louise, he is rescued from poverty and disgrace by his former dresser, Margaret 'Peg' Hughes, who loves him; she becomes one of London's first actresses. Now, as co-stars and as a couple, they abandon the artificial, gesture-based style of acting he had laboriously perfected since childhood and pioneer a more realistic and natural theatricality. *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.

Floyd's orchestral score boasts a wide variety of colours and textures, and his trademark lyricism surfaces in Peg's and Kynaston's declarations of love, his confessions about his homeless childhood, his commitment to the old-fashioned acting style, and the actor-manager of his company's plea for his stubborn prima donna to take a new career path.

Michael Gielea presided over a fluid, handsome production. Renée Brode's lighting neatly conjured up candlelit stages and night-time strolls in the park. Shoko Kambara's set featured a rotating platform with drawers in it for quickly needed props, which could double as a theatre stage and Kynaston's room. Best of all were Gregory Gale's sumptuous gowns, robes and luxurious wigs.

Patrick Summers, conducting, deftly realized the work's meticulous orchestration and flights of lyricism. Ben Edquist sang Kynaston in a sturdy baritone, resisting any temptation to slip into falsetto. Yet high notes abound in *Prince of Players* and, as Peg, Mane Galoyan fined her ripe soprano down for two limpid pianissimo examples. The bass-baritone Federico De Michelis boomed resonantly as the actor-manager Thomas Betterton, and the tenor Chad Shelton was a clarion King Charles II. Other tenors providing strong support were Joseph Evans as Kynaston's nemesis Sir Charles Sedley, and Scott Quinn as the Duke of Buckingham, Kynaston's pre-Peg love interest. The royal mistress and future actress Nell Gwynn was perkily played by Sofia Selowsky, and her fellow mezzo Megan Mikailovna Samarin and soprano Pureum Jo gushed effusively as the Kynaston groupies Lady Meresvale and Miss Frayne, respectively. Most of the cast were current or former HGO Studio members.

On February 13 OPERA IN THE HEIGHTS tackled comic Rossini with an energetic and well-sung LAMBERT HALL staging of *La Cenerentola*. The set designer Jodi Bobrovsky and lighting designer Jim Elliott created a spirit of infectious fun with a palette worthy of *Pee-wee's Playhouse*, and David Ward thought up all kinds of lively stage business for his young cast. The Ugly Sisters, got up as eccentrically colourful flappers by the



■ *Mane Galoyan (Margaret Hughes) and Ben Edquist (Kynaston) in the premiere of Carlisle Floyd's 'Prince of Players' in Houston*

costume designer Macy Lyne, were especially active.

OH's principal conductor, Eiki Isomura, coaxed sprightly orchestral support from his 19-member band. Megan Berti was sympathetic in the title role, and her warm mezzo met the coloratura demands nimbly, though it could tighten on high. The men were much more challenged by fast notes but acted confidently and gave satisfying vocal performances. Eric Bowden's sweet tenor easily scaled Prince Ramiro's daunting heights, and Thom Gunther was a keen-toned Dandini. Christopher Besch and Nathan Milholin, the latter sporting mutton-chop whiskers worthy of a Victorian-era swell, gave

stentorian voice to Alidoro's pronouncements and Don Magnifico's fulminations respectively, while Kyla Knox and Monica Isomura twittered brightly as Clorinda and Tisbe.

WILLIAM ALBRIGHT