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## LA BOHÈME: A DESIGN

by

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April, 1972

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Date \_\_APRIL\_ 28.1972

#### ABSTRACT

This thesis is a design for Puccini's opera, <u>La Boheme</u>, which I have set in the 1890's instead of the 1830's in which Puccini originally set it. The main reason for this period change is based on the fact that the music, the spirit, and the characters themselves, seem to fit naturally and appropriately into the glitter, the charm, and the artistic mood of the "gay nineties".

I have set the opera on the Metropolitan Opera House stage, and have included photographs of the half-inch scale model constructed for this purpose. The actual settings are simple, suggesting only the basic architectural necessities, in order to allow the background - a system of projection screens and mirrors, to predominate and filter through the action constantly.

In designing the costumes, I have adhered closely to the silhouette of the 1890's, exaggerating, simplifying, or emphasizing particular elements in order to heighten their dramatic effect. I have assigned specific, restricted colour schemes to the chracters which I considered appropriate and in character.

Although I did not rely entirely on artistic works, the majority of the research into the period is centred around the paintings of Toulouse-Lautrec, Degas, and Utrillo, as well as the lithographs and posters of Lautrec, Cheret, and other turn-of-the-century artists.

The thesis also includes technical drawings and a lighting layout, section, and instrument schedule. Generally speaking, charm, simplicity, and a romantic mood, are the qualities for which I strove in the design of the opera.

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## LA BOHÈME IN 1895

In reviewing a performance of <u>La Bohème</u> in 1901, a New York Times critic, W. J. Henderson, admitted that "the audi ence rather seemed to enjoy the Puccini opera." He then commented on the unfortunate frequency of consumption among operatic heroines, and ended his article with a thoughtful judgment: "Nevertheless, we cannot believe that there is permanent success for an opera constructed as this one is." Another critic dutifully upheld Victorian propriety in the statement that "Mürger's <u>La Vie de Bohème</u> is hardly suitable for the book of an opera." Others sighed for a return to grand opera as exemplified by <u>Aida</u>. Generally speaking, at the time of its various premieres, <u>La Bohème</u> aroused no critical acclaim, and yet, today, "it is just about tied with <u>Aida</u> as the opera most often given by the Metropolitan." 1.

Although Puccini set the opera in the 1830's, there are a number of reasons why it seems to fit very naturally into the 1890's - the most obvious being that Puccini completed it in 1896 and reflected his own time in both the music and the dramatic structure of the work.

If one trait can be chosen as most characteristic of La Bohème, it is apparent spontaneity. There are melodies in profusion, flowing out of one another so naturally that the listener rarely realizes when he is hearing a new one for the first time. Arias and duets, the so-called set pieces are rather subtly "set";

<sup>1.</sup> Giacomo Puccini, <u>La Bohème</u>, trans. by E. H. Bleiler, p. 22.

often they grew imperceptibly out of Puccini's personal kind of recitative, a very melodious interchange between singer and orchestra. 2.

Since the dramatic material consists of a number of short stories connected by their setting and characters, the result has a casual, even seemingly disorganized, continuity. "Variety is one of Boheme's great charms and the apparent disorganization frees

Boheme from the rigorous structural composition of well-made plays."

Therefore, the music and the story, unlike operas composed in the 1830's (Rossini's, for example) are much less structured, more novel in conception and style, although Puccini does reveal a high degree of organization which he is skillful enough not to allow to intrude on the dramatic effect. For example, the repetition of themes, characteristic motifs associated with ideas or specific characters, is one of the more obvious ways in which Puccini attempted to tighten the structure.

"The lavish fund of melody is actually under firm control; art conceals itself - La Bohème still seems spontaneous."

La Bohème still seems spontaneous."

The characters in <u>La Bohème</u> were contemporary figures, not standard operatic cut-outs, and the whole work "stressed pathos and intimacy rather than drama and grandeur." The depiction of the typical life of "the artist", his adventures, his fervent concern with love, its artistic expression, and of course, his basic struggle for survival, seemed to reach a peak of romantic intensity at the end of the

<sup>2.</sup> Katherine Griffith, "A Method to the Madcaps", in Opera News, Vol. 22, No. 15, February 10, 1958, p. 4.

