

‘Arizona Lady’: A brand-new opera (that's 60 years old)

[Kerry Lengel](#) , The Republic | [azcentral.com](#)



(Photo: Arizona Opera)

STORY HIGHLIGHTS

- Written in 1953, "Arizona Lady" is getting its first production at a major U.S. company.
 - Composer Emmerich Kálmán was a Jewish emigre who fled the Nazis and fell in love with the American West.
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- The comic opera has been updated with a new libretto in English and Spanish.

Jewish composer Emmerich Kálmán fled his beloved Vienna after the Nazis took over Austria in 1938. After a sojourn in Paris, the family moved on to the California, where Kálmán, a Hungarian writer of numerous popular operettas, aimed to make a living scoring films.

“Kálmán was really into Western movies and really into the idea of the American West — as mythologized, this sort of open expanse where everything can happen and there is no government and you’re free,” opera conductor Kathleen Kelly says. “How resonant would that be for someone in his situation?”

Kálmán's stint in Hollywood didn't work out, but his passion for his second homeland endured. He moved back to Vienna after the war, but his final opera was a love letter to the American West called "Arizona Lady."

Arizona Opera's bold turnaround marries art, commerce

Now, more than six decades later, "Arizona Lady" is getting its first production by a major U.S. company, Arizona Opera. Set in the 1920s, it's a light (if convoluted) comedy about a Viennese immigrant, Lona, who owns a ranch in Tucson. There's a love triangle involving the local sheriff and a suspected outlaw, and the story climaxes at the Kentucky Derby, where a side bet has Lona's romantic future riding on her prize racehorse, which also happens to be the title "character."

"Arizona Lady" plays Friday through Sunday, Oct. 16-18, at Symphony Hall, after premiering the previous weekend in Tucson. Here are three reasons to give this unfamiliar title a first listen.

1. It's very much a new show.

"Arizona Lady" had its official premiere in Bern, Switzerland, in 1954, the year after Kálmán's death. Arizona Opera is producing it as part of the company's Arizona Bold initiative, which aims to promote newer works with relevance to a contemporary Southwestern audience. And that meant making a few changes.

The original German libretto, by Alfred Grünwald and Gustav Beer, "mentions such classic Arizona sights as fields of corn, grizzly bears, tornadoes, Fred Astaire," says Kelly, who conducts the show. "It's hilarious" — but unintentionally. So Kelly has adapted the libretto into English to make it work for a 21st-century Arizona audience, staying true to Kálmán's vision of the West as a symbol of freedom and possibility.

There's still a smattering of German, and because some of the characters are Mexican-American, Arizona poet laureate Alberto Ríos was engaged to make some translations into Spanish.

Alberto Ríos named Arizona's first poet laureate

And, of course, the physical production also is new, with vaudevillian scenic design and tons of fun props, including a life-size plastic horse. There's even a rope-trick bit, a skill that chorister James Mendola mastered as a singer with the Tucson Arizona Boys Chorus, where lasso skills are required.

"It's a mash of so many different cultures," stage director Matthew Ozawa says. "You have two horse races, one at the Tucson rodeo, one at the Kentucky Derby. You have two love stories. You have square dancing, waltzing, vaudeville performances. It's wild, and it's a lot in one piece."

2. It's very American.

Kálmán wasn't just inspired by the American dream, he also was influenced by American musical theater. He saw Rodgers and Hammerstein's "Oklahoma!" in New York, Kelly says, and that was a direct influence on both the music and the story, right down to a hymn to the state titled "Arizona."

"There are a couple of quotes directly from 'Oklahoma!' " says Kelly, who graduated from McClintock High School and Arizona State University before launching an international career as an opera conductor and singing coach.

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"He writes his own version of a Mexican tune at one point, which is a little bit Vegasy. The orchestration is very rich. You hear the influence not only of his orchestral tradition but the Hollywood movie-music tradition. ... So it's a mixture of all of those things. I think that an American audience will find it really familiar in a lot of ways."

3. It's easy on the ears.

The composer's daughter, Yvonne Kálmán, has traveled to Arizona from her home in Puerto Vallarta, Mexico, to see the production.

"I am so excited for my father, for the work and for Arizona to have the opportunity to see this, because it is a fabulous show," she says. "It is really not an opera and not an operetta. It is really a musical of that time when my father wrote it in the '40s and '50s. And it is the most fun."

