

# A NOTE FROM THE DIRECTOR

Michael Shell

**The Barber of Seville is a love story.** It is a story of two people, Rosina and Almoviva, a Count in disguise, overcoming obstacles and being together. And with the help of an ingenious Barber, they outwit Bartolo, Rosina's guardian, and are united. The story is funny, passionate, and quite frankly, totally absurd. Rossini was a master at this type of storytelling. His music, always fresh and vibrant, makes all of these elements come alive and makes the absurd plausible.

For this production, I wanted to create an environment that not only allowed for Rossini's brilliant blending of reality and borderline farce, but also was grounded firmly in Spain. For inspiration, the design team and I turned to the films of Pedro Almodóvar - which have all of the elements of a Rossini opera. Almodóvar is brilliant at walking the line between dramatic comedy and melodramatic absurdity. His films, rich with a vintage feel, are also deeply embedded in Spain and Spanish culture. But his films also embrace the surreal and random. Sometimes these things are very theatrical and sometimes they are just depicting the randomness of life.

Part of the fun of Rossini's music is that kind of random interruption. At times, the action stops completely just so characters sing about how crazy the situation is. At others, in the middle of an urgent getaway, someone stops to sing at length about how urgent it is to leave right now - long enough that he can't escape in time. I wanted this production to embrace the random at a level that keeps the surprises fresh and is always entertaining.

We also bring Almodóvar's sensibility towards his characters in terms of gender and sexuality. Rosina, the opera's heroine, is usually depicted as an innocent, without sexual desire. This production gives her a little more teeth. Here, she is an assistant to Dr. Bartolo (an optometrist) looking for a life beyond the office walls (think *Women on the Verge of a Nervous Breakdown*). She has desires, and it seems like this young man serenading her at the start of the opera might be able to fulfil them. She and that young man, Count Almoviva, never formally meet before falling in love. They rarely even speak to each other. It's a physical spark between them. She has passionate feelings for the guy. If there's no desire for them to get together, it's not going work out for them. And we want it to work out.

To further root the production in Spain, we set it during the time of the *Feria de Abril de Seville* (the Seville April Fair), which began as a livestock fair in the late 1800's and eventually became one of the largest to take place in Seville. At many Fair events, including the opening bullfight, many women wear Flamenco dress and do a very specific type of Flamenco dance - the *Sevillanes*. The fair still shows its origins with many horse-drawn carriages carrying people wearing traditional costumes that span centuries. The festival is represented by these random people that come in and out of the scenes. Figaro, in a sense is their gang leader. They show us, in their costuming, the history of the festival and give a unconventional quality to many moments including various change of scenes.

Using Almodóvar as our muse, in combination with characters who create the festival atmosphere that happens during the *Feria de Abril*, we are able to fully inhabit the zany world Rossini has created, and to tell its story in the kind of fresh and interesting way that his masterpiece deserves.

Original Production by Michael Shell