<sup>3. &</sup>lt;u>ibid.</u>, p. 4.

<sup>4.</sup> ibid., p. 6.

<sup>5.</sup> John Freeman, "Farewell, Sweet Awakening", in Opera News, Vol. 22, No. 15, February, 1958, p. 11.

nineteenth century; and Puccini was no doubt greatly influenced by life around him. However, it seems that an era always becomes more romantic in retrospect. As Puccini regarded the Bohemian life on the Rive Gauche in the 1830's with poetic and frank sentimentality, surely we regard life on the slopes of Montmartre in the '90's with the same romantic nostalgia.

After the debacle of the Franco-Prussian war of 1870-71, in which the national pride of France was shattered, there came a time for picking up the pieces, arranging them differently, and creating a new social structure. Paris wanted to live; the penitent mood and passed. 6.

For glitter and charm this new age was unsurpassed and reached a peak of expression in the overwhelming World Exhibition of 1900 and the erection of the Eiffel Tower. The names associated with this period; Zola, Pasteur, Marie and Pierre Curie, Becquerel, Debussy, promised exciting progress in every facet of life. It was this period which produced an abundance of "superb restaurants, with all the masterpieces of the culinary art and every kind of wine, luxury hotels, big stores, bridges, and of course, the Grand Opera was aglow every night with electric chandeliers."

As Europe's marketplace for cultural ideas, Paris, a city of great contrasts, attracted artists and foreigners from all over the world. It was a golden age for art collectors since masterpieces could be bought for next to nothing.

When Ambroise Vollard, the great art dealer and apologist of modern art, put a price of 200 francs on a remarkable life-drawing by Renoir, he was

<sup>6.</sup> Hermann Schardt, ed., Paris 1900, p.7.

<sup>7.</sup> ibid., p.8-9.

scorned with laughter, and no one even came to see the picture.

Those who came to see the paintings of Van Gogh, Cezanne, Monet, and Gauguin, priced at 40 - 100 francs, "left vastly amused or struck dumb with astonishment." 8.

As Paris grew, moving into her second million, and property speculators pushed into the Latin Quarter, its inhabitants were compelled to move out.

The young art pioneers, like the people as a whole, were full of the joy of life and the excitement to be derived from creative work had its living roots in the friendship and trust of a like-minded community.

Therefore, painters, poets, and musicians, with their wives, children, and mistresses made their way across the city and settled on the slopes of Montmartre where cheap lodgings could be had, giving birth to "a conglomeration of studios that seemed to have been thrown together from a scrap heap."

It was the local bistros and cafes which were the regular meeting places of the Bohemians and one in particular, "Le Chat Noir" is linked with many personalities of that period who have remained (or since become) famous - Paul Verlaine, Claude Debussy and, of course, "the little monster," Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec were the first habitues, and soon dozens of the great names could be seen there night after night.

It was here that Toulouse-Lautrec struck up a friendship with Aristide Bruant who appeared nightly... in a black velvet jacket and wide brimmed hat and sang the coarse songs that

<sup>8.</sup> ibid., p. 10.

<sup>9.</sup> ibid., p. 11.

made him the leading folk singer in Paris. 10.

The new spirit was reflected in every facet of living - art was no longer to be regarded as a luxury and nothing seemed so simple or so humble that it could not be ennobled by the artist. Puccini's <u>La Bohème</u> is a prime example of this proclivity towards honouring and romanticizing the hand to mouth existence of the artistic community.

Colour once again became an essential feature of peoples' lives and environment... The melancoly style of interior decoration with its gilt, and its dust-trap curtains which had been fashionable until 1890, disappeared and was replaced by one that featured brightly coloured materials and light woods.

The last years of the century found their most significant expression in the French poster, that dynamic creation of the "fin de siecle" to which all artists - with few exceptions - turned their hand.