"It's sentimental, it's romantic, it's beautiful, and it's light. It's a real thank you to Arizona, and I think my father's song 'Arizona' should be your state song. It's that good and that catchy."

Even before Kálmán discovered Rodgers and Hammerstein, he was famous for his romantic, tuneful style. His operettas, including "The Gay Hussars" and "The Gypsy Princess," are about as far from the Sturm und Drang of Wagner as you can get.

Yvonne Kálmán, who was a teenager when he died, vividly recalls her father's passion for his music.

"He would wake up in the middle of the night and he'd have a tune, and he'd have to go sit down at the piano and play it," she says. "And they were terribly catchy songs and beautiful romantic melodies.

"We had a family dog, a dachshund, and the dog and I would go under the piano and listen to the music, and then he'd look down afterward and say, 'How did you like that?' "

**AUDIO
EXPRESS**



Arizona Opera and Poet Laureate Alberto Rios Collaborate on *Arizona Lady*

BY LYNN TRIMBLE

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 15, 2015 AT 7 A.M.



Angela Fout performs the role of Lona Farrell in *Arizona Lady*.

Arizona Opera

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Arizona Opera's falls season opens with a collaboration that sets a high bar.

Arizona Poet Laureate Alberto Ríos recently collaborated with **Arizona Opera** for its production of *Arizona Lady*, an operetta set in Tucson in 1925. Think gold rush, rodeos, and horse thieves. It's opera on the lighter side, with plenty of music, dance, and comedic elements. And it features a new English-Spanish translation by Ríos and Kathleen Kelly, who conducts the production. Ríos is a Regents' Professor at Arizona State University, where Kelly earned her undergraduate and graduate degrees in music. The opera was originally written in German.

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“I suppose it was kismet,” Ríos says of getting involved. He’d run into Ryan Taylor, general director for Arizona Opera, during a Victoria Foundation Awards ceremony (which presents an award in Ríos’ name) just as Taylor was starting to think about mounting the production. At the time, recalls Ríos, it felt like “a gift from outer space.”

“Arizona Opera is trying to do things of intrinsic interest to Arizonans,” Ríos says. *Arizona Lady*, written by composer Emmerich Kálmán after he fled Nazi Germany and traveled to the Southwest, fit the bill. Arizona Opera describes it as a love letter to the state, inspired by Kálmán’s passion for the desert landscape. The original libretto (that’s opera speak for text) was written by Alfred Grunwald and Gustave Beer.

The piece was written in 1953, performed in Switzerland in 1954, and in Berlin in 2014. Chicago Folks Operetta performed *Arizona Lady* with a new English translation in 2010, but Arizona audiences are the first to see a production featuring German, English, and Spanish. Arizona Opera is the first major opera house to perform the work, which it premiered first in Tucson. One Tucson reviewer -- who praised the singers, chorus, and orchestra -- noted that rope tricks drew the biggest audience applause.





Arizona Poet Laureate Alberto Ríos.

Evie Carpenter

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It plays from Friday, October 16, through Sunday, October 18, at Phoenix Symphony Hall. Never fear if you're not fluent in three languages. Arizona Opera will project English supertitles onto a screen above the stage. Asked why other U.S. companies haven't mounted the work, Taylor said, "Where else should it be produced but in Arizona?"

Arizona Lady is about a horse called Arizona Lady raised in Tucson, Ríos says. She goes on to win the Kentucky Derby in 1925. But this is opera we're talking about, so naturally the horse is surrounded by colorful characters with plenty of woes.

Although he's credited as a translator, Ríos actually did something more. He wasn't directed to reproduce the German text, but rather to capture its essence. "I had free reign to write in the spirit of the opera, which allowed me to find the poem of the moment," Ríos says. "That was a real gift."



inRead invented by Teads

Still, he describes it as a “daunting challenge,” explaining that the different languages used in this production of *Arizona Lady* reflect “different tools for expressing the world and cultural realities.” A direct translation would have been nearly impossible,” he says. “Ultimately, the language I worked in was the great grey in-between language.”

Although he’s not a regular opera-goer, Ríos saw Arizona Opera’s October 2014 production of the mariachi opera *Cruzar la Cara de la Luna*, which explores the lives of family members separated by the U.S.-Mexico border. “When that opera and those mariachis started playing, it just turns you to tears,” he recalls. “Opera is a doorway into something only music can give you.”





