

'Dulce Rosa': An Isabel Allende tale turns operatic



"Dulce Rosa" in rehearsal with Peabody Southwell, left, as Inez and María Antúnez as Rosa. (Lawrence K. Ho / Los Angeles Times)

By **Reed Johnson, Los Angeles Times**

MAY 14, 2013, 5:00 AM

Composer Lee Holdridge says his new opera, "Dulce Rosa," hits "very close to home" for him in several ways. First, as a native Latin American. Second, as the son of a passionate, indomitable woman.

And, third, as a lifelong aficionado of stage drama — generally the more dramatic, the better.

FOR THE RECORD:

"Dulce Rosa": In the May 14 Calendar section, an article about the new opera "Dulce Rosa" at the Broad Stage in Santa Monica said it would be opening Sunday. It opens Friday. —

"I'm very story-driven," Holdridge said during a break in a rehearsal room at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion a few days ago. "Verdi would not write a note until he had the libretto because he said it's got to be about the drama."

PHOTOS: LA Opera through the years

All three of Holdridge's affinities came together in "Dulce Rosa," a dramatically red-blooded two-act work centering on a formidable South American woman, with a libretto by Richard Sparks. Opening May 19 at the Broad Stage in Santa Monica, the co-production between the Broad and L.A. Opera will be conducted by Plácido Domingo, the opera company's general director.

Based on the short story "Una Venganza" (A Revenge) by the Chilean novelist Isabel Allende, "Dulce Rosa" takes place in an unnamed South American country in the politically volatile 1950s. It relates the romantic tragedy of a young, upper-class woman, Rosa Orellano, who loses her beloved senator-father in a military raid, then gets raped by a guerrilla leader, Tadeo Cespedes, with a traumatic past of his own.

As Rosa plots to settle scores with her assailant, the fates conspire to twist the dagger of destiny and ironic revelation several times before the opera arrives at its violent and startling climax, a *coup de théâtre* that suggests a recombination of "Tosca," "Antigone" and the latest *telenovela* on Univision.

That convergence is not coincidental. "Telenovelas can be pretty intense," said Holdridge, an Emmy Award-winner who has scored numerous feature films ("Splash," "Old Gringo") and television shows ("Moonlighting," "The Mists of Avalon") in addition to his operatic work.

The idea for "Dulce Rosa" first took shape about a decade ago, said Sparks, who has collaborated with Holdridge on several previous L.A. Opera commissions, including "Concierto Para Mendez" and "Journey to Córdoba."

Allende had written "Una Venganza" as part of a short story collection not long after moving from Venezuela to the United States, where she continues to live in the Bay Area.

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"It's 23 stories, and they're all sort of twisted love stories," said Allende, speaking by phone from New York City, where she was touring to promote her latest novel, "Maya's Notebook."

"They all have the Venezuelan flavor because I had just moved here."

Sparks, who calls Allende "one of my favorite writers — the bravado she has, the narrative drive that she has, the risks that she takes" — envisioned the story that became "Dulce Rosa" as a modern Greek tragedy in which "the lead characters are destroyed by their fatal flaw, which is pride."

Sparks said he'd begun gathering visual ideas for the opera some years before he started writing the libretto. He visited locations in Mexico, Ecuador, Peru and other parts of Latin America, scouting haciendas, churches and other key settings.

The project coalesced in July 2007 when Sparks was conversing with Domingo backstage in Munich, where the superstar tenor was performing in "Die Walküre."

"Domingo says, 'I know what we'll do, we'll do it in the Broad. And let's go,'" Sparks recalled.

Allende confirmed that she had no direct involvement with developing the opera. But she has been pleased with the changes that have been made in order to flesh out the plot line, and she plans to attend Sunday's opening.

"You always need a good female protagonist in the opera; the story's always about the girl," she said. "So maybe that's why they chose that particular story."

If sturdy, old-fashioned melodrama supplies the opera's pulsing heart, political conflict forms a big part of its colorful backdrop. Growing up in Haiti and [Costa Rica](#) in the 1950s and '60s, Holdridge said, he lived through the kind of war-driven turmoil that "Dulce Rosa" depicts.

PHOTOS: LA Opera through the years

"I was in San José when Somoza decided to attack Costa Rica and sent fighter planes over the city," the composer said, referring to former Nicaraguan strongman Anastasio Somoza García, whose country periodically battled its southern neighbor over border disputes.

Holdridge also was raised at a time when "women were not treated very well in Latin America," he said.

"My mother was a very strong individual person, even for her time, and she learned to survive. That little scene where Rosa says she will go on, somehow — that's my mother right there."

"Dulce Rosa" doesn't take sides politically between the landed gentry represented by Sen. Orellano, ensconced in his prosperous hacienda, and the guerrilla fighters camped out in the surrounding jungle.

Instead, both music and libretto emphasize the mixed psychological motives of the characters on both sides of the story's revolutionary divide. That intentionally ambiguous view of regional politics rings true for the production's two lead performers, soprano María Antúnez, a native of Uruguay, and baritone Alfredo Daza (Tadeo), who was raised in the Mexican colonial city of Puebla.

Antúnez said that in spite of her character's nickname — "dulce" is Spanish for "sweet" — Rosa is a multilayered character who is compelled to act strongly and decisively as she evolves from a sheltered young woman to a resolute heroine.

"In this story, like in most of Isabel's stories, there is a really good side and a horrible side to each" person, Antúnez said. "It's called 'Dulce Rosa,' but she's not all sweet. But she has her reasons. She has to do what she has to do."

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Daza said that his character reminds him of a real-life guerrilla leader viewed by some as a martyred utopian, but by others as a messianic thug: Ernesto "Che" Guevara.

"Many friends, many students, all admire his conviction," Daza said of the Argentine-Cuban revolutionary. "And at the other time, he becomes a tyrant. It depends on who's seeing him."

Like other components of "Dulce Rosa," that political duality is hardly unique to Latin America. But Holdridge believes that his native region is ripe for operatic exploration.

"We've written thousands of operas about Europe; we've even done Asia," he said. "But now there's this, 'Oh, wait, we haven't done much there.' And I think it opens up the possibility of exploring new territory."

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