

LA BOHÈME



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Meet Saint John's Resident, Patrick Bellegarde-Smith

Patrick Bellegarde-Smith is a Professor emeritus of African & African Diaspora Studies at UW-Milwaukee. He did his research and chose the only Life Care Community in Wisconsin. Now he continues to enjoy the vibrancy of his eastside neighborhood, and bask in the knowledge that his future is secure with Life Care.



Scan this image to hear what Patrick says about life at Saint John's.

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LA BOHÈME

PROGRAM INFORMATION

Production Sponsors: Donald and Donna Baumgartner

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The Florentine Opera is a proud United Performing Arts Fund (UPAF) Member and appreciates the generous support received annually thanks to your UPAF donation.

What a joy it is to bring you this *Bronzeville Bohème*! After multiple years of waiting, we are delighted to welcome you to this legendary blockbuster.

It feels apt to bring this Florentine-built *Bohème* to you as part of our 90th season. This company began with the voices of Italian immigrants, seeking a sense of belonging and a way to make Milwaukee feel like home, in a beautiful way. Our city has welcomed so many immigrant waves, and so many of our neighborhoods have treasures harkening back to those hard-won beginnings. 1940s Bronzeville was born out of Black Southerners seeking a better life in the North, and they built one! In a neighborhood of churches, schools, banks and nightclubs that drew the likes of Duke Ellington as regulars, Bronzeville had as many orchestras as they had barbershops (nine of each!). This community thrummed with music, neighborly celebration, and entrepreneurship. Explore the true Milwaukee Bohemians Dramaturg Sheri Williams Pannell identified as people our characters resemble. Such history abounds, and deserves its own spotlight as we share this grand opera against the backdrop of our city's past.

Opera exists to move us, to draw us into a story profoundly told through the power of the human voice. What makes us cry, sigh, and laugh? Connecting those impactful moments on stage to our lived experiences, which brings a personal meaning to a story people have responded to for over a century. La Boheme represents everything that makes opera great: soaring melodies, meaningful relationships, gorgeous sets and orchestral magic that makes the whole ridiculously beautiful. Bronzeville's history is equally potent, and marrying these great standouts together compounds the timeless and impactful in both our opera and civic experience.

Our lengthened planning window allowed us to build more Milwaukee into this production. Look for students from Schools on Stage St. Marcus and Pathways, Boheme Chorus Pipeline members (local singers who got free training to prepare for paid chorus work), and artwork from Ras' Nsoroma on stage, along with a piece from art student Iman Fatmi from Rufus King high school, who was able to join Ras'Ammar for a painting session leading up to this production. Special thanks to Ray Hill of the MLK BID and Genyne Edwards of P3 for championing this setting and connecting the Florentine to the Bronzeville community!

In addition to Milwaukee onstage, so many generous donors made this production possible. From the NEA to many local families, this opera truly is a gift, given by so many to celebrate the art form and Milwaukee. To our supporters, thank you for continuing to make opera in Milwaukee a reality. And now, after such a wait, on with the show!



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LATE SEATING:
Guests arriving late will be seated at a suitable pause in the performance. Please be advised that guests arriving after the performance has begun may miss substantial portions of the performance.

ACCESSIBILITY:
Wheelchair seating is available on the main and upper floors in Uihlein Hall and on the main floor in Wilson Theater at Vogel Hall. Telecommunication devices for the hearing impaired (TDD) are available at the front of the house at the Marcus Center for the Performing Arts.

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We extend our sincerest gratitude to each of our valued show sponsors for their generous support of *La bohème*. Your commitment and generosity have played a pivotal role in making this production possible, enriching our community with the magic of the performing arts.

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LA BOHÈME

By Giacomo Puccini

Libretto by Giuseppe Giacosa & Luigi Illica

Performed in Italian

2 hours, 40 minutes, with one 20-minute intermission

April 19 & 21, 2024

Uihlein Hall at Marcus Performing Arts Center

CONDUCTOR: Francesco Milioto

STAGE DIRECTOR: Nadja Simmonds

With the Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra and The Florentine Opera Chorus

CAST

Rodolfo, a poetChaz'men Williams-Ali*
Mimi, a seamstressMichelle Johnson*
Marcello, a painterBrian Major*
Musetta, a grisette Kelebogile Besong*
Colline, a philosopher Allen Michael Jones
Schaunard, a musician Leroy Davis^
Benoit, a landlord/Alcindoro, admirer of MusettaVince Wallace
Parpignol, a toy vendor Cameo Humes*
Custom-House Officer Avery Sujkowski
SergeantMason Cooper
Child SoloistMalia Hutchinson*
Prune ManBenjamin Burney

* Florentine Opera Debut ^ Baumgartner Studio Artist Alumni

CREATIVE TEAM

Lawrence E. Moten III**Set Designer
Mieka van der Ploeg**Costume Designer
Kathy Perkins**Lighting Designer
Jasmine WilliamsAssistant Lighting Designer
Erica CartledgeHair, Wig and Make-up Designer
Eboni Adams*Assistant Director
Savannah ValiguraProduction Stage Manager
Marcie FriedmanAssistant Stage Manager
Alycia Yip MartinAssistant Stage Manager
Dyan YoderSupertitles Design and Translation
Sheri Williams PannellDramaturg
Ras'Ammar Nsoroma*Fine Artist

* Florentine Opera Debut **Member of USA 829

Costumed with the assistance of Judy Christensen, Maddy Lowe, Leslie Vaglica, Lynne Dixon and the Edessa School of Fashion, Waukesha Civic, Milwaukee Repertory Theatre. Wiggged with the assistance of The Wig Associates.

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Aurelia Andrews*Principal Coach & Pianist
Dr. Benjamin RiveraChorus Master
Fumiyasu Kawase+Rehearsal Pianist

CHORUS

Sopranos	Mezzo-soprano	Tenor	Bass
Ariel Andrew*	Justina Austin*	Christian Adams*	James Barany
Dana Campbell	Eunice Ayodele*	Benjamin Burney	Mason Cooper*
Cecilia Davis	Magaly Cordero-	Jerek Fernández+	David Guzmán
Jade Dasha Ferrell	Dietz*	Cameo Humes*	William Johnson
Kaylene Howard*	Kathryn Kinjo	Jesus Alfredo	Brandan Sanchez+
Alexandra Logue	Duncan	Jiménez	Lee Stovall*
Laura McCauley+	Ruth Ginelle Heald	Ryan Dennis Kirk	Avery Sujkowski
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Darlene Jones-Grams* Music & Dance Instructor St. Marcus Lutheran School
 Renata Herrera Education & Community Engagement Manager

CHILDREN’S CHORUS

from St. Marcus Lutheran School

Kenosha Coleman*	Zaria Gray*	Rhea Perez*
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Jazmin Holton*	Aubrie Kock*	Rubyn Smith*
Malia Hutchinson*	Maryjane Mather*	Mackenzie Williams*

SUPERNUMERARIES

from Pathways High School

Abigail Wallace	Gianna Houston
Brena Davis*	Josiahis Walker
Evangeline McChrystal*	

La bohème is our third-annual Schools on Stage project, where we invite a local school to participate in one of our productions. This is an opportunity for students to engage on stage with artists from across the world. The Florentine is committed to diversity and we hope that all students feel welcomed and see themselves reflected across our cast, crew, and staff. Our goal is for students to feel empowered to continue entering creative spaces and making room for arts in their lives.

