

**“Heaven...I’m in Heaven”**

**Mythology’s Orpheus and Eurydice Meet the Silver Screen’s Fred and Ginger**

By Laurel Kallenbach

Remember the magic of watching an old Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers movie where the couple waltzes dreamily, dressed elegantly in tuxedo tails and a flowing gown? Imagine how dazzling they must have seemed to the audiences of the Great Depression.

Most movies of the era were created to provide people with an escape for a few hours. One 1938 film newsreel bid audiences to “Enter the dream-house, leaving your debts asleep, your history at the door. This is the home for heroes, and the loving darkness is a fur you can afford.”

Heroes and larger-than-life movie idols illuminated the Silver Screen, much as the heroes and gods of ancient Greek myths enacted stories that continue to teach us lessons. Opera Colorado’s innovative production of the mythological *Orpheus and Eurydice* sets out to do no less—using the Depression as the setting for its powerful lyrics and expressive choreography.

This 20<sup>th</sup>-century vision of *Orpheus and Eurydice* — which hasn’t been performed here since 1941 — gives new relevance to the timeless human journey of grief, longing, and

regret symbolized by Orpheus the musician's descent into the Underworld to redeem his beloved dead wife. The mythical opera ultimately proves that love and music will triumph, even over death.

With direction and choreography by dance luminary Doug Varone, and co-direction by artistic director James Robinson, this year's *Orpheus* promises to enchant Colorado audiences—much the way Depression audiences felt watching Fred and Ginger glide across the screen.

“Twentieth-century history communicates more to a modern audience than a classical Greek setting,” says Varone, who believes the Depression is close enough to our collective memory to amplify the mythological message to a contemporary audience. “I wanted to portray the opera during a recent historic period when life was so desperate that the only comforts were community, family and love,” he says.

The Depression — with its dire economic hardship and the Dust Bowl—fit the bill.

“When material things are stripped away, we hold on to truths like love,” Varone adds, equating the experience to how Orpheus' love for Eurydice drives the story.

Dance plays a large role in *Orpheus and Eurydice*, giving Varone the opportunity to showcase the talents of his company, Doug Varone & Dancers. (Colorado audiences may remember them from performances at the Colorado Dance Festival in Boulder or the Aspen Dance Festival.)

Using cinematic escapism as a pivotal element in his production of *Orpheus* and in its dance sequences, Varone recreates the Underworld and the Elysian Fields as a 1930s movie theater, where people flock to the promise of beauty and forgetfulness.

During the opera's famous "Dance of the Furies" and "Dance of the Blessed Spirits," Varone invokes those old Fred and Ginger dance flicks to express the dreamlike beauty of the Elysian Fields where Eurydice and other joyful spirits dwell after death. "Film stars of the '30s were very much like gods to normal human beings," says Varone. "This dance will be a celluloid vision — a fantasy of how life could be," he adds.

### **Choreographers and Composers**

Though best-known for his choreography, Varone has brought other operas to stages around the country. His dance background makes him perfect to direct *Orpheus and Eurydice*, since much of the tale is told in dance. "Everything I touch as a choreographer and a director is movement-based, so this will be a very visual piece, full of motion," he says.

Varone is an old hand at telling very human tales in dance, since much of his work centers on depicting community, humanness, and relationships. He recently created a theatre/dance work called "Neither" for New York's Lower East Side Tenement Museum. "Neither" was a series of short stories that reveal poignant tales of love and grace, filled with the ghosts and memories of a life past. That piece echoes themes

surrounding Orpheus, whose haunting memories propel him to Hades in an attempt to conquer death.

*Orpheus and Eurydice* may delight dance aficionados, but its arias will also dazzle music lovers, especially those partial to rich mezzo-soprano voices. Appearing with Opera Colorado as Orpheus is the remarkable mezzo Theodora Hanslowe, who appears regularly with the Metropolitan and Berlin operas. Joining Hanslowe in the role of Eurydice is soprano Franzita Whelan, who is making her American debut.

“The music in *Orpheus* is ravishingly beautiful,” says Robinson. “Composer Christoph Gluck is tremendously under-appreciated. Some people think of him as Mozart without a sense of humor, but I think the two had equal genius,” he adds. This production uses the Berlioz 1859 French edition, revised from Gluck’s original 1774 work.

*Don’t miss this spectacular presentation of Orpheus and Eurydice, performed May 5, 8, 11 and 13 in Boettcher Hall. Call 303-893-4100 for ticket information.*