The poster which was designed for the street, for everyday life and not for the art museum heralded the beginning of the art of advertising. The human figure was always predominant, the colours vibrant and often in very unusual combinations. In Cheret's posters, the ladies of the demimonde (whom literature had made acceptable) and dancers and singers "pose with gay abandon in a light which gives the illusion of footlights." 12.

Paris was delighted to see this image of herself in an artist's mirror... Lautrec did not see the life of the demi-monde through rose coloured spectacles. Behind the smile on the rouged faces of his dancing girls, one can detect the misery of a life of drudgery.

In Lautrec's poster "Reine de Joie", the three figures, the fat roue, the coquette and the tired dandy are so portrayed as to evoke hundreds of similar characters in the Paris of the '90's. The fact that, behind this

<sup>10.</sup> ibid., p.13.

<sup>11.</sup> ibid., p. 9.

<sup>12.</sup> ibid., p. 15.

facade of gay turmoil, there was growing social tension was of little concern to the inhabitants of the city. Lautrec, however, very much a man of his time could "with unfailing instinct, detect its basic ambiguities," 13. and painted its people with stark, often cruel, yet very human realism.

In the glitter and excitement of this world belong the characters of La Boheme whose lives reflect the strong contrasts which permeated Parisian life in the "gay nineties". Extreme poverty with its tragic consequences, in conjunction with the "joie de vivre" expressed through an undaunted pursuit of sublime and creative thought and activity shaped the lives of the Bohemians.

<sup>13.</sup> ibid., p. 19.

#### THE DESIGN OF THE SETTINGS, COSTUMES

## The Settings

In designing the settings for <u>La Boheme</u>, the basic approach taken was to simplify the actual structure of the sets, and merely to suggest their architecture in order that the background which constantly predominates, would filter through the action just as the Parisian environment does through the lives of Puccini's characters. This attempt to expose the setting to its surroundings I considered to be a crucial concept in staging the opera.

The background consists of six large rear projection screens connected by six mirrors of the same height angled to reflect the images projected on the screen. The purpose of these is not to replace painted backdrops, but to produce an interesting and entirely different quality. Because of the angle of its placement, a single mirror may reflect either the image of a single screen or partial images of several screens superimposed on one another thus giving a feeling of increased depth. The slides used to project the images on the screens are hand painted in a style which emphasizes and, to a degree, forces the perspective of the buildings and streets. This effect is heightened by the reflection of the mirrors, producing an interesting, apparently three-dimensional background for the action.

Since the screens are so large (approximately thirty-six feet by sixteen feet) and in order that the background might not totally over-whelm the action, the slides are painted very simply: details are eliminated; the colours are muted and the lines softened; and the basic motifs are repeated with only minor variations. Although the audience would at all times be aware of the important role played by the environment, the screens and mirrors would never intrude on the intimacy of certain scenes and would therefore be dimmed when necessary.

In researching, turn-of-the-century painting, I was impressed by the strength and simplicity of Maurice Utrillo's paintings of Paris streets. He distilled and captured the essence of the city, with its "white-washed houses bathed in the marvellous light of Paris." Although, in painting the projection slides, I did not attempt to copy slavishly his style, I incorporated those qualities of his painting which seemed most characteristic of Parisian architecture. For example, the almost identical solid buildings, cramped together along a narrow street, with their mansard roofs, numerous chimneys and dark slits as windows, reflect the appearance of Paris in the 1890's.

## Technical Explanations

For the purposes of this project <u>La Bohème</u> has been set on the stage of the Metropolitan Opera Housewhose excellent facilities provide a designer with practically limitless freedom. The proscenium arch of the

<sup>14.</sup> Albert Skira, Paris in Our Time, p. 91.

Metropolitan Opera House is a fifty-four-by-fifty-four foot opening, which I have masked down to create a fifty-four-by-thirty-eight-foot opening. The main stage itself is eighty feet deep and one hundred feet wide, flanked by two side stages adding another sixty feet of space on each side of the main stage. These side stages contain wagons (sixty-feet-by-forty-feet) on which the alternate sets would be completely assembled and rolled on when necessary while the main stage wagon with its set would be rolled back into the rear stage area (sixty-feet-by-sixty-feet) thus facilitating and speeding up scene changes.