DID YOU KNOW...?

Milwaukee’s Bronzeville began over 100 years ago when a small group of African American families moved to Milwaukee after the Civil War. During World War I, increasing numbers moved from the farms in southern states in hopes of finding higher-paying factory jobs, escaping Jim Crow segregation, and providing new opportunities for their families. A larger wave of Southerners came north during World War II in the Second Great Migration. In the 50 years from 1900 to 1950, Milwaukee’s African American population grew from 900 to over 20,000.

Giacomo Puccini’s opera *La bohème* is one of the three most popular operas ever written but it was not an immediate success. An opera by a rival Italian composer, Ruggiero Leoncavallo, on the same subject and with the same name, premiered about a year after Puccini’s and was quite successful. Puccini may have stolen the idea from Leoncavallo. (Leoncavallo accused Puccini in a scene in a cafe. Puccini said, “Let the public decide which one they like best!”) The two operas co-existed in Italian theatres for about ten years before Puccini’s came out as the public’s favorite version. It’s never left the active repertory since, and Leoncavallo’s version is all but forgotten.

I recently had the opportunity to take my eight-year-old nephew to see the neighborhood I grew up in. We sat in the car outside of my childhood home and I pointed out the window that leads to my brother’s room, the bush on the side of the house where we found a litter of kittens, and the tree near the back where we attempted (and failed) to add a swing to. As we drove around the small neighborhood I showed him the houses of my childhood friends, the home of my track coach, and the neighbor that would hold onto my dog whenever she made a daring escape out of the house. My nephew asked me how I knew so many people in our neighborhood, and I explained that everyone looked out for each other. Parents around the neighborhood watched every child, kept you out of trouble, and provided a safe space for us to grow and play.

This feeling of community is prevalent in many neighborhoods of color, especially Bronzeville in the 1940s, making it the perfect setting for *La Bohème*. In the late 1800s, Giacosa, Illica, and Puccini came together to write this beautiful romantic tragedy, and it continues to be one of the most produced operas today because of the relatable struggles we face in our own community. As we follow Rodolfo, Marcello, Colline, and Schaunard, we see that their passion for each other, their art, and their romantic relationships aren’t inhibited by housing insecurity or the struggles of being Black men in America. Before Congress allowed I-43 to bulldoze through Bronzeville, the vibrant community served as an artistic home for black artists and people of color for decades. Bronzeville is not defined by the trauma inflicted upon it under the gaze of “urban renewal”, but by the joy and creativity of black people and businesses that thrive today and throughout time.

We lost our childhood home growing up, but the memory of a safe and connected community is something I strive for my nephew to have, and one that I see missing from many neighborhoods today. I hope that through *Bronzeville Bohème*, you too are reminded of the Black joy that exists despite hardship inflicted by a torn nation, and that we can continue to uplift and find the beauty in the cultural communities around us.

Walnut Street served as the social and economic heart of Bronzeville, a microcosm reflecting the richness, history and breadth of Milwaukee’s full Bronzeville neighborhood. It’s a story similar to many Main Street USA archetypal streets. Walnut Street was really the central corridor for commerce and social life in the bronzeville neighborhood — the beating heart of this vibrant community; a street where businesses and social clubs, restaurants and churches all thrived and grew shoulder to shoulder.

Background on the importance of Walnut Street, and The Flame Nightclub, from conversations with Sheri Williams Pannell and Mark Doremus.
 SPIRIT OF BRONZEVILLE 1948–1951
 SOURCE: THE WISCONSIN BUSINESS DIRECTORY
 EDITED AND PUBLISHED BY DR. MARY ELLEN SHADD.



Act 1

In the bohemians' attic apartment (Christmas Eve).

Marcello, an artist, and Rodolfo, a poet, try to keep warm by burning the manuscript of Rodolfo's drama. Colline, a philosopher, and Schaunard, a musician, arrive with money, food, and wine. The friends are interrupted by Benoît, the landlord, who arrives to collect the rent. They manage to avoid paying and set off to celebrate at the Café Momus.

Rodolfo stays behind in order to finish an article he is writing. He is interrupted by a pretty neighbor, whose candle has blown out. She briefly faints, Rodolfo revives her and helps her to look for the key she has dropped. While they search, he takes her cold hand and tells her of his life as a poet, then asks her to tell him more about her life. The girl says her name is Mimi and describes her simple life as an embroiderer. Rodolfo's friends call out for him to hurry up. He promises to join them with Mimi.

Act 2

On the street near the Café Momus (the same night).

Vendors hawk their holiday wares. Rodolfo introduces Mimi to his friends. Musetta, Marcello's former sweetheart, makes a noisy entrance on the arm of the rich and elderly Alcindoro. To the delight of the crowd and the embarrassment of her patron, she sings a risqué song, hoping to reclaim Marcello's attention. Musetta sends Alcindoro to buy her a pair of shoes and throws herself into Marcello's arms. When the bill comes, Musetta has a bright idea: combine her bill with theirs and let Alcindoro pay it. The sound of a military band is heard, and the friends leave.

Act 3

At the toll gate (late February).

People enter the city looking for work. Mimi asks Marcello to speak to Rodolfo for her because his jealousy has made their life together impossible. Rodolfo wakes up and comes out looking for Marcello. Mimi hides and overhears Rodolfo first telling Marcello that he believes Mimi is so ill that her only chance of recovery is to leave him and his life of poverty.

Mimi's weeping and coughing reveal her presence, and Rodolfo hurries to her. Musetta's laughter is heard and Marcello goes to find out what has happened. While Mimi and Rodolfo recall past happiness, Marcello has found Musetta, and the couple quarrel fiercely about Musetta's flirtatiousness. Mimi and Rodolfo decide to remain together until springtime.

Act 4

Back in the attic apartment (some months later).

Marcello and Rodolfo are trying to work, though their thoughts stray to their absent lovers. Schaunard and Colline arrive with a very frugal dinner and all parody eating a plentiful banquet, dance together and sing, before Schaunard and Colline engage in a mock duel.

