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Cast from workshop production of A.C.T.'s *The Tosca Project*, from left: Jekyln Pelaez, Muriel Maffre, Marc Morozumi, Stephanie Saunders, Nol Simonse, Pascal Molat.

Love and Loss at Heart of *The Tosca Project*

by Jean Schiffman

A woman enters an empty bar where three young bartenders, bearing a passing resemblance to the Three Stooges, greet her enthusiastically: *Benvenuto!* She responds in Russian. Ushered to a stool, she opens her bag; inside is a Russian nesting doll. Reverently she dismantles the doll, layer by layer, and a beautiful young man appears, dances swiftly across the room, vanishes.

Today the cast is rehearsing this opening scene of *The Tosca Project*, an American

Conservatory Theater world premiere set in a certain San Francisco bar. It combines movement-based acting and dance in a series of essentially wordless vignettes that reveal personal stories of love and loss. Outside, the world changes as the decades roll on.

Although for this rehearsal the bar is merely a cobbled-together cluster of chairs and planks in a rehearsal room, with an old refrigerator standing in for the jukebox,

on A.C.T.'s proscenium stage the scene will mirror North Beach's storied Tosca Café, with its swinging glass doors, long, polished bar and darkly alluring ambiance.

Four years ago, when A.C.T. artistic director Carey Perloff and San Francisco Ballet choreographer Val Caniparoli put some actors and dancers in a room together to see what would happen, no one knew that the cross-disciplinary experiment would evolve, after many

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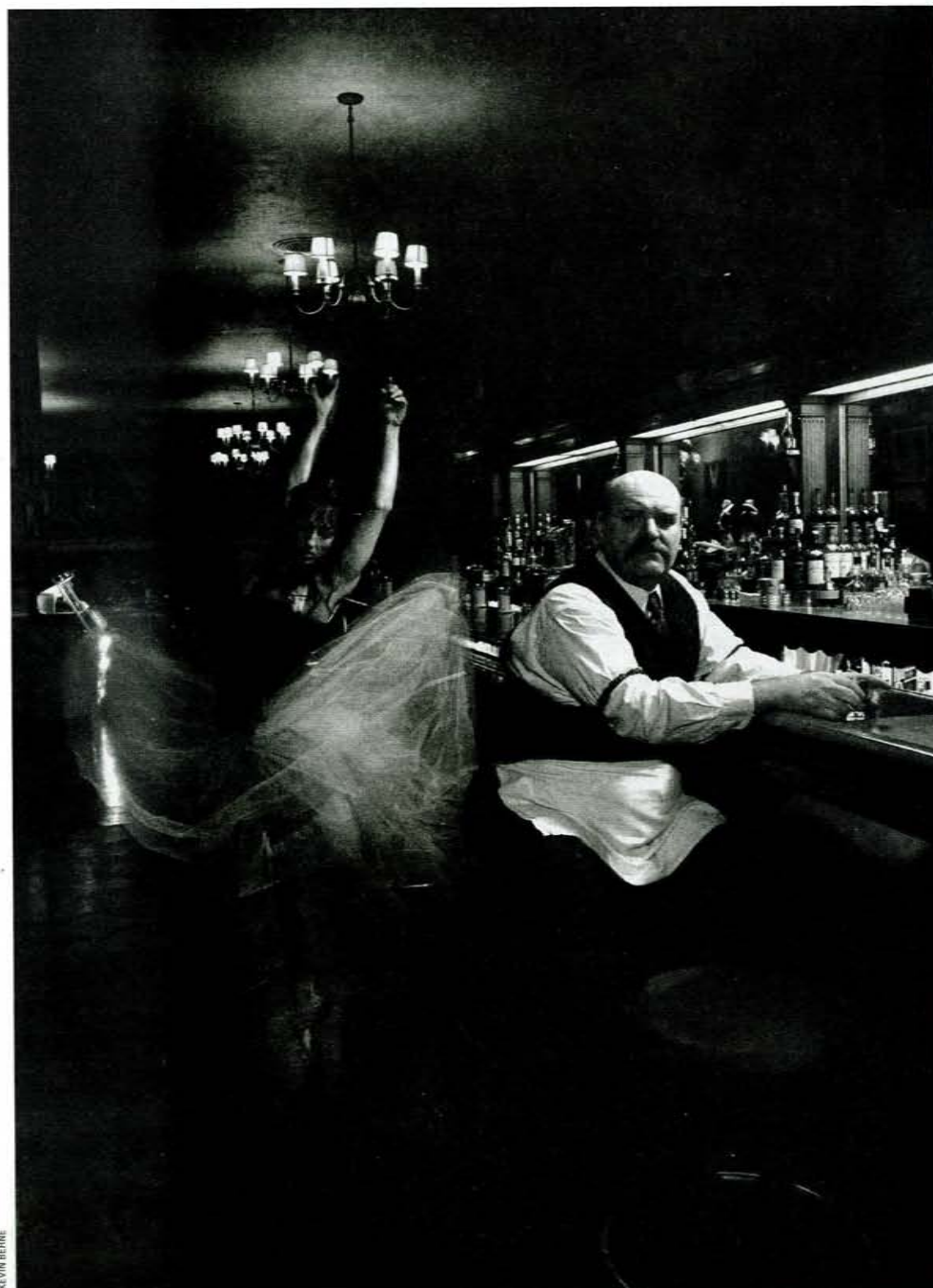
workshops, including a public one at Yerba Buena Center in 2007, into a poignant, multicultural piece. Says Perloff, “We had the notion, because of seeing *Le Bal* [Ettore Scola’s stylized, 1983 French film that conflates a half-century of European history into one night in a provincial ballroom] and a lot of conversations with [former San Francisco Ballet prima ballerina] Muriel Maffre, of exploring a really magical place over a period of time.”