Since the fly apparatus on the double-grid system is regulated by one-hundred-and-sixteen individual motors and contains one-hundred-and-three pipes, each bearing a maximum load of 1000 pounds, flying the window and chandelier is a simple operation. <sup>15</sup>.

The projection system is composed of six screens (thirty-six-feet-by-fifteen - sixteen-feet) joined by six mirrors (thirty-six-feet-by-eight - ten-feet). (See technical drawing no. 2.) The images, painted on seven-inch-by-seven-inch glass slides, are rear projected by twelve 5000 kilowatt projectors, with two projectors assigned to each screen. When placed with the slide parallel to the screen at a distance of twenty feet, each slide will project an image approximately eighteen-feet-by-eighteen-feet, thus requiring one projector to cover the top half and one to cover the lower half of each screen.

<sup>15.</sup> Herman E. Krawitz, An Introduction to the Metropolitan Opera House, p. 40.

## The Costumes

In designing the costumes, I have adhered closely to the cut and silhouette of 1895-96, accentuating and exaggerating the form in order to emphasize "the aerial thrust which is portrayed by the head and bosom. "16. The impression conveyed should be one of simplicity as far as the Bohemians are concerned, contrasted sharply with dramatic Musetta and some of the city people involved in Act II. In the costumes for which it is appropriate, a number of the distinctive characteristics of Lautrec's style of painting have been incoprorated, but have been softened in order to become more romantic. The overall colour scheme emphasizes dark colours: greys, greens, some blues, and black for the men, accentuated by bright accessories while the women are in paler shades: lavender, beige, ecru, and blues, highlighted with bright and contrasting colours. In researching the colours, I relied mostly on the posters of artists like Cheret and Lautrec for the bright combinations (oranges, yellows, purples and reds, usually set off against black) and on the paintings of Degas, Bonnard and Lautrec's early work for the darker, muted combinations.

Musetta, as an entertainer and a coquette is most characteristic of Lautrec and her "door knocker" hair styles, her make-up, and emphatic black accessories should reflect the theatrical, somewhat superficial quality of Lautrec's women, but even she cannot become too harsh, and should always express freshness and joy through her appearance. Her colours: black, white and various shades of purple, reflect the

<sup>16.</sup> Parker Tyler, Degas/Lautrec, p. 128.

strong contrast so characteristic of Lautrec, as well as her desire to create an effect both as an entertainer and as a woman. Her final costume is more somber but still characteristic, in keeping with the mood of the final Act of the opera.

Although Mimi's costumes contain a lot of blue and brown, these colours are bright and strong hues, reflecting the independence and spirit of the little seamstress. Her final costume, made from a very pale, (almost white) shade of dove grey velvet heightens not only her death-like appearance, but indicates also that she has returned to Rodolfo from a wealthier world.

Rodolfo is dressed in greens and rusts, with black and orange highlights. The soft scarf tied in a large floppy bow and his ragged jacket and cap give him a highly romantic, boyish, and very casual appearance and underline his meager livelihood.

Marcello, though also an impoverished artist, in contrast to Rodolfo, is dressed very dramatically, and his appearance is more worldly, thus establishing a definite relationship to Musetta. In his striking cape and black wide-brimmed hat with a deep red scarf (recalling Lautrec's "Aristide Bruant"), Marcello appears a more typical "artist".

The costume of Shaunard, the musician, reflects an attempt to look grand that is thwarted by his poverty which has restricted his ward-robe to a single, frayed, ill-fitting and ancient black morning coat. He has tried to spruce it up with a colourful scarf and a formal white shirt, neither of which are in any better condition than the coat.

Colline, on the other hand, is quite unconcerned about his appearance. Since the main object of his overcoat is to keep out the

cold and to provide enough pockets for all of his numerous books, the heavy, tweedy olive green coat fulfills its purpose. Though not sloppy in appearance, Colline is not dressed with any regard for fashion, and the coat is at least ten years old.