Musetta suddenly appears with news that Mimi is outside, too weak to come upstairs. Mimi had begged Musetta to bring her to Rodolfo. Mimi, haggard and pale, is assisted onto a bed. Mimi and Rodolfo remember past happiness and their first meeting. The friends do what they can but it is too late to save her. Schaunard discovers that Mimi has died. Rodolfo rushes to the bed, calling out to his Mimi.

By Renata Herrera and Music Director Francesco Milioto

Giacomo Puccini (1858-1924) is remembered for his great Italian operas written around the turn of the 20th century. Puccini's *La bohème*, based on a book by Henri Murger, *La Vie de Bohème*, was a smashing success when it premiered in 1896 and remains the fourth most performed opera worldwide. Puccini is the third most performed composer globally, having written other prominent operas like *Tosca* (1900), *Madama Butterfly* (1904), and *Turandot* (1926). He was well known for creating operas in the verismo, or "realism", style which focused not on gods or prominent historical figures, but on the lives of average men and women. Puccini's own life as a young man in Milan served as a source of inspiration for elements of the *La bohème* libretto. While he was a student at the Milan conservatory he experienced poverty similar to that of the bohemian protagonists. He frequently had to pawn his possessions to cover food and rent.

Listen for... beautiful melodies and rich orchestrations that will sweep you off of your feet. Two of the most memorable arias in *La bohème*, Rodolfo's *Che gelida manina* (What a cold little hand) and Mimi's *Si, mi chiamano Mimi* (Yes, they call me Mimi), occur in sequence in Act 1. The sincerity of their first meeting can be felt in Puccini's setting of the text and orchestral accompaniment. These melodies are the beginnings of their heart wrenching and eventually tragic love story.

Arguably, the most famous musical moment of *La bohème* is provided by the vivacious Musetta in Act 2 during *Quando me'n vo'*, also commonly known as Musetta's Waltz. Puccini's obvious love for the character of Musetta leaps off of the page and enraptures the audience. Likely an intentional choice by Puccini, *Quando me'n vo'* is the only waltz in the opera, making it an even more memorable selection. Musetta's flirtatious performance first is used to tempt Marcello. The second time the waltz motif is heard, Puccini uses the melody to incorporate all the other characters into the story and by the end of Act 2 Marcello and Musetta fall back into each other's arms.

In Act 3, Marcello becomes the friend in whom Mimi and Rodolfo confide, and it is revealed that Mimi is dying. The setting of the text and orchestral colors here are a prime example of the verismo style. As the act progresses, Musetta is added into the action and Puccini creates a double duet with the feuding Marcello and Musetta playing alongside Rodolfo and Mimi who have decided to stay together until spring. At the beginning of Act 4, the boys are horsing around and play fighting. This joyful moment is abruptly stopped by Musetta's entrance when the orchestra plays a piercing chord that makes the audience's heart drop to their stomachs. Like turning a page in a book, Puccini shifts the mood to a somber setting. In their last moments together Mimi and Rodolfo sing their Act 1 melodies back to each other. The finale is a tender and cathartic bookend to Mimi's life and their relationship.

Did you know?: *La bohème* librettists Luigi Illica and Giuseppe Giacosa originally set the opera in Paris, circa 1830. The onset of the French Revolution in 1789 cost established artists much of their financial support, as the majority of artist patronage came from the aristocracy and the Church. Desperate for new sources of income, artists migrated to Paris and the bohemian lifestyle was a popular Parisian dream by the early 19th century. In the United States, the Great Migration of the Early 20th century was a large movement of African Americans from the American South to Northern, Western, and Midwestern cities, including Milwaukee. Much like the Parisian bohemians, Bronzeville jazz artists fulfilled their dream and found a new life in Milwaukee among a self-sustaining community of African American leaders and entrepreneurs.

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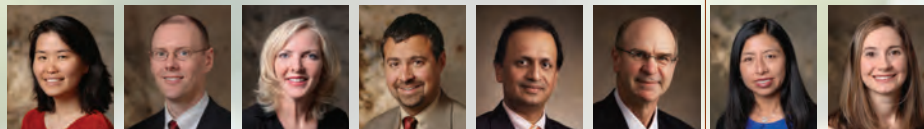
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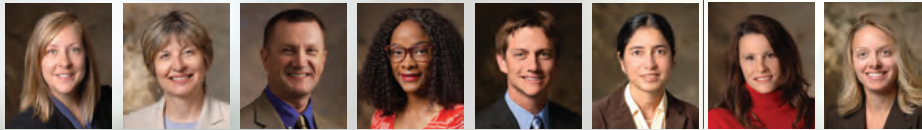


Kathleen Baugrud, M.D. | Avi Bernstein, M.D. | John Betz, M.D. | Matthew Connolly, M.D. | Kevin DiNapoli, M.D. | Deidre Faust, M.D. | David Goldberg, M.D. | Scott Jorgensen, M.D.



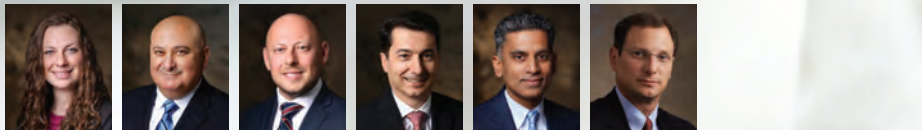
Unchu Ko, M.D. | David Lucke, M.D. | Rachel Oosterbaan, M.D. | John Sanidas, M.D. | Abraham Varghese, M.D. | James Volberding, M.D. | Carmen Balding, M.D. | Camille Haxsel, M.D.

ENDOCRINOLOGY



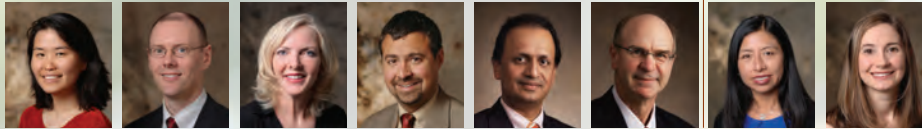
Amy DeGueme, M.D. | Elaine Drobny, M.D. | Antoni Gofron, M.D. | Usonwanne Ibeke, M.D. | Brent Jones, M.D. | Kawaljeet Kaur, M.D. | Anne Lent, M.D. | Kristin Schroederus, M.D.

