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Houston-connected Helios Opera aims to change the form with tech, diversity

The second production from the company, whose chief officers now live in southeast Texas, debuts Dec. 4.

Chris Gray | November 30, 2020 Updated: December 1, 2020, 10:56 am





Life, as John Lennon once sang, is what happens when you're busy making other plans. That lesson was not lost on the founders of Helios Opera, when the brand-new company was forced to pivot to working virtually before mounting even a single live production.

They hardly gave it a second thought.

“What we decided is that it was actually a good opportunity for us to push through, because we didn't see COVID as an obstacle but more as an opportunity,” says Julien Rohel, Helios' chief innovation officer. “We wanted to leverage technology, we wanted to design new ways of working together, even remotely.”

Their solution was the Modular Opera Project, whose second production, “Stardust,” debuts Dec. 4. “Modular” is a fitting name for an organization that is literally all over the place – Rohel and chief creative officer Theodora Cottarel recently moved to Houston, while chief strategic officer Adrienne Boris remains in Boston. Their “Stardust” creative team, meanwhile, is spread out between director John de los Santos and composer Felix Jarrar in New York and lyricist B.L. Foxley, a sci-fi/fantasy author and poet living in London.

One of Helios' primary goals is to make opera seem more accessible (read: less elitist), which they hope to do in part through productions that – at least during the pandemic – are heavily influenced by film and music videos. In August, Helios launched the Modular Opera Project with an adaptation of “La Voix Humaine,” Francis Poulenc's one-act 1958 opera based on the Jean Cocteau play.



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Directed by Boris, the production starred Cottarel – a soprano who has sung with, among others, Odyssey Opera in Boston and Houston’s Opera in the Heights – as a woman alone in her apartment, having one last conversation with the lover who has just jilted her. At one point, she chases pills with Grey Goose.

“We thought it really spoke to what people were going through, and the isolation that the pandemic has unfortunately caused for a lot of people,” says Rohel.

The Helios founders also want to help redress opera’s historic inequities. Says Cottarel, “Historically, opera is not inclusive, and unfortunately, there’s a lot of racism in it.”

“We really want to be a platform for BIPOC (Black, Indigenous and People of Color) artists to put their works forward,” she adds, “but also to have the conversation that needs to be had with our artists about how the industry can move forward in that regard.”

To that end, Helios has assembled an all-BIPOC creative team for “Stardust.” The piece will be sung by Victoria Davis, a former first-prize winner of the Harlem Opera Voice competition and soloist in Washington National Opera’s Juneteenth celebration.

Based on three of Foxley’s poems, the song cycle invokes the Fates of Greek mythology – three old women who controlled the destiny, represented by a thread, of every human being – to explore the idea of identity through the lenses of race, self-criticism and self-actualization. De los Santos divides the screen into a triptych, allowing each of Davis’ personae to interact with the others.

The theme offers Cottarel “is really based on pushing back at the fate that society wants to assign you.”



music of Richard Strauss and the dramatic impetus of Verdi and Britten. It's very, very tonal.

Each of the four performances of “Stardust” will conclude with a dialogue about the opera’s themes between the creative team and a special guest: playwright and performer Melinda Lopez (Dec. 4); producer and screenwriter Chay Jones (Dec. 6); drag performer and opera singer Jasmine Rice LaBeija (Dec. 11); and NAACP Image Award-nominated writer Malcolm Hansen (Dec. 13). Helios also plans to supply background context – explaining Greek mythology, for example – through its newsletter and social-media updates.

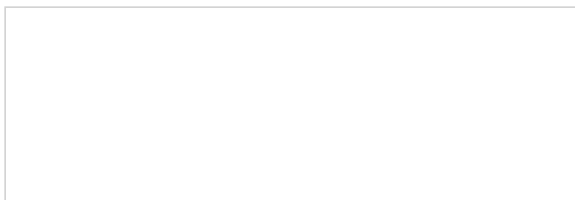
“The goal here is to encourage people to watch our productions in an environment and in a state of mind that allows them to enjoy it,” Rohel says. “(If) you want to catch all the details, sure, we’ll share that information with you. But we don’t want you to feel bad because you don’t know the protocol or the etiquette or whatever. Just enjoy the show.”

Chris Gray is a Galveston-based writer.



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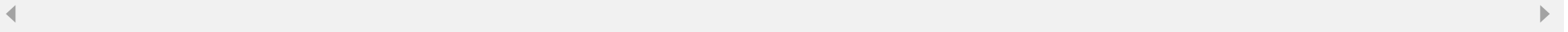




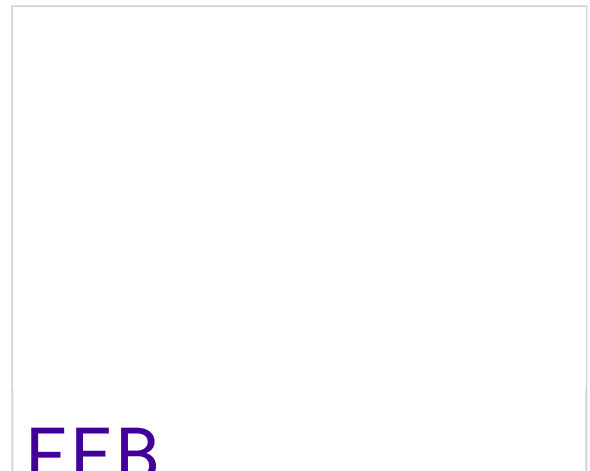
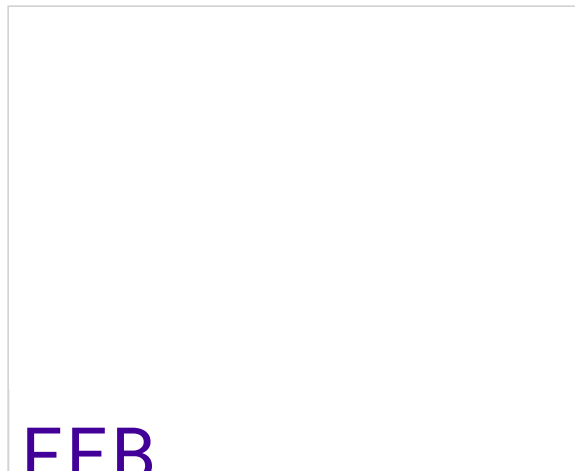
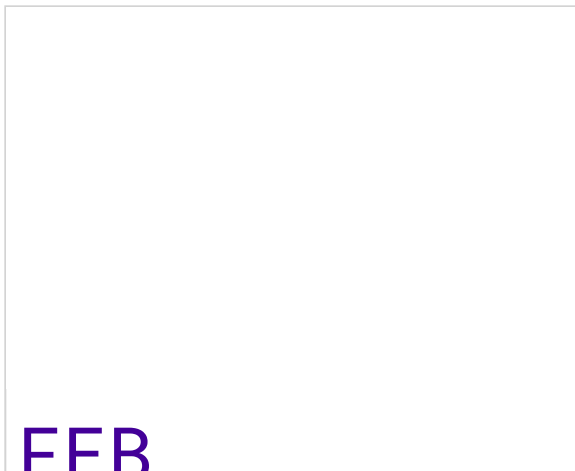
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