Benoit, the landlord is seedy and, since he fancies himself to be a "ladies' man", he is dressed in a fashionable but sloppy pair of navy blue and red striped trousers and a flashy gold patterned vest which are totally inappropriate for his age and figure and only serve to emphasize the ridiculousness of this greedy little man.

Alcindoro is like Lautrec's "Englishman": a paragon of stiff and perfect fashion, whose precision and preposterous formality are reflected in his evening dress, complete with walking stick, silk top hat, and boutonnier.

In Set II the chorus is composed of people from all social classes: gaudily dressed whores; romantic but improverished students; rebellious artists and thinkers; and fashionable upper class ladies and gentlemen.

The colours used for the men are very dark, with special emphasis on black, while the women are dressed in brighter shades, with the whores in gaudy yellow, orange, and magenta contrasted with black. The scene reflects the gaiety and celebration of Paris at Christmas and the crowd provides a colourful but not distracting background for the action in the cafe.

In Act III the chorus, in keeping with the cold and more somber mood of the scene, is dressed in very dark shades with special emphasis on the muted plum, taupe and blue shades also used in the setting. Since it is the lower class people who must set off for work in the city before dawn, poverty is reflected in their humble, makeshift costumes.

### Summation

In making the decision to choose <u>La Bohème</u> as a thesis project I was attracted not only by the beauty of Puccini's masterpiece, but also by its apparent simplicity. Though in reality, a very intricate piece of musical craftsmanship juxtaposed with a charming, entirely romantic, and even naive story, the design of the opera seems to demand a similarly apparently simple approach. It is the charm and the romance that should be its outstanding characteristics. Paris in the 1890's with her gay facade disguising any sadness, and her desire for expression giving birth to a wealth of exciting artists provided me with a most appropriate setting for the design approach.

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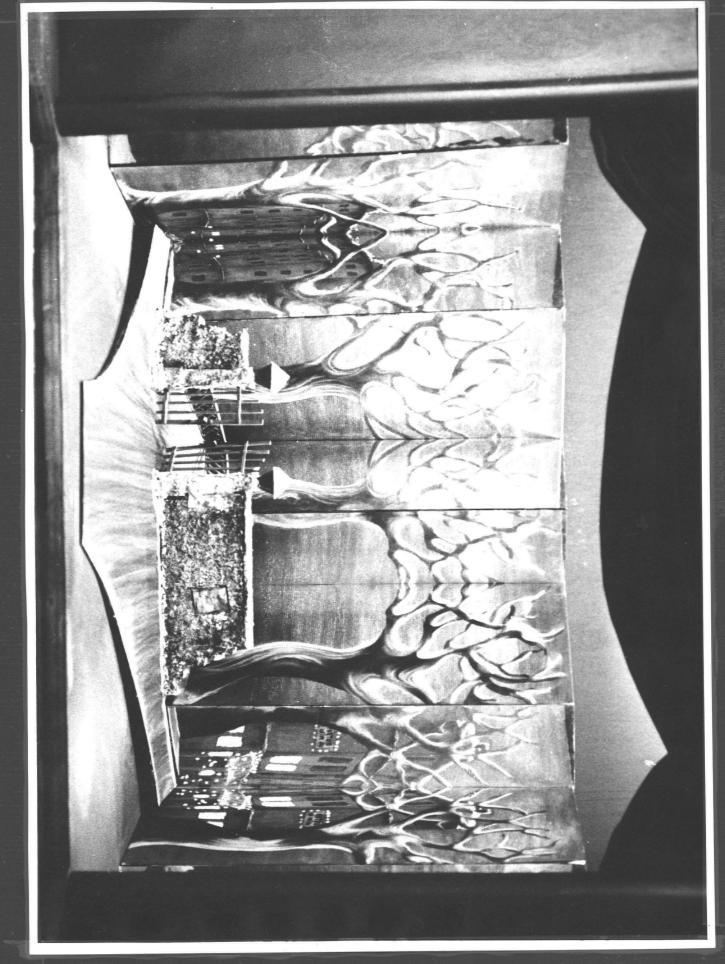
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	11.	11		Bridge #2	Doors	2	59	59		
	12.		. If		ii .	2	59	59		
•	5	1.000	Surrocno1	Prides #1	Table wicht	- 2	60	60		
	J.	7000	o rresnel	pringe #1	Table right	<b>.</b>		00		
						•				
		*	1							