GASTROENTEROLOGY



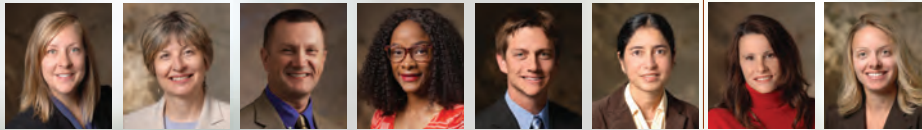
Keely Browning, M.D. | Abdullah Fayyad, M.D. | Gene Kligman, M.D. | Venelin Kounev, M.D. | Srihari Ramanujam, M.D. | Chad Stepke, M.D.

MOHS SURGERY



Carmen Balding, M.D. | Camille Haxsel, M.D.

ALLERGY & IMMUNOLOGY



Anne Lent, M.D. | Kristin Schroederus, M.D.

DERMATOLOGY



Amanda Cooper, M.D. | Tracy Donahue, M.D. | Michael Knabel, M.D. | Valerie Lyon, M.D. | Jack Maloney, M.D. | Jason Rosenberg, M.D. | Debra Scarlett, M.D. | Thorsteinn Skulason, M.D.



Heather Wells, M.D. | Richard Cattery, M.D. | Jasna Coralic, M.D. | Alysandra Lal, M.D. | Joseph Regan, M.D. | Craig Siverhus, M.D. | Jake Thayer, M.D.

SURGERY



Heather Wells, M.D. | Richard Cattery, M.D. | Jasna Coralic, M.D. | Alysandra Lal, M.D. | Joseph Regan, M.D. | Craig Siverhus, M.D. | Jake Thayer, M.D.

UROLOGY



Kevin Gee, M.D. | Christopher Kearns, M.D. | Jonathan Berkoff, M.D. | Katya Frantskevich, M.D. | Shireen Jayne, D.O. | Jennifer Moralez, M.D. | Nicolette Deveneau, M.D.

OBSTETRICS & GYNECOLOGY



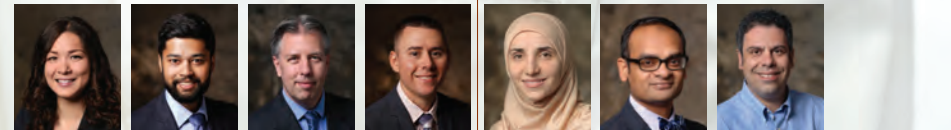
Kevin Gee, M.D. | Christopher Kearns, M.D. | Jonathan Berkoff, M.D. | Katya Frantskevich, M.D. | Shireen Jayne, D.O. | Jennifer Moralez, M.D. | Nicolette Deveneau, M.D.

UROGYNECOLOGY



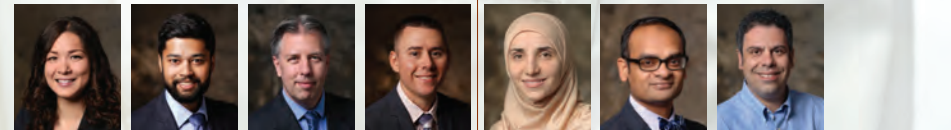
Kevin Gee, M.D. | Christopher Kearns, M.D. | Jonathan Berkoff, M.D. | Katya Frantskevich, M.D. | Shireen Jayne, D.O. | Jennifer Moralez, M.D. | Nicolette Deveneau, M.D.

COMPREHENSIVE EYE CARE



Lisa Bennett, M.D. | Alwin Edakkunnathu, O.D. | James Ivanoski, O.D. | Joseph Zilisch, M.D. | Dima Adil, M.D. | Jay Balachandran, M.D. | Burak Gurses, M.D.

PULMONARY



Lisa Bennett, M.D. | Alwin Edakkunnathu, O.D. | James Ivanoski, O.D. | Joseph Zilisch, M.D. | Dima Adil, M.D. | Jay Balachandran, M.D. | Burak Gurses, M.D.



Francesco Milioto continues to establish himself in opera houses as an incredibly gifted “singer’s” conductor. His interpretation of each score is fueled by a philosophy of collaboration in service of the overall experience for artists, creators, and audience.

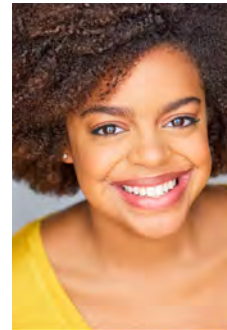
Maestro Milioto currently serves as Music Director of The Florentine Opera, OPERA San Antonio, and Holy City Arts and Lyric Opera. Highlights of Mr. Milioto’s most recent acclaimed performances, outside of his home companies, include at the Lyric Opera of Chicago, The Atlanta Opera, Arizona Opera, and Tulsa Opera. He is a member of the

music staff at the world-renowned Lyric Opera of Chicago and The Santa Fe Opera.

Recent highlights include productions of *Romeo and Juliet* at The Florentine Opera and OPERA San Antonio, *Pagliacci* at OPERA San Antonio, and his debut with Ballet San Antonio conducting several performances of *The Nutcracker* in collaboration with the Classical Music Institute Orchestra. He also conducted the final two performances of *Aida* with the Lyric Opera of Chicago in April 2024.

Maestro Milioto is an avid coach and much sought after master teacher. In addition to his work with young artists at OPERA San Antonio and The Florentine Opera, he recently gave masterclasses for the Detroit Opera Studio and Mexico Opera Studio in Monterrey, Mexico.

As a Music Director and guest conductor Mr. Milioto has thrived in Chicago and beyond. Over his many years in Chicago, he claimed the title of Music Director to the New Millennium Orchestra, the Skokie Valley Symphony Orchestra, the Highland Park Strings, Access Contemporary Music and the Chicago Cultural Center Summer Opera. As a guest conductor he has amassed several critically acclaimed productions with Chicago Opera theater and has collaborated with many professional local orchestras. His work with the New Millennium Orchestra and Chicago Opera theater were each named to the Chicago Sun-Times list of the “10 best performances of the year.” Mr. Milioto is particularly proud of his work with the New Millennium Orchestra of Chicago, which he co-founded in 2005. The NMO had an incredible range of repertoire, playing everything from classical music and opera, to collaborations with jazz and hip-hop artists. His highly acclaimed work over ten seasons with both the Highland Park Strings and Skokie Valley Symphony Orchestra ranged from early music to contemporary works and often featured world-renowned soloists. As Artistic Director/Conductor of Access Contemporary Music, Mr. Milioto led the brilliantly vibrant ensemble *Palomar* which has been featured on the radio and in performances throughout the city and abroad. He has also conducted successful productions with The Atlanta Opera, Arizona Opera, Tulsa Opera, Opera Santa Barbara, Opera Southwest, Elgin Opera, and Opera on the James.