Mariachi Vargas performs in *Cruzar la Cara de la Luna*.

Arizona Opera

Ríos says his first opera encounter happened during middle school in Nogales, where his chorus teacher Mrs. Walker used to weave opera into class time. “I was just a shy kid and didn’t know what was going on in the universe,” he says. “All around the classroom she had pictures of opera stars,” he recalls. “I wanted to know what they did.”

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Sat., Feb. 4, 7:00pm

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Tue., Feb. 7, 7:30pm

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Sat., Feb. 11, 4:00pm

TICKETS

“What I remember most is the force of the sound,” he says.

“It was impressive to me.” Ríos says he remembers being struck by the fact that it was loud, like yelling, but had no evil intent. “Anything in an extreme form – a brilliant blue, an exquisite taste, a bright light – we’re attracted to them.”

Rhythm of the Dance

Sun., Feb. 12, 3:00pm

TICKETS

“Loud is a kind of magnet,” he explains. “If we hear it, we turn towards it. It carries something of the luminal or the edge.”

Arizona Opera performs Arizona Lady Friday, October 16, through Sunday, October 18, at Phoenix Symphony Hall. Tickets are \$25 to \$160. Find more information on the [Arizona Opera website](#).



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Opera review: 'Florecencia en el Amazonas' lives up to 'magical' billing

Kerry Lengel, The Republic | azcentral.com



(Photo: Tim Trumble)

"Florecencia en el Amazonas," the 1996 opera inspired by the magical realism of Colombian writer Gabriel García Márquez, has two title characters.

The first is Florecencia Grimaldi, an opera diva returning from her glamorous life in Europe to her hometown in the heart of the South American jungle, where she hopes to reunite with the lover she left behind. And the second is the Amazon itself, which the late Mexican composer Daniel Catán evokes with dark, swirling arpeggios to suggest the deceptively languid river and airy, lilting ones like the fluttering of butterflies.

It's a lush score, both neo-Romantic and neo-Impressionist, and it makes for a ravishing listening experience in a new production by Arizona Opera, which opened Friday, Nov. 13, at Symphony Hall in Phoenix. And staging director Joshua Borths and his design team have done justice to the music with equally evocative visuals.

Set in the early 1900s, the subtle, not-in-a-hurry story takes place on a riverboat, envisioned by scenic designers Douglas Provost and Peter Nolle, that nearly fills the stage.

While Florencia, traveling incognito, laments her lost love, ambitious young writer Rosalba and restless sailor Arcadio fight their attraction to each other, and the unhappily married Paula and Álvaro squabble disdainfully over small things. It is a meditation on the permutations of love set against a backdrop of mysterious forces embodied by dancers pirouetting like whirls in the river.

While each of the two acts climaxes with a supernatural transformation, the narrative is built on the simple rhythms of ordinary life. There is a wonderful quartet in which the two couples, one young and one old, barely manage to suppress their emotions during a game of cards, and a soaring romantic duet with Rosalba and Arcadio explaining why they simply can't fall in love with each other.

Such quotidian rhythms are elevated by an unabashedly poetical libretto (by Marcela Fuentes-Berain, in Spanish), particularly effective in a philosophical argument between Arcadio and his Captain, in which the latter explains that, despite appearance, the boat does not simply travel back and forth along the river, because life only moves in one direction: forward.

Conductor Joseph Mechavich leads the orchestra in an energetic performance of Catán's mystical score. Four lead roles are double cast — including Riolobo, a crew member who is more than he appears — but the opening-night stars all give strong performances, including Sandra Lopez in full-on diva mode as Florencia and, especially, Susannah Biller and Andrew Bidlock as the reluctant young lovers.

In secondary roles, Adriana Zabala is a standout as Paula for her melancholy mezzo, along with her wonderful comic chemistry with Levi Hernandez as Álvaro. And as the Captain, bass-baritone Calvin Griffin once again shows off the powerful pipes he has been honing for more than two seasons in Arizona Opera's studio-artist program for up-and-coming singers.

Kudos are also due to costume designer Adriana Diaz, who illustrates the opera's theme of transformation with a color palette that subtly evolves from formal muted tones to vibrant tropical colors — from the realism to the magical.

