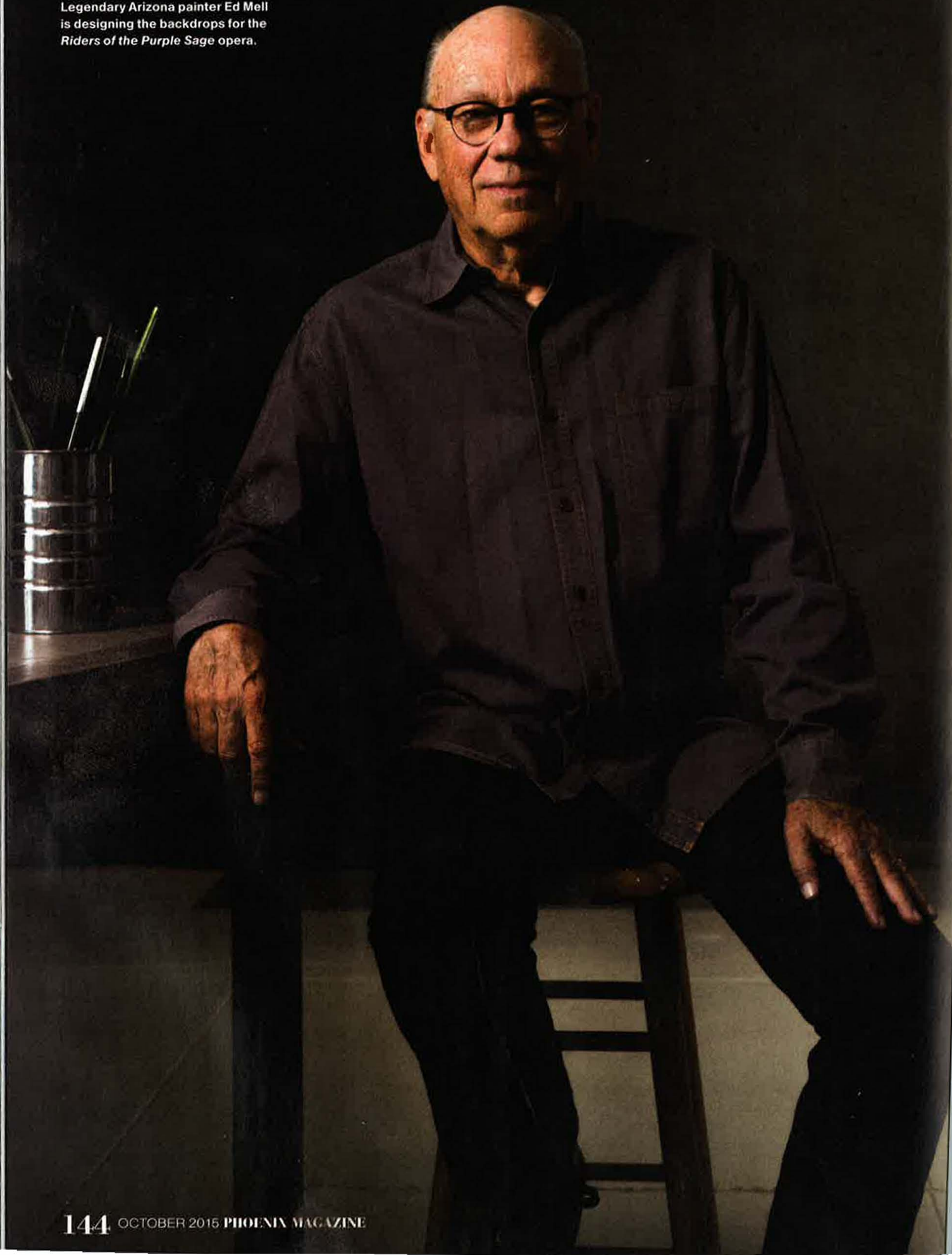


Legendary Arizona painter Ed Mell is designing the backdrops for the *Riders of the Purple Sage* opera.





From SAGE to STAGE

The wild, untamed story behind Arizona Opera's upcoming adaptation of Zane Grey's *Riders of the Purple Sage*.

**Part one in a series of three.*

BY MICHAEL GRADY

PORTRAITS BY CHRIS LOOMIS

Serendipity is the watchword of *Riders of the Purple Sage* – the classic Zane Grey novel of Western adventure that will return to Arizona as, of all things, an opera.