Nadja Simmonds is a theater and opera director and actor working across the Midwest. Originally from Cincinnati, Ohio, she moved to Milwaukee to attend Marquette University focusing on theater and digital media. After graduating, she travelled around Wisconsin, Montana, and Ohio performing at regional theaters including The Contemporary Theater of Ohio, Cincinnati Playhouse, Forward Theater, First Stage Children’s Theater, Montana Shakespeare in the Parks, Next Act Theater, and more.

When the pandemic hit, her focus shifted to assisting and directing musicals and plays at Northern Sky Theater, The Milwaukee Rep, Marquette University, and here at Florentine Opera Company. Florentine Opera credits include *Hansel and Gretel*, *The Barber of Seville*, and assisting Brenna Corner on this season’s production of *Elixir of Love*. She is incredibly excited to direct this iconic production of *The Bronzeville Bohème*. This summer she will be at The Glimmerglass Opera Festival assistant directing *The Pirates of Penzance* and *Rumpelstiltskin and the Unlovable Children*.

Much love goes to her family and friends, those continuously fighting for justice and equality, and to the amazing Lisa Schlenker for introducing her to the wonderful world of opera.



Background on the importance of Walnut Street, and The Flame Nightclub, from conversations with Sheri Williams Pannell and Mark Doremus. SPIRIT OF BRONZEVILLE 1948–1951 SOURCE: THE WISCONSIN BUSINESS DIRECTORY EDITED AND PUBLISHED BY DR. MARY ELLEN SHADD.

The Flame night club was the pinnacle of jazz music in Milwaukee in 1950, offering a source of high-quality entertainment and a release from daily life struggles. Jazz was vitally important to Bronzeville culture and connected the black community to a larger artistic heritage. The Flame highlighted the diverse draw of Bronzeville’s jazz scene, hosting nationally famous acts such as Jabbo Smith, Bernie Young, Dizzy Gillespie, Louis Armstrong, and Duke Ellington. This bastion of intellectual and popular music provided a place for Milwaukee’s black and white communities to come together, sharing the joy new exciting music and entertainment tastes.

ARTISTIC

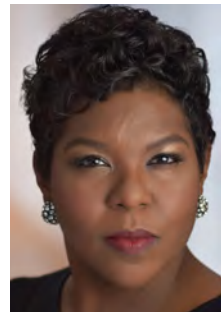
**Chaz'men Williams-Ali, *Rodolfo, a poet***

American tenor Chaz'men Williams-Ali's Season 2023-24 includes Cavaradossi in *Tosca* at Cedar Rapids Opera, the role of Nate in *Highway 1 USA* in his Los Angeles Opera debut, and his return to Rodolfo in *La bohème* at The Florentine Opera. His recent highlights include his work as principal tenor at Theater & Orchester Heidelberg in Germany, his Metropolitan Opera debut as Zorn in *Die Meistersinger* and Spinner in *Fire Shut Up in My Bones*, a role he inaugurated in the original production at Opera Theater of St Louis in 2019.

The artist made his international debut when he joined English National Opera for the roles of Robbins and The Crab Man in *Porgy & Bess* in their co-production with The Metropolitan Opera and Dutch National Opera; he also sang the role in Amsterdam. Chaz's professional opera debut came in 2008 in Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Gondoliers* with Cedar Rapids Opera Theatre.

Mr. Williams-Ali has broad musical interests and lends his great talents to other genres, appearing professionally with a jazz ensemble alongside his drummer father, and in blues venues of renown in the US. He is also an experienced music director and conductor and has been known to appear as the Cowardly Lion in *The Wizard of Oz* and in the title role in *Shrek, the Musical*.

www.chazmenwilliamsali.com

**Michelle Johnson, *Mimi, a seamstress***

Soprano Michelle Johnson, a Grand Prize Winner of the Metropolitan Opera National Council Auditions where she was described as "a clear audience favorite" (New York Times), has been lavished with praise for her "extraordinary breath control and flawless articulation... Her voice is velvety and pliant – a dulcet dream."

In the 2023-24 season, Ms. Johnson will sing *Tosca* with Madison Opera, returns to Chicago Opera Theater in Shostakovich's *The Nose* and debuts with The Florentine Opera singing Mimì in *La bohème*.

Ms. Johnson has also made a name for herself as one of the most in demand Aida's in the opera world today, performing Verdi's tragic heroine with Glimmerglass Music Festival, Opera Santa Barbara, Opera Columbus, Knoxville Opera, Opera Idaho, and Sarasota Opera, among others. As an avid concert artist, she has performed Verdi's *Requiem*, Beethoven's Symphony No. 9, and Vaughan Williams' *Dona nobis pacem*.

Ms. Johnson is a graduate of the Academy of Vocal Arts in Philadelphia, Boston University Opera Institute, and New England Conservatory. She has graced the winner's circle of the William Matheus Sullivan Foundation, Gerda Lissner Foundation, and the Giulio Gari Foundation.

www.michellejohnsonsoprano.com

**Brian Major, *Marcello, a painter***

Charismatic baritone Brian Major consistently garners praise from critics, celebrated for his enchanting "velvety voice" and commanding stage presence.

Major's 2023-24 season will see his return to the Metropolitan Opera covering the role of Malcolm X in *X: The Life and Times of Malcolm X*, in addition to debuts with Opera Roanoke as Count Almaviva in *Le nozze di Figaro*, Marcello in *La bohème* with The Florentine Opera, a concert debut with the esteemed Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, and Amonasro in *Aida* with Opera Maine.

Last season, he made his Metropolitan Opera debut as Baron Douphol in *La traviata* and covered Benny "Kid" Paret in *Champion* and Scarpia in *Tosca* with The Santa Fe Opera.

In addition to his operatic accomplishments, Mr. Major is an accomplished recitalist and concert artist. He has served as the baritone soloist in Handel's *Messiah*, Vaughan Williams' *Five Mystical Songs*, Beethoven's Symphony No. 9, and Mendelssohn's *Elijah*.

Major's excellence has been recognized on the competition circuit, earning him prestigious awards such as the 2022 Sullivan Foundation Award, 1st prize at Harlem Opera Theater's Vocal Competition, and 1st prize at the Atlanta Music Club Vocal Competition. Mr. Major holds degrees from Morehouse College, Boston University, and Michigan State University.

www.brianmajorbaritone.com

**Kelebogile Besong, *Musetta, a grisette***

South-African spinto-soprano Kelebogile Besong is emerging on the international opera and concert stages as a talent of unusually strong stage presence, sensitive musicianship and vocal power. After making her North American debut as Aida with the Pacific Symphony, critics proclaimed, "At the youthful age of 28, Besong's vocal abilities are nothing short of phenomenal. Her Aida is truly visceral... The dramatic soprano turns on a dime, capable of radiating over and above tutti orchestra, yet poised for a quixotic shift of pianissimo phrasing that melts like butter." (Concerto.net). Quickly establishing Aida as a signature role, Besong has also sung the role with Malmö Opera and Aalto-Musiktheater Essen.