From broadwayworld.com

Arizona Opera Set for Mystical Journey in FLORENCIA EN EL AMAZON, 11/13-22

[Opera News Desk](#) Sep. 24, 2015

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Arizona Opera's second production of its 2015/16 season, FLORENCIA EN EL AMAZONAS comes to Phoenix and Tucson for the first time. Inspired by the magical realism of celebrated author Gabriel García Márquez, FLORENCIA EN EL AMAZONAS is an exotic journey through the physical and mystical worlds of love, desire and the mighty Amazon River. Performances are in Phoenix November 13 and 14 at 7:30 pm and November 15 at 2:00 pm in Symphony Hall, and in Tucson November 21 at 7:30 and 22 at 2:00 pm in the Tucson Music Hall. Tickets start at \$25 and are on sale through www.azopera.org or by calling (602) 266-7464 (Phx) or (520)293-4336 (Tuc). In addition, Arizona Opera will be hosting a series of free community events with its Latin American Cultural Festival in anticipation of the performances of FLORENCIA EN EL AMAZONAS.

FLORENCIA EN EL AMAZONAS follows the story of Florencia Grimaldi who journeys along the famed Amazon River in the hopes of finding her long-lost lover, a butterfly hunter, who

disappeared in the jungle many years ago. Wracked by storms and a cholera outbreak, she and her fellow passengers are drawn deeper into the exotic rainforest, where fantasy and reality intertwine and their hopes and dreams are tested.

Written by the late Mexican composer Daniel Catán, FLORENCIA EN EL AMAZONAS was the first-ever Spanish-language opera commissioned in the U.S. and has become a smash sensation around the globe ever since its premiere in 1996. Daniel Catán's widow, Andrea Puente, will be traveling to Arizona to attend the performances.

This will be a brand new production of Florencia, with costumes designed by Adriana Diaz and scenic design by Doug Provost and Peter Nolle, evoking the mystical creatures and characters encountered along the journey.

FLORENCIA EN EL AMAZONAS' cast features Cuban-Ecuadorian soprano Sandra Lopez (November 13, 15 & 21) and Alexandra Loutsion (November 14 & 22) as "Florencia", Luis Alejandro Orozco and Joseph Lattanzi alternating the role as the magical and mysterious "Riolobo", and Susannah Biller (star of last season's The Daughter of the Regiment) and Sarah Tucker (last season's Pamina in The Magic Flute) sharing the role of the inquisitive "Rosalba". Conductor Joseph Mechavich will lead the orchestra with stage direction by Joshua Borths.

Where in the world is 'Carmen'? Arizona Opera diva aims to make famed role her own

Kerry Lengel , The Republic | azcentral.com

Mezzo-soprano Daniela Mack stars in new production set during Spanish Civil War



(Photo: Tim Trumble)

It's one of the biggest roles in opera, and certainly the biggest for a mezzo-soprano, so there's a lot pressure on any diva tapped to sing "Carmen." But Daniela Mack, who is making her Arizona Opera debut in the company's current production, is feeling a little easier about it than the first time she starred in the Bizet classic.

That was in 2014 at Santa Fe Opera, one of the best-known companies in the country. The director changed the setting from 19th-century Spain to the 1950s on the U.S.-Mexico border, and he asked Mack to model her character on Amy Winehouse, the infamously drug-addicted British pop star who had died three years earlier.

"It was different," Mack says. "It was sort of difficult to reconcile that."

Arizona Opera's latest "Carmen" opened in Tucson on Jan. 30 and moves to Symphony Hall in Phoenix Feb. 5-7, with Mack starring on Friday and Sunday and Beth Lytwynec singing the lead on Saturday. This production also has a non-standard setting, moving the action to the 1930s during the Spanish Civil War. But director Tara Faircloth, returning to Arizona Opera after staging "Eugene Onegin" a year ago, says it is nonetheless a traditional interpretation.



(Photo: Simon Pauly)

"I do not have a really strong political bent with (the setting)," Faircloth says. "Neither side was pure. There were a lot of atrocities committed on both sides, and neighbors were informing on each other. It was a rough time in Spain, and so that kind of tension in the air is important. It's another dangerous time in Spain that's a little closer to our time that we can relate to. These people look more like people that we would know, or our parents or grandparents."

The 1930s milieu is reflected in the costuming, including a "gorgeous Hemingway suit" for the celebrity matador, but it doesn't impose a new interpretive lens on the story, Faircloth says.