If an aspiring dime novelist hadn't tried to capture the soaring grandeur of the West in words; if a treasured Arizona painter hadn't wondered how to wrap that grandeur around a human story; or if a restless composer hadn't discovered the dead novelist's ephemera while ducking out of a Payson rainstorm, local opera fans would have nothing more in their Christmas stocking than the possibility of watching the nice lady from *La Bohème* get sick. Yet again.

Instead, this unlikely group of artists found a common bond in a century-old tale, so singing tuberculosis will have to wait. The long and distinguished catalogue of performance opera – *Carmen*, *Aida*, *The Barber of Seville* – will soon include a story much closer to home for Arizonans. Composed in Scottsdale and polished through workshops in Downtown Phoenix, *Riders of the Purple Sage* will conjure the Old West via artistic devices that predate America herself. And Arizona Opera's unlikely posse – a dead author, a live painter, and a composer who ran from the rain – will herd it into Symphony Hall in May 2017.

Gold in Them Thar Trills

"It's amazing to me, the way it's all coming together," composer Craig Bohmler says. "It's almost like *Riders* chose us and put the right people in our path." Armed with a zealot's energy and an inquisitive spirit, Bohmler is a great believer in serendipity. But even he marvels at the opera's unlikely beginnings. "We were just supposed to go on a hike."

That hike, up in Payson in 2012, fell afoul of a monsoon, leaving Bohmler and his partner seeking the first available shelter. In a Wes Craven movie, that might've meant a Gothic mansion or a cabin full of skulls. Fortunately, shelter in this case meant the Zane Grey Museum.

Bohmler's curiosity has created a large and varied résumé. His operas include *The Tale of the Nutcracker* and *The Achilles Heel*; his musicals range from 3 *Redneck Tenors* to *Gun Metal Blues* to *Enter the Guardsman*, which won Denmark's International Musical of the Year competition and was performed off-Broadway. But he knew little of Zane Grey or the pulp novels that established Western folklore. In the museum, under the drum of the rain, he studied all the old movie posters those novels inspired.

"You had adaptations with Tom Mix and George Montgomery, flashing guns and looking melodramatic," he says. "It was the kind of intensity you usually see in opera." So, exactly 100 years after *Riders of the Purple Sage* was first published, Bohmler looked the novel up on his Kindle. "About 20 pages in, I was hooked. I said, 'This is an opera.'"

Traditionalists may listen, at this point, for the gentle hum of John Wayne revolving in his grave.

Because Western lore first took hold through early 20th-century dime novels – and because the Western genre "grew up" alongside silent and talking pictures – these action-oriented American art forms are natural bedfellows. Librettos and tenors? Not so much.

Still, Bohmler held firm in his belief that Grey's masterwork had the elements of good opera. "It's got strong characters, and a dramatic landscape." Other operas have ventured to these parts: Puccini's *Girl of the Golden West*, Douglas Moore's *Ballad of Baby Doe*, and Emmerich Kálmán's 1953 work *Arizona Lady*, which holds court at AZO this October. But *Riders* remains unique, Bohmler says, be-

cause its themes – about masculinity, guns and fundamentalism – still echo close to home. "You never retell a story unless it has something contemporary to say."

Set in 1871, near the Arizona/Utah border, *Riders* follows Jane Withersteen, fighting to protect her land and faith as Mormon elders whittle the family ranch out from under her. Their efforts are thwarted by Lassiter, a notorious 'gun man,' whose bloody past overshadows a lonely personal quest.

"Emotional stakes run very high in the story," Bohmler says, "and opera has the ability to give you those heightened emotions without making them corny."

Commercial stakes ran very low, however. Bohmler had no backers, and no commission. No one was interested in blowing dust off an old pulp novel and making its cowboys sing. Bohmler started anyway. He wrote a few anchor melodies, then enlisted friends to help: librettist Steven Mark Kohn, to shape the script, and local documentary producer Kristin Atwell to consult on video and action sequences. "We worked for the love of doing it."

With little hope of anything more, his posse set off into the wilds of Western folklore, to find opera in them thar hills.

Meanwhile, Back at the Opera House...

In 2013, while Bohmler and Kohn were writing music and lyrics "on spec" – or for the fun of it, basically – the strange serendipity of *Riders* rose once again. Yearning to tap new markets and evolve artistically, Arizona Opera experienced an aesthetic sea change.