On the concert stage she has performed Handel's *Messiah*, Mendelssohn's *Elijah*, Mahler's Symphony No. 4, Beethoven's Symphony No. 9, Mozart's *Requiem* and Mass in C minor, and Poulenc's *Gloria*.

Ms. Besong is the proud recipient of the 2012 Standard Bank Young Artist Award in Music and in 2013 she was awarded Africa's Most Influential Woman in Business & Government (Arts). Mrs. Besong was a finalist of the 32nd Belvedere Singing Competition 2013, held at the Dutch National Opera in Amsterdam, and represented South-Africa in the BBC Cardiff Singer of the World competition 2015.

www.guybarzilayartists.com/kelebogile-besong/



Allen Michael Jones, *Colline, a philosopher*

Rising young bass Allen Michael Jones continues to gain recognition in major theaters around the world. Highlights of his 2023-24 season includes debuts with Dutch National Opera in the world premiere of Ellen Reid's *The Shell Trial* as Laborer and with the Spoleto Festival USA as Curio in *Giulio Cesare*. He also returns to the role of Colline in *La bohème* with The Florentine Opera, a role he has also performed with Nashville Opera and Pensacola Opera.

He has recently appeared as the Imperial Commissioner in *Madama Butterfly* with his hometown company, Atlanta Opera, returned to

Minnesota Opera as Il Commendatore in *Don Giovanni*, and was seen at Des Moines Metro Opera as Zuniga in *Carmen*.

During his two summers in the Santa Fe Opera Apprentice Artist program, he was heard as the Officer in *Il barbiere di Siviglia* and as Zaretsky in *Eugene Onegin*, a role he also sang with the Dallas Symphony. Jones is a former resident artist with Minnesota Opera and Michigan Opera Theatre. Also a gifted composer, Jones is a proud graduate of Morehouse College where he received his Bachelor of Arts Degree in Music Composition before going on to earn his Master of Music Degree in Vocal Performance from Georgia State University.

www.allenmichaeljonesbass.com



Leroy Davis, *Schaunard, a musician*

As a proud member of the Ryan Opera Center Ensemble at the Lyric Opera of Chicago, baritone Leroy Davis sang or covered roles in *Macbeth*, *Die Zauberflöte*, and *Florencia en el Amazonas*. In 2022, he sang the Jailor and covered Sacristan in *Tosca*, and made his debut as Pastor/Kaboom, covering Chester in *Fire Shut Up In My Bones*. Leroy also sang Marcello in *La bohème* with Kentucky Opera and joined Atlanta Opera as Prince Yamadori in *Madama Butterfly*.

In 2023, the baritone returned to The Florentine Opera for his first Figaro in Rossini's *Il barbiere di Siviglia* and sang the Pirate King in *The Pirates of Penzance* with Nashville Opera.

As a Gerdine Young Artist at Opera Theater of St. Louis, he appeared in *Rigoletto* and *Fire Shut Up in My Bones*. In 2018, Leroy was a Baumgartner Studio Artist with The Florentine Opera, where he sang Aeneas in *Dido and Aeneas*, Adonis in *Venus and Adonis*, and Fiorello in *Il Barbiere di Siviglia*. Leroy was also a young artist at Central City Opera where he was awarded the Iris Henwood Richards Memorial Award.

Mr. Davis attended the Mannes College of Music and earned his Masters degree at Bard College.

www.leroydavisbaritone.com



Vince Wallace, *Benoit/Alcindoro*

A native of St. Louis, Missouri, American bass-baritone Vince Wallace is a versatile performer with broad performing experience ranging from skilled ensemble performances to a variety of solo roles and orchestral appearances. Currently based in Chicago, Mr. Wallace has appeared regularly with the Lyric Opera of Chicago since 2008.

Mr. Wallace was singing at The Metropolitan Opera house for the first half of their 2021-22 season, which included the premiere of *Fire Shut Up In My Bones* by Terence Blanchard. He has performed with the Grammy Award-winning Chicago Symphony Orchestra and Chorus in several programs including their encore and live rendering of the scores to *The Lord of the*

Rings at the Ravinia Festival. Locally, he sings with Chicago Opera Theater, The Florentine Opera, Des Moines Metro Opera, the Grant Park Music Festival, as well as numerous chamber ensembles and churches in the area.

Vince sings the National Anthem for various Chicago Bulls, Bears, and Cubs games and other local sporting events throughout their respective seasons.

Mr. Wallace is a graduate of Westminster Choir College (M.M., Voice Performance and Pedagogy) and Eastman School of Music (B.M., Vocal Performance).

www.vincewallace.com

PRODUCTION



Eboni Adams, *Assistant Stage Director*

Eboni considers herself an action figure. She keeps it moving. An LA-based multidisciplinary artist, originally from Austin, Texas, she has worked alongside Celine Dion, Cirque du Soleil and the Los Angeles Opera, among others.

As a choreographer and assistant director, she has collaborated with esteemed opera companies like Cincinnati Opera, Dallas Opera, and Washington National Opera, where she made her choreographic debut at the illustrious Kennedy Center. Her short film, 'Grace', was selected as one of the 'best of' the Pan-African Film Festival's 30th anniversary. As a

testament to her versatility, she also lent her voice to the Oscar-winning animation 'The Windshield Wiper'.

Whether it's through acting, dancing, choreographing, writing, or directing, Eboni is passionate about the performing arts and is committed to captivating and uplifting audiences through storytelling.

www.eboniadams.com



Lawrence E. Moten III, Scenic Designer

[Broadway] Chicken & Biscuits (Circle In The Square); What The Constitution Means to Me (Broadway & Tour Associate). [NYC] The White Chip (MCC), Covenant (Roundabout), Patience (2ST Uptown), STEW & Stargazers (Page 73), White Chip (59E59); [Regional] Black Cypress Bayou (Geffen), Bulrusher (McCarter & Berkeley Rep) Faust (Wolf Trap Opera), The Brothers Size, Proof & Once Upon A Bridge (American Players), Twelfth Night, Trouble In Mind, King James (Old Globe), Blues For An Alabama Sky (McCarter & Guthrie), Sherlock Holmes and the Case of the Jersey Lily (Alley Theatre), Appropriate & The Little Foxes (South Coast Rep) Christmas in Connecticut (Goodspeed Musicals), This Little Light

of Mine (Santa Fe Opera), Requiem (INSeries Opera), The Last Supper (SOPAC) Much Ado About Nothing (Commonwealth Shakespeare), How I Learned What I Learned & Native Son (Playmakers Rep), it's not a trip, it's a journey & We Declare You A Terrorist... (Round House), Gem of The Ocean (Portland Center Stage), The West End (Cincinnati Playhouse), Hype Man (ART & Company One), Gloria (ACT), Hi, Are You Single? (Woolly Mammoth), House of Joy (CalShakes), The Royale (Capital Rep), Behind The Sheet (Ensemble Studio Theatre).