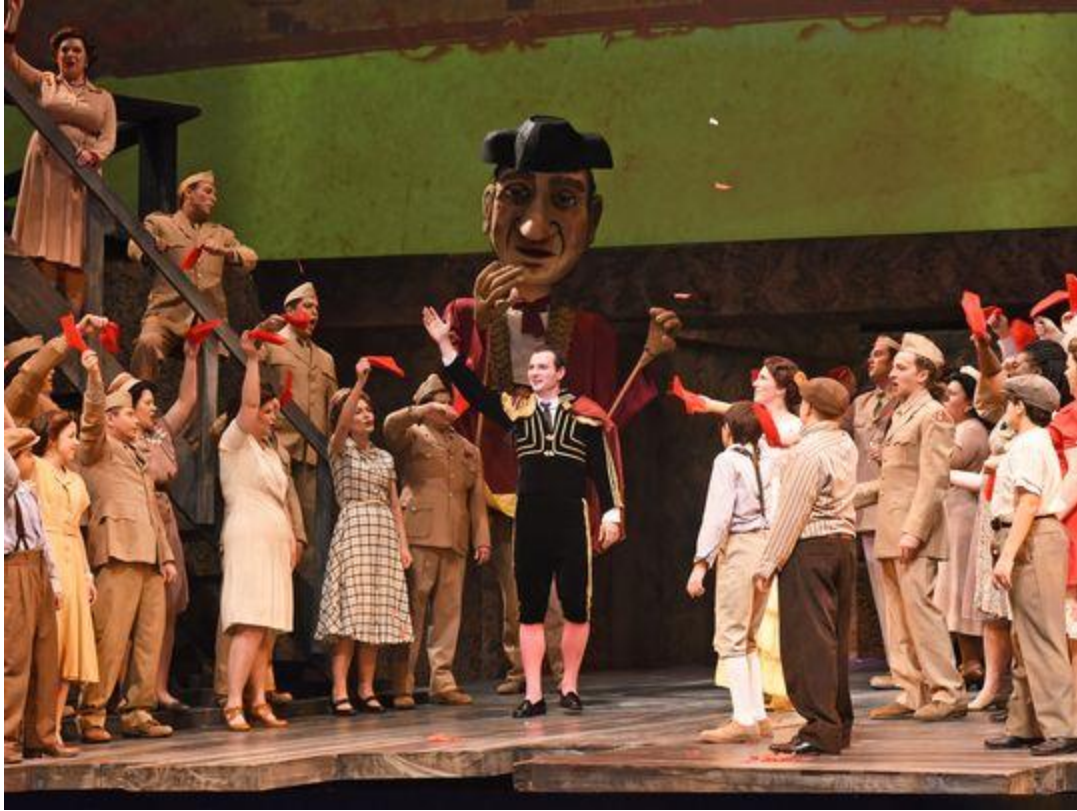
"What's really amazing is that textually there are no anachronisms," she says. "If there was ever a show that was about pure emotion and human relationships, this is it. There are soldiers in the original story, there are soldiers today. There are dangerous Gypsies smuggling contraband through the woods, that still happens today. Racism, alive and well. Messed-up people trying to make relationships with one another, still very part of the scene. Even bullfighting still goes on today."

"If there was ever a show that was about pure emotion and human relationships, this is it."

Director, Tara Faircloth

For Mack, this "Carmen" might be more in her comfort zone, but that doesn't mean the pressure of taking on the role is entirely gone.

"This is a piece that people know peripherally, even if they don't know what the tunes are from," she says. "And people who do know opera have some expectation of who she is, and I think there's maybe a danger in playing her a certain way and portraying this femme fatale kind of character."



(Photo: Tim Trumble)

"I tend to want to fight against that and not make her into something that I've seen before, to make it organic and different. She's young, and she uses her sexuality to get what she wants, but it's not her only tool. I think she's very multifaceted, and I like to explore that."

"I think Carmen is one of the most difficult roles," Faircloth says, "because she has this reputation for being the sexiest woman in the world, and that is different for every human being watching. I happen to think both of our ladies are very sexy, so that works out well, but I've really tried to push an agenda that rather than exuding sexiness. She is attractive and there's something in her that draws people to her, and it doesn't necessarily have to do with sex, although she happens to be really good-looking as well. In this the star and her director are simpatico."

"But I think that's the real challenge, and then also trying to be every other Carmen. Every amazing singer in the world has played Carmen. It's a lot of weight to bear, and really you have to throw that out the window."