"Think of a movie, say... *Pretty Woman*," Arizona Opera's general director, Ryan Taylor, says. "Now, you may like *Pretty Woman*. But the movies would get pretty boring if *Pretty Woman* was playing every two years."

Taylor isn't really that fond of *Pretty Woman*. He's speaking, metaphorically, about the need for more diverse programming at AZO. Increasing diversity was one of the major objectives of a 2013 shakeup that saw Arizona Opera rework everything from its leadership to its mission statement to its debt structure. And it opened the gates for *Riders of the Purple Sage*.

"We conducted a rigorous self-examination and held discussions with our subscribers and members of the arts community," Taylor says. "We saw we were perceived as a homogenous, elitist organization. Now, why would you patronize an elitist organization?" He asks. "We do education programs and outreach, but there was that perception: We don't do enough in and for the community."

The company needed to be more inclusive – starting with season selection. "People were getting fatigued with the old warhorses. We wanted to create something of interest for a wider group of people, including many who think they don't belong in an opera house."

Cue the posse.

Composer Craig Bohmler dreamed up the *Riders* opera during a rainstorm in Payson.



“Certain projects come along and, well, you just know you’re going to do them.”

- Ed Mell

Arizona Opera – then under the management of Taylor’s predecessor, Scott Altman – invited Bohmler in, listened to his melodies and ideas, and liked what they heard. “If we’d gone out looking for a world premiere, I don’t think we’d have been able to develop one in four years’ time,” Taylor says. “But these are terrifically talented people. Because Craig had already been working on it with his friends, it was already well-developed.”

So AZO assumed the substantial financial risk of being the company that brought *Riders* to the light of day. They made Bohmler a composer-in-residence, sponsored two open workshops to hear the score sung, and, to date, have raised about two-thirds of the estimated \$750,000 needed to spin a Zane Grey Western into two hours of soaring music. The remaining third will be raised through individual patrons, and the enthusiasm *Riders* inspired during its workshops. That may seem like a lot of work for three performances in Phoenix, and two in Tucson. But it establishes AZO as a creative force in opera, and strengthens ties with the folks at home.

“This is the way we connect, through art, to our communities,” Taylor says. “By selecting a piece like [*Riders*] we explore not only opera, but our relationship with the state.” But the thrill of telling a Western audience its own story in opera comes with a caveat: It has to feel authentic. And as the posse captured Grey’s story in words, staging and song, they knew their opera was missing a critical character: the American West.

The vast Western landscape is what inspired Zane Grey to write *Riders of the Purple Sage* in the first place. Its rigors, secrets and angular beauty set the stakes for the story that follows. Jane’s struggles and Lassiter’s demons would ring hollow in front of a wobbly mesa and a spotlight moon. If *Riders* wanted to wow an Arizona audience, it had to authentically capture the beauty and the sprawling magnificence of the land we all share.

It was Kristin Atwell who figured out how.

“When I picture this opera in my mind,” she said, “I see it playing beneath a giant painting by Ed Mell.”

The Whites of Their Skies

“Certain projects come along,” Ed Mell says, with a chuckle, “and, well, you just know you’re going to do them.”

If Arizona has a visual poet laureate, it’s Mell. The soft-spoken 73-year-old paints with a brush that’s hard-wired to the soul of the state. From the easel of his Downtown studio, Mell channels Arizona’s fiery skies and craggy horizons into images that define it to the world. His regal portrayal of Cathedral Rock became the Arizona Statehood stamp. His landscapes have held court in the governor’s office, run on the covers of *Arizona Highways* and dotted the walls of museums and private collections everywhere.

You wouldn’t think a guy like Mell would want to create opera

scenery and sets. But he did.

“When we first went to Ed, we were hoping he might license an image or two for us to use,” Atwell says. “When we realized he wanted in, that was a mind-blower.”

Ask Mell why, and he says with a grin what others say in fear: “This is something I’ve never done.”

“I like this stuff. It pushes you out of the painting you usually do, and pulls you in a different direction.” Mell keeps his work fresh with variety and improvisation: bouncing between realism and abstraction at the canvas; scouting landscapes in helicopters. “Painting is very solitary,” he says. “I’m always looking for ways to include others in the process.”

Riders of the Purple Sage will give Mell a chance to push the frontiers of his work, and seek new sources of inspiration. One such source: dioramas, those shoebox-shape, stage-like *objets* we all made in grade school. “Dioramas have always fascinated me, ever since I was a kid,” he says, eyeing the glass box tableaux that dot the shelves of his studio. They take a one-dimensional picture into the realm of storyteller, wrapping it around figurines – hunters, animals, birds in flight – to create a frozen moment in time.