			,				,	
			4.		: •	•		• .
	• • •		•				-	
NÒ.	WATTS	INSTRUMENT	POSITION	FOCUS	GEL	CIR.	DIM.	NOTES
<b>6.</b>	1000	8"Fresnel	Bridge #1	Table right	2	60	60	
7.	**	H	11	" left	2	61	61	
8.	69	, #	11	er er	2	61	61	
	٠.		e de la companya de				• •	
		-	Overhead und awning	ler Exterior window	5,6, 2		62	•
2.	6" by	31 "		11		62	62	
3.	6"by	6. "	er .	**	**	62	<b>62</b> .	
4.	6" by	31 "	11	"	11	62	62	
5.	8" by	81 "	Floor of was	gon Footlight:	s 1,8 21.		63	
6.	**	11	**	11	<b>2</b>	63	63	
7.	"	et .	**	11	11	64	64	
. 8.	**	88	N	er e	11	64	64	
Act	t III				. ,	•		
1.	1000	8"Leico	Bridge #2	Tree shadow	20	65	65 <sup>-</sup>	
2.	11	18	#	11	**	65	65	Gobo to
3.	11	ÎII	11	••	. #	65	65	match
4.	11	18	f f	ff .	"	65	65	tree
5.		<b>#</b>	**		**	65	65	shape
6.	••	11 -	Bridge #4	11	11	66	66	
7.	78	**		Ħ	er .	66	66	
8.	#	<b>11</b>	11	11	11	66	66	
9.		ef	11	ų	##	66	66	
10	. "	***		17	11	66	66	
11	• "	•••	Pipe #5	at '	**	67	67	
12	. "	"	***	H ·	••	67	67	
				,				

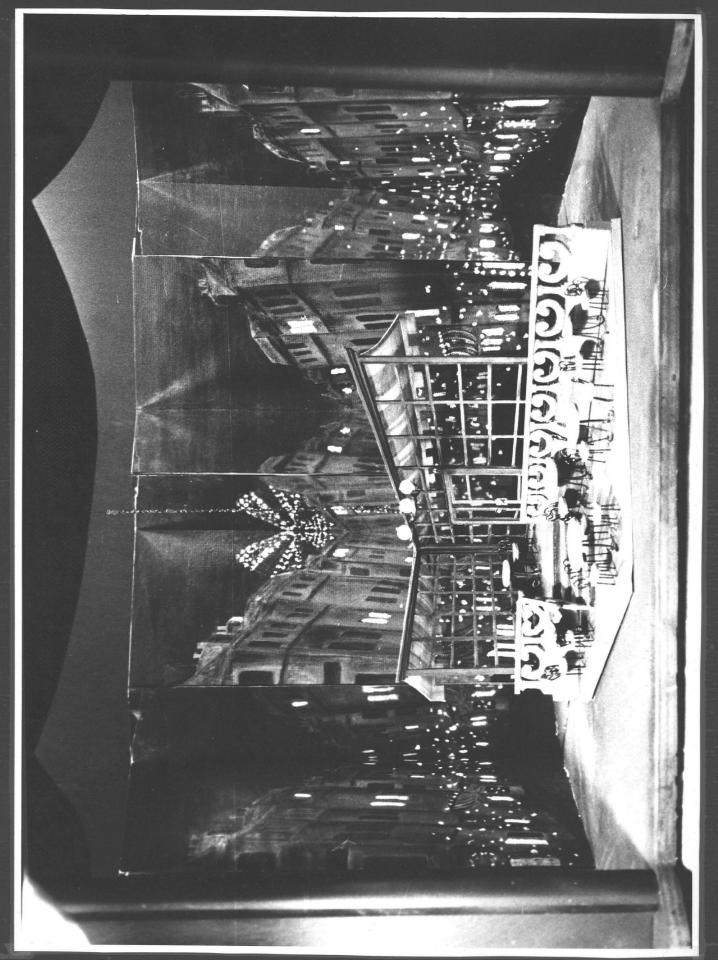
NO.	WATTS	INSTRUMENT	POSITION	FOCUS	GEL	CIR.	DIM.	NOTES
13.	1000	8"Leico	Pipe #5	Tree shadow	20	67	67	••
14.	11	. #1	**	. (0)	* ***	67	67	
15.	"	**	"	11	H - 1	67	67	
16.	H .	**	Pipe #6	11	#	68	68	
17.		**	tt .	it	**	68	68	•
18.	**	tt	**		**	68	68	
19.	**	•	ee	"	**	68	68	
20.	**	<b>66</b>	Ħ	Ħ	"	68	68	
1.	1000	8"Leico	Pipe #6	Gate(back)	) 17	69	69	
2.	**	#		#	17	69	69	
3.	1000	8"Fresnel	Bridge#3	Stage righ	nt 17	<b>7</b> 0	70	
4.	11	**	tt .	#	17	70	70	•
5.	11.	<b>11</b>	**	Gate	17	71	71	
6.	11	11	11	99	17	71	71	
7.	er .	11	11	Stage left	. 17	72	72	•
8.	. "		tr .	11	17	72	72	
9.	Spec	ial	Gate lamps		4	73	73	
10.	, n		<b>()</b>		4	73	73	•
1.	8"by 8	8' strip Pl	laster line	Footlights	<b>~</b> 1	74	74	· ·
2.	n,		11		21	74	74	•
3.	11		Ħ	19	**	75	75	
4.	<b>11</b>		•	#	••	75	75	.•
1.	Follow	w spots	F.O.H.		Lear	13	13	

