

With *Dulce Rosa*, an Isabel Allende Story Becomes Opera

BY STEVEN LEIGH MORRIS

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Greg Fedderly and Maria Antunez in *Dulce Rosa*

PHOTO BY JENNY OKUN

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It's taken 11 years to get director-lyricist Richard Sparks and composer Lee Holdridge's new opera, *Dulce Rosa*, from the germ of an idea to a full production.

Sparks and Holdridge have worked together for two decades as professional partners; they've had five prior works commissioned by L.A. Opera over a 20-year span. But these were mini operas, part of the company's outreach program.

This is different. Not only is *Dulce Rosa* the L.A.-based pair's first full-length opera, it's just the seventh new work L.A. Opera has world-premiered since 1992 – and it comes with both a serious literary pedigree and some important

players. Based on a short story by Isabel Allende, L.A. Opera artistic director Placido Domingo is the conductor, with the L.A. Opera chorus and orchestra backing a cast of six. After Friday's premiere at Santa Monica's Broad Stage, *Dulce Rosa* will play intermittently through June 9.

The British-born Sparks says he'd long felt drawn to stories about colonialism, perhaps because of his native country's history. He was intrigued in particular by Allende's works, and settings in "the New World dictatorships, and corruption and violence that very much remain part of the region."

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After Sparks and Holdridge, who was born in Haiti, read Allende's short story "Una Venganza," about a 15-year-old Venezuelan girl seeking revenge on the man who murdered her father and raped her, the co-creators agreed the material called for a full-length opera.

"What we discussed is, rather than adapting one of her full-length novels, why don't we adapt a short story," Holdridge explains, "because opera always slows the story down."

They first raised the idea with Domingo in 2002.

Holdridge recalls his response after he read the story: "You have to get the rights."

Allende was skeptical at first.

"I couldn't visualize it as an opera because I know very little about opera," Allende tells the *Weekly* by phone from Chicago, where she is promoting her latest novel, *El Cuaderno de Maya (Maya's Notebook)*. But, she says, "I never hesitated because I felt that whatever they did would be intriguing."

Isabel Allende is today a Californian. But her roots are in South America, and her family has a turbulent history: The novelist's first cousin once removed was Chilean president Salvador Allende, who was forced out in the CIA-backed coup that installed dictator Augusto Pinochet.

Years before that, in 1945, Allende's father, the Chilean ambassador to Peru, "disappeared." He urged Allende's mother to relocate her family to Chile, where Isabel grew up and started writing – until civil war in 1973 forced her into exile

in Caracas, Venezuela. In 1985, she emigrated to the United States. She currently lives with her family in San Rafael, basking in the glory of an internationally recognized literary career.

Allende says she wrote "Una Venganza" when she first arrived in California.

"I still had Venezuela in my head," she explains. "I don't know exactly where the story came from. Ideas for short stories are like apples. They just fall in front of you, and you have to write them quickly, on impulse. A novel is many threads, and needs crafting and research. A short story needs speed. You have one shot – if you overwork it, it doesn't work. It really needs to be really fresh. So that's why I write long novels. I can't guarantee that I will have inspiration for a short story."

When director-lyricist Sparks went to work on the story, he made some changes and added some characters.

"In the short story, she's a 15-year-old girl. [Richard] said we can't have a soprano in the main role who's 15," Holdridge explains. "So she's a bit older, in her early 20s."

There were countless other changes to the story over the next decade. The opera evolved through three fully staged workshops, all attended by Domingo, and in 2009 he approved the commission. Just four years later, there are now *Dulce Rosa* posters on MTA buses.

"That's pretty fast, as opera speed [goes]," Sparks says. "They're all booked so far ahead. It's a long-sighted business. Domingo's [schedule] is packed for the next six years."

Throughout the lyricist's and composer's decade of work, Allende saw nothing of what her story was becoming, but that didn't bother her.

"I'm open to anything," Allende says. "Once you publish a book, it's gone. People will read and interpret it anyway. It doesn't belong to me once it's published. I have never been watching over the shoulder of somebody doing something with a story of mine."

In 2011, Sparks and Holdridge went to San Rafael with their computers to show Allende what they'd done with her story as a courtesy.

"I saw nothing until they came with a computer," she says. "They showed me the rehearsals, the music and part of the set. The sets [by Yael Pardess] are stunning. They look like Chagall's paintings."

Allende says she had no problem with the fact that the writers changed the ending: "I like my ending better, but I understand this is an opera, where you can't have an open ending. They did some changes that were perfect for the opera. In a written story, you can suggest; in an opera or a play, it has to be [shown]. It's not left to the audience's imagination."

Opera is different from musical theater in one big way: Opera is sung from beginning to end, no dialogue needed. Holdridge explains, "The way I developed the thematic content of it, the way I interlaced the different motifs, the way it all laces together, is like a huge symphonic panorama, and I think that's what opera is, in a way. Whereas a musical can be interspersed with scenes, I think there's still this kind of major symphonic thrust to the whole thing."

With this production, L.A. Opera launches its Off Grand initiative – an attempt to keep opera vital to new generations and diverse cultures. The first project to get the L.A. Opera out of the shrinelike Music Center, *Dulce Rosa* is part of a national trend of opera companies trying to keep their art accessible.

At the Broad, tickets are still expensive – \$75 to \$175. But with 500 seats, the venue is much more intimate and, as at all shows, the pricing is based on demand. Sometimes tickets drop as low as \$18, with a set of 250 seats also available for certain enthusiasts.

The affordability often means smaller casts. This summer, for example, the Kennedy Center's American Opera Initiative is presenting Mark Campbell and Davis Miller's new, hourlong opera, *Approaching Ali*, about a reporter and Muhammad Ali – employing only five actor-singers to handle D.J. Sparr's score. *Dulce Rosa* has just six.

Declining ticket sales are forcing opera companies to innovate. Yet as Sparks notes, things move slowly in opera time. Eleven years in the making, *Dulce Rosa* is L.A.'s response to a slow-rolling trend.

DULCE ROSA | Adapted from a short story by Isabel Allende. Composed by Lee Holdridge. Lyrics and direction by Richard Sparks. Conducted by Placido Domingo | Presented by L.A. Opera and the Broad Stage, 1310 11th Street, Santa Monica | Fri., May 17, Sat., May 25, Tues., May 28, Mon., June 3, Thurs., June 6,

7:30 p.m.; Sun., June 9, 4 p.m. | (310) 434-3200 | laopera.com/season/Dulce-Rosa/



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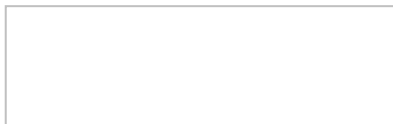
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