“I made a diorama, with James Robson, for Phoenix Children’s Hospital. But I’m more of a collector, really. I own way more than I deserve.”

Is creating *Riders*’ world the next step? A living, singing diorama of the Old West? Mell, who’d much rather paint than analyze, chuckles at the idea. “I suppose it all seeps into your psyche, somehow. All those things gel inside you, and something new comes out.”

And he is eager to attack the possibilities. “I’ll do some studies first, to help me get a sense of the look. I’ll also be working with the video crew to animate different pieces. We’ll paint the sky separately, for instance, so the clouds can move across the land.”

Once the balance of painted pieces versus projections is determined, he will work on three-dimensional pieces, like Jane Withersteen’s ranch house and the town church, to incorporate them into the look. “It’s exciting to do something with this kind of scale and life to it.”

End: Act I

Currently, the *Riders*’ artistic posse is fully staffed and gathering speed. Bohmler’s 55-piece orchestral score has been written. Kohn’s libretto is done. Fenlon Lamb, the accomplished director behind Arizona Opera’s production of *Rigoletto*, has been selected to direct the production. She, Mell, AZO production designer Doug Provost and Atwell are busy defining the mosaic of hard scenery, video projection and moving pieces that will create the *Purple Sage*.

But plenty of questions remain. Will the old-guard opera faithful embrace a homegrown creation? Will Zane Grey fans, the guardians of Western mystique, follow Lassiter and Jane into an opera house? How do you stage a stampede in Symphony Hall? And will jaws drop – in a good way – when the first *hombre* sings?

The challenges seem daunting, but the posse doesn’t flinch. “I try not to look at it as a challenge,” Mell says. “To me, we’re more about making it happen and the excitement of creating the thing.”

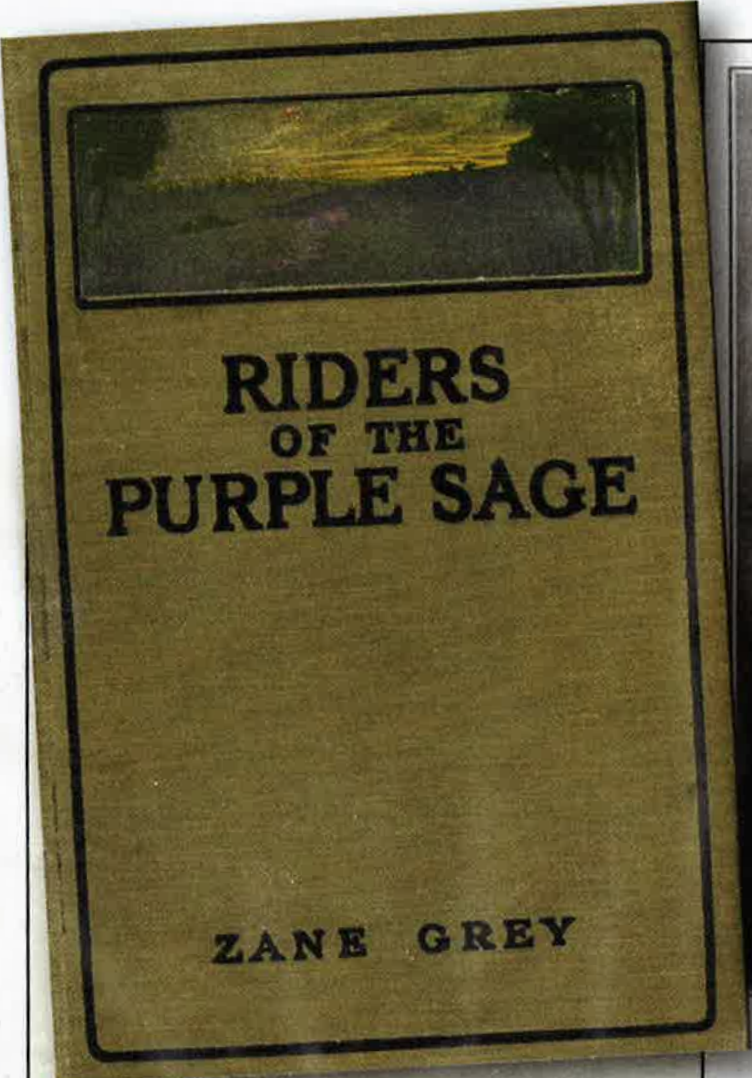
There’s also the small matter of casting and rehearsing the opera. Last spring, the team spent a week in New York, auditioning singers from all over the country to cast the voices that will fill the *Purple Sage*. But that’s a whole other act.

