

AMERICAN CONSERVATORY THEATER

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PRESENTS

WORDS ^{on} PLAYS

INSIGHT INTO THE PLAY, THE PLAYWRIGHT, AND THE PRODUCTION

The Tosca Project

CREATED AND STAGED BY CAREY PERLOFF AND
VAL CANIPAROLI

AMERICAN CONSERVATORY THEATER

JUNE 3–27, 2010

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TOSCA INSPIRATIONS

BY ELIZABETH BRODERSEN

“I am at home nowhere, in no house, and in no country, except one place.”

—German filmmaker Wim Wenders about San Francisco’s Tosca Cafe

“It was so serene and beautiful and gracious, so evocative of southern Italy, 1919—you know, men in fedoras and overcoats and very elegant women sipping martinis. I remember feeling knocked out of time and just being able to sit and let my imagination run free. It was an oasis, it was a refuge. Tosca can transport anyone who’s paying attention to a different place in time.”

—Janet Clyde, co-owner of Vesuvio Cafe,
about her first visit to Tosca Cafe in 1979

“I could sit at the end of the bar and see my whole life going in front or in back of me.”

—Richard “Specs” Simmons,
owner of Specs’ 12 Adler Museum Cafe,
remembering his early days at Tosca Cafe

Historic Tosca Cafe, the inspiration for A.C.T.’s time-traveling *Tosca Project*, was founded on Columbus Avenue in San Francisco’s North Beach neighborhood in November 1919 by three intrepid Italians—just weeks before nationwide laws banning the sale of alcohol went into effect. “The old *paesani* who used to walk up and down in North Beach thought he must have been shell-shocked,” remembers Martha Francesconi Holroyd about her father, Tosca cofounder Gesualdo “Baldo” Francesconi, because “everyone knew [Prohibition] was about to start.” Martha and her sister, Tosca Francesconi Sartorio—after whom the café is reputedly named—fondly remember their opera-loving mother at the kitchen stove cooking up home-made spirits, which their father carried to work twice each day in bottles hidden in his coat pockets to outwit the ever-watchful FBI. That brew helped to perk up the house “cappucino,” served nightly to Tosca’s eagerly scoff-law patrons. Transforming the sawdust-floored bar into a coffeehouse, Francesconi sent to Italy for San Francisco’s first espresso machines, adorned the walls with murals depicting scenes of Puccini’s eponymous opera and the canals of Venice, and installed a jukebox filled with the popular arias of the day. Overcoming their initial skepticism, the *paesani* of North Beach’s thriving working-class neighborhood found at Tosca a home away from



Tosca Cafe cofounder Gesualdo “Baldo” Francesconi (right) and colleague (thought to be cofounder Ugo Pieri). Photo courtesy Martha Francesconi Holroyd.

their homeland—playing cards in the back room, eating mamma Francesconi’s sandwiches, and sipping potent “cappuccini” while evading the not-so-vigilant local police.

During World War II, Martha and Tosca remember, officers on their way to and from the Pacific theater of operations lined up at the beautiful mahogany bar two and three deep, mingling with local girls and gents; they were soon followed by the literati of the beat generation—and their fans—who made North Beach their creative headquarters. As the San Francisco Renaissance

reached its peak, Tosca Cafe—with Lawrence Ferlinghetti’s City Lights Bookstore and Henri Noir’s Vesuvio Cafe right across the street, and the poetry-jazz-fusion happenings of The Cellar, the Coffee Gallery, and Caffe Trieste around the corner—found itself at the heart of American counterculture.

As the years passed, Tosca remained true to its family origins. Al Landi, son of owner Fred Landi and Baldo’s nephew, carried on the tradition, managing the bar with the help of local boy Mario Doninelli—Tosca’s stalwart bartender from 1947 until his retirement in 1990. Mario and Al always had a friendly word, protective stance, and taxi home for their loyal customers, who included famously topless dancer Carol Doda, who found her way to the darkest corner of the bar each night to claim a few moments of safe obscurity between sets of her act at the nearby Condor Club.