NO.WATTS INSTRUMENT	POSITION	FOCUS	GEL	CIR.	DIM.	NOTES
2. Follow spots	F.O.H.		clear 2,17		14	
3. "	Bridge #1.			15	15	
4.	n ·		**	16	16	
5. "	Bridge #2	•	н	17	17	
6. "	11	•		18	18	
1. 5000 Projector	Dist.from scr 20'	reen		1	1	
2. "	11			2	2	
3. " "	**			3	3	
4. 11	H			4	4	
5. " "	i.			5	5	
6. "	**	•		6	6	
7. " "	11	•		7	7.	
8. "	88	£		8	8	
9. " "	er ,		•	9	9	
10. " "	11			10	10	
11. " "	"			11	11	•
12. " "	<b>;;</b>			12	12	
TOTALS Instruments used:	Number:	•				
8"Leico (1000W) 8"Fresnel(1000W) 12"Beam Projector Specials 8"by8' Strips 6"by6" Strips 6"by6" Strips	82 22 7 5 10 2 2 6					
Follow spots Projectors TOTAL	6 12 148					











LA BOHEME

MARCELLO ACTI

LA BOHEME

RODOLFO, ACT I

LA BOHEME

SHAUNARD

COMME

LABOHEME

MIMI ACTI



LA POHEME

BENOTT





LA BOHEME

ALCINIDORO

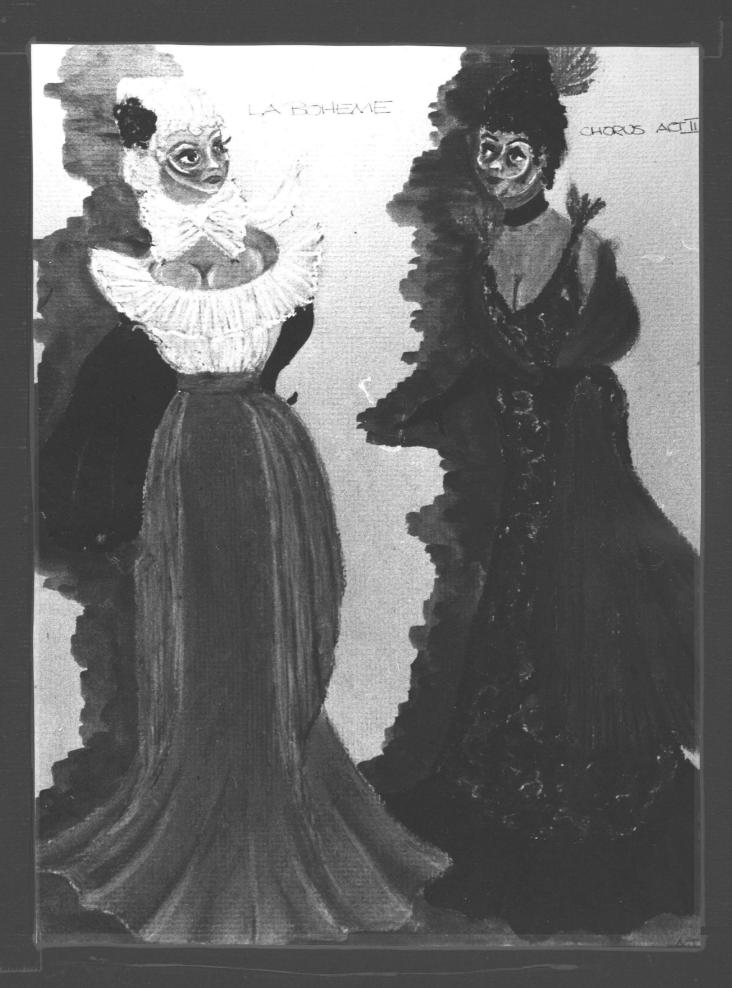
AT 172

LABOHEME





RODOLFO ACTITUE LA BUHEME

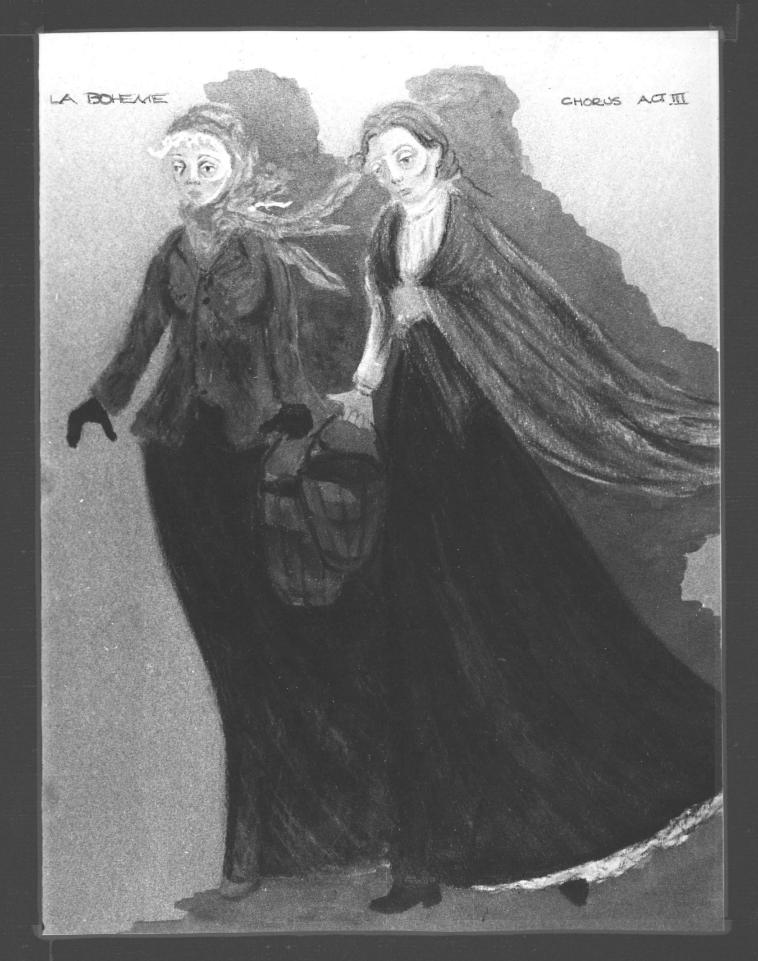


CHORUS ACTIL

PARPIGNOL BOHEME

MUSETIA ACTIL LA BOHEME





LA BOHEME

MIMI ACT IV