PM

Read Part II of *From Sage to Stage in the May 2016 issue of PHOENIX magazine.*

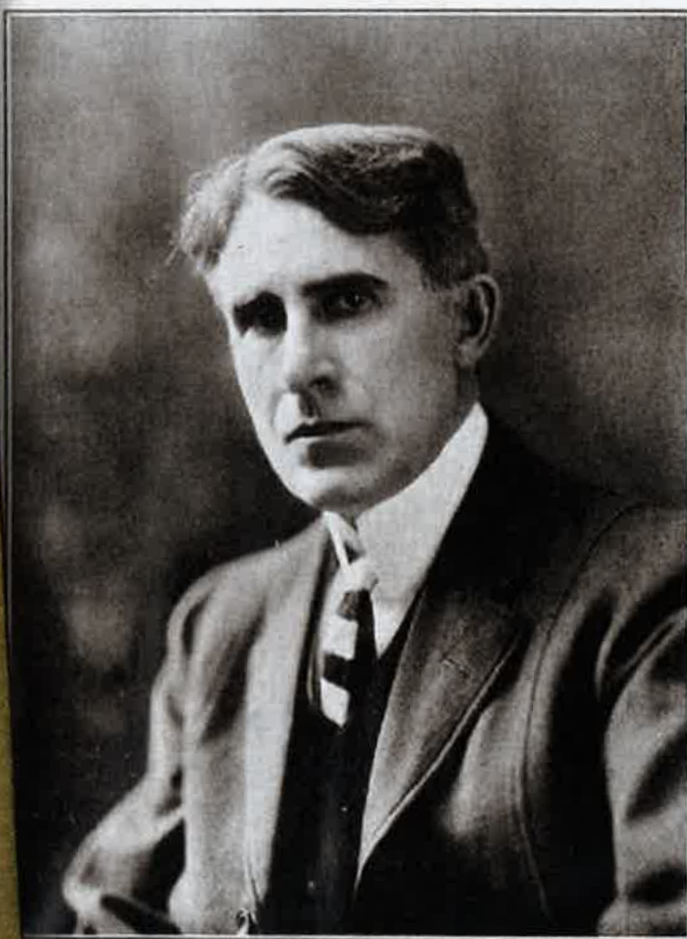
Stage director Fenlon Lamb's resume includes *La Bohème* at Palm Beach Opera and *Don Pasquale* at the Crested Butte Music Festival.





RIDERS OF THE PURPLE SAGE

ZANE GREY



Zane Grey

A NOVEL APPROACH TO OPERA

Riders of the Purple Sage may be the next iconic American novel to reach operatic heights, but it's far from the first. Many American classics have rendered their pages into song, including:

The Fall of the House of Usher

Edgar Allan Poe's 1839 short story of dead siblings and substandard housing has been adapted multiple times, including two short operas that will run side-by-side at the San Francisco Opera this season.

Little Women

In 1998, Houston Grand Opera premiered an adaptation of Louisa May Alcott's irrepressible story of the March sisters, which enjoyed multiple productions, nationally and abroad, and aired on PBS' *Great Performances* in 2001.

An American Tragedy

In 2005 - 80 years after Theodore Dreiser wrote his epic tale of a minister's son undone by ambition - the Metropolitan Opera premiered its version to mixed reviews.

The Great Gatsby

John Harbison's adaptation of F. Scott Fitzgerald's masterwork received mixed reviews at its 1999 premiere. It was revived by the Met in 2002, and performed at Tanglewood in 2013.

Of Mice and Men

Carlisle Floyd's 1970 John Steinbeck adaptation premiered in Seattle, playing in Houston, Washington and New York. A 2012 revival, by Utah Opera, received critical praise.

A Streetcar Named Desire

Andre Previn adapted Tennessee Williams' play into song. It premiered at the San Francisco Opera in 1998, with Renée Fleming singing Blanche DuBois, and has been produced steadily around the country.

Production designer Doug Provost will incorporate video projection and moving pieces into the opera's visual mosaic.