Among the wayward travelers who found safe haven in Tosca was Armen Balianz (née Psakian), who landed in San Francisco in 1952 after a harrowing trek across Russia and Asia. Born in 1921 in Manchuria to Armenian parents who had fled to Russia and then China to escape the Turkish massacres of 1915–17, Armen spent much of her life one step ahead of the forces of history. She married businessman Aram Balianz in 1939 in Tsingtao, where their two children, Jeannette and Arthur, were later born; when World War II caught up with them, the Balianz family was detained for four years in a Japanese prison camp. Not long after their release, they were deported by the Red Chinese and then spent two years in a refugee camp in the Philippines. A woman with a talent for languages, indomitable will, and enormous heart, Armen got her family safely to San Francisco, where she established her own restaurant, Bali’s, at Sansome and Jackson, which soon became a sanctuary for a diverse array of writers, dancers, filmmakers, and politicians. A lifelong lover of the ballet, the Russian-speaking Armen befriended ballet legend Rudolf Nureyev

soon after his 1961 defection from the Soviet Union (she and Jeannette would remain close to Nureyev until his death in 1993), and became a mothering influence on the greats that followed, including Mikhail Baryshnikov, Natalia Makarova (who was introduced to her husband, businessman Edward Karkar, by Armen), and Alexander Filipov. All found a nourishing meal and warm heart at Bali's—and a place to party the night away at Tosca.

Jeannette (now Etheredge) remembers sitting with her brother on a bench outside the bar while their parents enjoyed their Sunday night cappuccini. She herself started hanging out at Tosca with fellow art students in the 1960s; once inside, she essentially never left.

Al Landi retired in 1979 and it looked like Tosca would have to close. Armen told her recently divorced, single-mom daughter—who by now was helping her mother run Bali's—that she needed a business of her own. In 1981, Jeannette stepped up and bought the bar (co-owned in the interim by journalist Mark Miller and two bar employees), promising to retain its old-world charm. ("My mother told me, 'You have to buy it because it's the first bar I went to when we came to America,'" remembers Jeannette.) She has been true to her word: Tosca Café, last remodeled in 1938, features the same faded linoleum, vintage juke-box (which still plays the hits of Caruso and Callas, Ellington, Sinatra, and Patsy Cline, all labeled in Al's handwriting), nicotine-stained murals, hand-carved mahogany bar (one of the longest in the city), gleaming (original) espresso machines, and enduringly beloved



Armen Bali. Photo courtesy Jeannette Etheredge.



Armen Bali, Rudolf Nureyev, and Jeannette Etheredge at Bali's Restaurant, San Francisco, 1969. Photo courtesy Jeannette Etheredge.

house cappuccino that made it one of San Francisco's best-loved night-spots. Jeannette's contribution to the décor has been the dozens of photos that cover the walls with memories of the people who have made Tosca their place during her reign.

After Armen closed Bali's in 1985, the scene shifted entirely to Tosca, where Jeannette and Armen continued to hold court for two decades. Jeannette, active in the leadership



Alexander Filipov, Armen Bali, and Mikhail Baryshnikov. Photo courtesy Jeannette Etheredge.

of the San Francisco International Film Festival, attracted with her own hospitality and warmth the luminaries of the film, literary, and political milieus (not to mention the local cops): Sean Penn, Francis Ford Coppola, Philip Kaufman, Lauren Hutton, Ed Harris, Willie Brown, Hunter S. Thompson, Sam Shepard, Johnny Depp, Philip Glass, Louis Malle, Norman Mailer, Bono, Joseph Brodsky, and Nicolas Cage are but a handful of the great, glamorous, and notorious who have spent many a late night in Tosca's embrace. All desire—and a few are granted—access to Tosca's by-now legendary back room,

where Jeannette's brother played pool with his friends until his death in 1983, and which Jeannette keeps private in his memory. In the booths and back room of Tosca, countless masterworks have been written, film deals wheeled, political careers brokered, and love affairs sparked and quenched.

Madame Bali is sadly gone (she passed away in 2007), but her legacy of generosity and gracious entertaining lives on. Several nights a week, Jeannette—who today manages the bar with her nephew, Peter Ridet—still takes up her customary station on a stool at the far end of the bar, welcoming all comers, great, glamorous, and otherwise. As the hipster digirati of today's Wi-Fi generation seek out the technological connections of the Mission and beyond, it remains to be seen where the swirling eddies of history will leave Tosca Cafe. Regardless, the ghosts of the past remain to mingle with today's cappuccino-sipping regulars. "Tosca feels like something that's been part of me forever," says Jeannette. "The world outside changes, but this place doesn't."



Jeannette Etheredge, on the occasion of Tosca Cafe's 90th birthday, 2009. Photo by Michael Macor / *The Chronicle*.