It was only when Perloff went to Tosca to chat with legendary owner Jeannette Etheredge about possible funding through the Nureyev Foundation that the idea for a setting took shape. “In some ways Tosca feels like an archeological site to me,” Perloff says. “Jeannette told me nothing is any different than 40 years ago! The same jukebox, the same drinks, it’s amazing. Time has stopped!”

When Perloff and Canaparoli began their research—including extensive oral histories of Etheredge and other North

Beach bartenders and local figures—they discovered that Tosca was founded by three Italian brothers, inauspiciously just before Prohibition. Period photos, film footage of events like San Francisco’s 1934 maritime strike, audio of Beat poets, muralist paintings at Coit Tower: All that helped the creators absorb historical context and a uniquely San Francisco atmosphere—that, and cast gatherings at Tosca for drinks and games of pool in the private back room, a longtime sanctuary for Etheredge’s coterie: international and local performing artists and filmmakers. “I feel anybody who has lived through any piece of San Francisco, from the Summer of Love to the earthquake years to contemporary times—Italians, Russians, gays, African Americans—will have a piece of this story,” says Perloff.

Puccini’s 1900 opera too was inevitably among the piece’s inspirations. “What you get from *Tosca* automatically, no matter what, is suicide, political intrigue, a love triangle, an artist, jealousy, romance,” muses Perloff. “So we took some of the fundamental touchstones of the opera, and some of the most beautiful music, and began to incorporate that into this bigger story that we were making.” As in *Tosca*, there is a love triangle. And as in Etheredge’s bar—where you can drop a quarter to listen to an aria—Italian music, and other music as well, from Stravinsky to Hendrix, emanates from the stage jukebox.



KEVIN REINE

San Francisco Ballet principal dancer Lorena Feijoo and A.C.T. core acting company member Jack Willis (pictured at the Tosca Café) are part of the multidisciplinary cast of *The Tosca Project*.



A.C.T. core acting company member Gregory Wallace in *The Tosca Project*.

"The real question was, what's the most beautiful, richest, most emotionally resonant way to tell this piece?" says Perloff. "It isn't conventional theater, it's not a ballet. It's not enough that it has a lot of beautiful dancing, although that's a big piece of it. It needed to be something bigger than that.

"When you're making a piece like this, there are no real rules of how it should go," she adds. "You have to make it up as you go along. You want an emotional throughline that's incredibly pungent without a lot of text."

Threaded throughout is an uber-bartender (played by A.C.T. core company actor Jack Willis), who captures all the stories of the bar and carries them through time. "There's a memory contained in that bar [of a young woman] that's going to keep haunting him until he can resolve it at the end of the piece," explains Perloff.

Characters' memories, unleashed by the opening of a battered suitcase, violin case or nesting doll, materialize as dancers. The rattle of a cocktail mixer or spurt from an espresso machine jolt the dreamers from reverie to reality.

The 10-member ensemble includes San Francisco Ballet's Pascal Molat and its former ballerina Sabina Allemann, actress Rachel Ticotin and Vancouver-based physical performer Peter Anderson

(first seen here in 2005 in A.C.T.'s silent *The Overcoat*).

To put dancers and actors together was a challenge. For dancers, movement comes first and making sense of it comes later, explains Canaparoli; actors on the other hand memorize lines, develop a character. As Perloff puts it, actors say, "Why am I here, what do I want?" whereas dancers back into the process. Given steps, actors ask, "Why am I doing this?" and dancers simply do the steps and find the emotion within them.

After choreographing dance scenes for several of A.C.T.'s previous productions, Canaparoli learned to work toward the middle where the two disciplines can meet, looking for actors' strengths to incorporate into the choreography. For example, A.C.T. core company actor Gregory Wallace excels at creating distinctive character walks that Canaparoli is building into the stage movement.

For his part, Wallace says the process has been "amazing and wonderful." He thinks this is exactly the way any art system moves forward: by integrating with other art forms. He adds, "The dancers' whole m.o. is so different from ours. They're more disciplined, their aesthetic is different... I think they're attuned to music in a way actors are not. There's a beat, a rhythm, and they honor that and in some sense are enslaved to it. They're about the beauty of the physical line. Their value system is different from ours. We really are operating in two different worlds."

Just so are the show's two creators coming from two different disciplines, and not only that: Their personal working styles

are totally opposite, says Canaparoli. "We look at each other like, 'You're from Mars.' Yet we're still going the same direction. I'm not as vocal. I don't explain as much. Sometimes I look at Carey and I have no idea what she's talking about! But we're equals in the room."

Says Perloff, "Val is such an easygoing, open-minded guy, we've almost never collided. I'm responsible for the bigger storytelling: What are we actually trying to tell here? What is the relationship of this character to that? What is the backstory here? And he solves the moment-to-moment work." Actors and dancers contributed to creating their characters; for the dancers that was particularly exciting, says Perloff—the unfamiliar task of developing relationships, thinking of physical gestures to carry consistently through and other challenges.

As the rehearsal continues, Wallace is heard confessing to Perloff that he's just discovered he has no sense of rhythm. Dancers and actors are practicing a Charleston routine. Sound designer Darron L West experiments with recordings of European police sirens, part of a complex soundscape that, among other purposes, references time periods. "We have a clump of people over here, but nothing over *here*," frets Canaparoli, gesturing. "What time of day is it supposed to be?" wonders Perloff, sitting barefoot on a folding chair. "Happy hour," says Canaparoli.

June 3-27, American Conservatory Theater, 415 Geary St. 749-2228, www.act-sf.org ★