Member: USA 829 & Wingspace Theatrical Design. www.motendesigns.com; IG: @motendesigns

Meika van der Ploeg, Costume Designer

Theatre credits include designs with Steppenwolf, Goodman Theatre, Chicago Shakespeare Theatre, Milwaukee Repertory Theater, Great Lakes Theater, Idaho Shakespeare Festival, American Players Theatre, Court Theater, People's Light, Writers Theatre, Lyric Opera Unlimited, Lookingglass Theatre, Paramount Theatre, Marriott Theatre, Remy Bumppo, Second City, Redmoon, The Hypocrites, Chicago Children's Theatre, Children's Theatre of Charlotte, About Face Theatre, Steep Theatre, Theater Wit, Theatre Squared, Albany Park Theater Project, Manual Cinema, and the Under the Radar Festival at The Public Theatre. She won a Joseph Jefferson award in 2020 for First Love is the Revolution, at Steep Theatre. She is proud to be a member of USA829.

Erica Cartledge, Resident Wig/Makeup Designer



Erica Cartledge is the Florentine Opera's Resident Wig + Makeup Designer. Her recent designs include - *Songbird* (Florentine Opera), *Elixir of Love* (Florentine Opera), *Barber of Seville* (Florentine Opera), *Così: REMIX* (Florentine Opera), *Hunchback of Notre Dame* (Milwaukee Ballet), *Peter Pan* (Milwaukee Ballet), *Covers* (Florentine Opera), *Nutcracker* (Milwaukee Ballet), *Romeo and Juliet* (Florentine Opera), *Luisa Fernanda* (Florentine Opera), *Cinderella & The Child and the Enchantments* (Florentine Opera), *Rigoletto* (Florentine Opera). *La Bohème* (Florentine Opera). Erica has worked on world premiere productions of Don Davis' opera *Rio de Sangre* and Robert Aldridge & Herschel Garfein's opera *Sister*

Carrie (Florentine Opera). Other Florentine Opera engagements include *The Magic Flute*, *Venus & Adonis/Dido & Aeneas*, *Don Giovanni*, *Die Fledermaus*, *Madama Butterfly*, *Elixir of Love*, *Elmer Gantry*, *La bohème*, *Julius Caesar*, *La traviata*, *Albert Herring*, *Carmen*, *Le Nozze di Figaro*, *Idomeneo*, *Tosca*, *I Capuleti ei Montecchi*, *Merry Widow*, *Salome*, *Macbeth*. Erica has been a part of all wig and makeup design in Florentine Opera productions since 2006.



Kathy A. Perkins, Lighting Designer

Kathy has designed for Broadway, Off-Broadway, and regional theatres such as American Conservatory Theatre, Arena Stage, Berkeley Repertory, Seattle Repertory, St. Louis Black Repertory, Alliance, Goodman, Steppenwolf, Baltimore Center Stage, Alabama Shakespeare Festival, New Federal Theatre, Mark Taper, Yale Repertory, Actors Theatre of Louisville, Syracuse Stage, Two Rivers Theatre, and Playmakers Repertory. Internationally, her work has been seen in South Africa, Canada, Switzerland, and Austria. For twenty years she directed the MFA and BFA lighting program at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. As a scholar, she is the editor of seven anthologies focusing on women both nationally and internationally.

She is a senior editor of the Routledge Companion to African American Theatre and Performance.

Kathy received the 2019 Association for Theatre in Higher Education (ATHE) Career Achievement Award in Academic Theatre, the 2021 United States Institute for Theatre Technology (USITT) Distinguished Achievement Award for both Education and Lighting Design. Kathy has traveled to nearly fifty countries as both designer and lecturer and is the recipient of numerous research and design awards, including Ford Foundation, Fulbright, National Endowment for the Humanities, the Henry Hewes Design Award, and an NAACP Image Award. In 2007 she was inducted into the College of Fellows of the American Theatre. She received her BFA from Howard University and her M.F.A. from the University of Michigan. Kathy is faculty Emerita at the University of Illinois and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.



Jasmine Williams, Assistant Lighting Designer

Jasmine is an Atlanta-based Artist and Lighting Designer for theatre, music, dance, opera, and immersive experiences. Although previously a Stage Manager, Jasmine transitioned to Lighting and Costume Design at Tulane University, where she received her Design MFA in 2020. As a Lighting Designer, Jasmine has designed the Alliance Theater's, *A Gift Of Live* with Adam L. McNight, Passage Theater's production of David Robson's, *Blues In My Soul*, and *Damsel*, Atlanta's newest Dance Cabaret Dining Experience. Jasmine would also like to thank the theatre makers at St. Louis Black Repertory Theatre, for the opportunity of Resident Lighting Designer for their 46th season. JazLight.com



Dyan Yoder, Supertitles Designer

Dyan Yoder, Supertitle Designer, has been translating and designing supertitles for the Florentine Opera Company and other companies across North America since 2004. A former Company Manager and Stage Manager for the Florentine Opera, she is currently Partner and Show Director of Captus Creative, a technical event production company, where she is sought after for corporate, opera, and ballet show calling and stage management and is a voiceover artist for live events, podcasts, broadcasts, and recordings. She has worked with various talents, from world leaders, presidents, and dignitaries to musicians covering multiple genres. During the COVID-19 pandemic, she and her team expanded their company and resources by creating a studio that produced virtual, hybrid, and safe productions. Out of these productions, this led to them winning the 2022 Michigan EMMY® for Outstanding Achievement Historical/Cultural. Originally from Brookfield, WI, Dyan majored in Music and minored in Communications at Carroll University. She recently obtained certificates from Safe Sets International, Johns Hopkins University, and Cornell University.

CHARACTERS AND THEIR BRONZEVILLE COUNTERPARTS

Mimi, Rodolpho, Musetta and Marcello have come to represent the spirit and struggle of young artists. The story will be told through these archetypal characters. To assist us in telling the story in Bronzeville Milwaukee, counterparts have been identified. These historical figures may not share the tragic journey faced by the protagonists of the opera, but they exhibit the creativity and joy despite life's challenges.

Dramaturgical research provided by Sheri Williams Pannell, MFA
Associate Professor, Theatre, University of Wisconsin - Milwaukee
Cofounder and Producing Artistic Director Bronzeville Arts Ensemble



Sheri Williams Pannell (Dramaturg) is a native Milwaukeean who has performed, directed, or written for a number of Milwaukee's theater and arts organizations including First Stage, Florentine Opera, Milwaukee Chamber Theater, Milwaukee Fringe Festival, Milwaukee Rep, Milwaukee Symphony Orchestra, Milwaukee Arts Museum, and Skylight Music Theatre. Beyond Milwaukee, Pannell has worked at Oregon Shakespeare Festival, Utah's Old Lyric Theatre, Children's Theater of Madison, University Opera and University Theater at UW Madison. Pannell was honored to direct a production for the United Nations Conference on Genocide, hosted at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. In 2017, Pannell was honored as an Artist of the Year by the City of Milwaukee. She is a founder and producing artistic director at Bronzeville Arts Ensemble, artistic associate at Black Arts MKE and First Stage, co-director of the fine arts ministry at Calvary Baptist Church. Summer of 2020, Pannell served as a founder of the Milwaukee Black Theatre Festival. Pannell is on the faculty of the Theatre Department at University of Wisconsin - Milwaukee, where she is head of the Musical Theatre Program. A graduate of Spelman College, Pannell also holds an MFA from the University of Wisconsin-Madison.



SIMS

Marcello is a dreamer, lover and in love with Musetta. Milwaukee Bronzeville inspiration is renaissance man, Sylvester Sims. Mr. Sims was a boxer, visual artist and an Olympic hopeful in diving. He continued to paint while working for Miller Brewing. "Back then when I was coming up, very seldom you locked your doors when you left the house. Didn't nobody have nothing for you to take, really. Come in and eat your food. But outside of that they had a screen door with a nail bent to hold it closed." Sims says.

Sims says back then, if you were black in Milwaukee, you didn't harbor much hope of moving to another part of town - he says it was hell to try to buy a home. You didn't want to be harassed, say at a store or a church.



CLAYBORN

Rodolpho is a poet and playwright, passionate, hot-headed and in love with Mimi. For our production, he serves as the narrator for the performance. The Milwaukee Bronzeville inspiration is Cleveland Colbert, author and political activist.

Photo courtesy of the Wisconsin Black Historical Society Archives and Mr. Clayborn Benson.



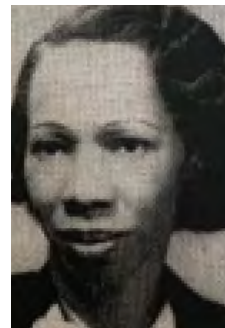
GOGGINS

Mimi is a sensitive soul. She is a seamstress, lover of the delicate things, roses and enjoys embroidering flowers on garments for pleasure. Mimi yearns for a beautiful life. She is ill with pneumonia. Our Bronzeville inspiration is Milwaukee Bronzeville Historian, Dr. Irene Goggins. She was an arts patron, socialite, Y's Men Booster, spoken word artist, excellent cook, baker, creator of homemade cards and possessed a deep reverence for God. She was everybody's Auntie Irene.

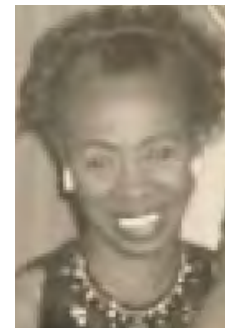
Musetta is a singer, opportunist, tender-hearted and in love with Marcello. Milwaukee Bronzeville inspirations are Newspaper columnist Mattiabelle Woods and dancer Minette "Satin Doll" Wilson.

Mattiabelle Woods was a socialite, newspaper columnist who was featured in the Milwaukee Courier, Milwaukee Star, Milwaukee Community Journal, Chicago Defender and Jet Magazine. Ms. Woods reported on the social events such as debutante balls, weddings, inaugural balls, special appointments, notable deaths and concerts for 75 years! Famous for her stylish attire and stiletto heels, Ms. Woods danced the electric slide at her 100th Birthday. She lived to be 103 years.

Minette "Satin Doll" Wilson Dancer and friend of jazz composer and band leader Duke Ellington, who gave Ms. Wilson, the nickname, "Satin Doll." Ms. Wilson eventually owned a nightclub.



WOODS



WILSON



The Anello Society

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The Anello Society is named after the Florentine Opera's visionary founder, John David Anello. This group of visionaries have provided a gift to the Florentine Opera in their wills or estate plans. These planned gifts assure that future financial support to the Florentine Opera remains strong.

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7	Physicians/Surgeons
11	Registered Nurses
7	Bookkeepers/Accountants
8	Lawyers
8	Notary Publics
11	Banks/Buildings and Loans
12	Realtors
12	Builders/General Contractors
11	Commercial & Fine Artists
9	Photographers
9	Orchestras
2	Music Arrangers
7	Pianists
6	Ice Companies
10	Tailors/Dressmakers
9	Barber Shops
13	Beauty Parlors
19	Cleaners/Laundrettes
23	Restaurants
4	Bar B Que Joints
4	Chicken Shacks
1	Chill Parlor
36	Taverns
38	Churches
2	Night Clubs
2	Ball Rooms
3	Cocktail Lounges
52	Private Social Clubs
173	Licensed Rooming Houses

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 Company Manager Megan Henschel
 Education and Community Engagement Manager Renata Herrera
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 Voice Teacher Connie Hass
 Resident Artistic Consultant..... Jill Anna Ponasik

Baumgartner Studio Artists

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 Libby Winchester Schultz Technical Director
 Jordan Elizabeth Meyer Costume Shop Manager
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 Skylar Delk Head Electrician
 Paul Gegenhuber Properties Manager
 Debranne Steidl Orchestra Manager & Production Assistant
 William Woger Head Carpenter
 Carri Dahl Scenic Charge Artist
 Tamara Jasinski Supertitles Prompter
 Show Run Crew IATSE Local 18

Costumes

Jessica Meyer Shop Assistant
 Deb Kocorowski Cutter/Draper
 Taylor Godden, Angeline Holtzman-Forbes, Beck Menk, Becky Molyneux, Daniel Rusch, Erynn Vickery, Cyprus White..... Stitchers

Wardrobe Crew/Dressers

Becky Molyneux..... Wardrobe Supervisor
 Dana Brzezinski Wardrobe Assistant
 Debra Bokelberg, Dana Brzezinski, Veronique Gillick, Taylor Godden, Reagan Godden, Angeline Holtzman-Forbes, Shanna McLain, Marie Merkél, Jess Meyer, Daniel Rusch, Erynn Vickery, Cyprus White

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