ARTS

"If I cease searching, then, woe is me, I am lost. That is how I look at it - keep going, keep going come what may."
VINCENT VAN GOGH

REVIEW

In intimate Valentine's Day 'La Bohème,' romance's joys and sorrows

BY ANNA ZOLTOWSKI
STAFF CRITIC

On Saturday night, Yale Opera's production of Giacomo Puccini's "La Bohème" wooed the audience in the Shubert Theatre with a timeless story of love and sorrow in a production involving Yale School of Music students, guests from the Metropolitan Opera and members of the New Haven community.

"La Bohème" — directed by J. David Jackson, a staff conductor at the Metropolitan Opera — was a treat for the opera fanatic and layman alike. The opera stands as an enduring tragedy of true love, sickness, companionship and death, set in alluring 19th-century Paris — a romantic choice for Valentine's Day weekend, certainly, but nevertheless gloomy. In an unusual directional choice, the casts differed entirely between the Saturday evening and Sunday matinee showings.

As the jaunty overture began, the curtain rose on a spartan scene: The frame and rafters of a house stood center stage in front of a bare brick wall. It was austere and, owing to the anachronistic abstract painting on an easel in the corner, instantly evocative of the lifestyle of a starving artist. In the first scene, Rodolfo, a poet played by Dominic Salvati MUS '27, burns his manuscript for warmth, and the room is saturated in glorious orange firelight. "La Bohème" hinges on juxtapositions: light and dark, hot and cold, destitution and excess, love and death.

Act 1 continued with precise and amusing physical comedy as Rodolfo's three high-spirited companions entered the apartment. The clear highlight was a fantastically choreographed half-dance, half-combat pillowfight. The audience laughed along with the four young men onstage. Chris Leimbruger MUS '27 delighted as the bothersome landlord, Benoit, with a dopey gait.

Later, three of the artists left to make merry at nearby Café Momus, leaving Rodolfo alone in his quarters. His neighbor Mimi knocks on his door seeking a light for her candle. She is ill and immediately faints in Rodolfo's arms. Maia Aramburu MUS '26 delivered a classic Mimi — darling yet doomed. Upon entering the barren room, Rodolfo remarked that Mimi looked pale. Only here did Aramburu begin to act like an ailing damsel in distress. Her character work seemed inconsistent at certain moments, but she snapped back into her illness upon prompting by other characters' comments on her frailty. Her voice never faltered and held strong through even the lower notes of her register.

The exchange of arias to close Act 1 displayed the highest caliber of artistry and vocal technique from both Aramburu and Salvati. In "Che Gelida Manina," Salvati's high B's and C's gushed through the theater with confidence, passion and ease. He had complete command over his register, and over the audience's hearts. We rejoiced when he rejoiced. We cried when he cried.

In larger productions of "La Bohème," an intermission between acts 1 and 2 allows for a magnificent scene change from a drafty, gray apartment to a lively Parisian city square. On Saturday night, the curtain stayed up and the transition was woven into the continuous action of the performance under the brilliant oversight of stage director Christopher Mattaliano. The entire chorus, 30 singers strong, rushed onstage, excitedly singing about the spritely energy of a lively Parisian evening. The facade of the Café Momus rolled into place and the ensemble split off to go about their business flirting, chatting and waiting tables.

The ensemble featured a children's chorus composed of members from Trinity on the Green in New Haven and St. Paul's Episcopal Church in Fairfield. When the toyseller, played by a suitably nimble Scott La Marca MUS '26, danced onstage shouting about his wares, the children ran up to him and jumped after his toy horses and tambourines. A military parade marched through the square, complete with brass, drums and flutes. Through this masterful direction of the chorus, Act 2 offered a deliciously ideal picture of a Parisian night. It was a total delight to the eye and ear.

Laura Miah MUS '26 emerged as an unquestionable standout as Musetta. During Act 2, Musetta stages a tantrum at the Café Momus to simultaneously ditch her geriatric date and catch the eye of Marcello, her former lover and Rodolfo's roommate. She is conniving yet genuine, both a wannabe prima donna and a sweet young Parisian. Miah walked this line with mature finesse to enchant the audience. Her supple technique excelled among the cast. The final sustained note of her Act 2 aria, "Quando m'en vo," a scalding high B, diminuendoed to a delicate pianissimo before swelling into a lush vibrato. As Marcello, Chancelor Barbaree MUS '27 thundered a robust baritone. Barbaree and Miah could have made a perfectly delectable and impassioned Rodolfo and Mimi.

As the curtain rose for Act 3 after intermission, the audience collectively gasped in wonder at the ethereal winter landscape onstage. The backdrop was a ghostly shade of steel blue. An imposing iron fence traversed the stage. A lone, leafless tree stood on stage left. Snowflakes floated down from the ceiling. Members of the ensemble sang an otherworldly melody from offstage. The scene was heavenly yet uncanny. From this bleak midwinter scene alone, it was clear that Mimi's end would be utterly hopeless.

After the lighthearted camaraderie and new romances of acts 1 and 2, the final Act 4 is a challenge for even a veteran Mimi or Rodolfo — both characters deliver gut-wrenching solos while seated or reclined. Singing one's strongest from a constricted position is a true test of a performer's abilities, and both Salvati and Aramburu did not let their staging impinge on their tender yet tortured grief at Mimi's impending demise. In the final scene, Rodolfo huddled at the foot of Mimi's bed, where his lover lay limp. Musetta knelt in prayer and the other three artists formed a tableau of utter agony. The lighting faded to icy gray and the curtain lowered, leaving us audience members on a melancholy note to continue our Valentine's Day festivities.

The production's greatest strength was its ability to communicate emotion. The audience had no choice but to feel along with the characters. The stage and lighting design, the precise musical and stage direction and the small size of the venue created an experience that was world-class yet had a hometown feel. It was easy to discern that every person involved — from a distinguished conductor to rising-star sopranos to local choir girls — put their whole heart into this performance.

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ALEX HONG / STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER
Yale Opera staged Puccini's renowned "La Bohème" at the Shubert Theatre. Both top-notch artistry and a hometown feel were evident at Saturday performance.

REVIEW

'College Play' captures absurdity and sincerity at Yale College

BY CAMERON NYE
STAFF CRITIC

To say someone is a "Yale student" is to summon a myth. It conjures mahogany seminar tables, secret societies and a conveyor belt to power. A Yale student is imagined as a tweed-clad apparition from the upper echelon of society, their pretentious reputation preceding them, their success as certain as their trust fund. They are supposed to have it all figured out. Yet beneath the suit jackets and suffocating cologne is something less composed: a student carrying the weight of the world on their shoulders.

"College Play," a creative writing senior thesis and original work of the director and lead Brennan Columbia-Walsh '26, animates these archetypes through the lens of his own life. Semi-autobiographical in form, it centers around his days living on Edgewood Avenue with his closest friends — played, fittingly, by the housemates themselves.

The play opens with Columbia-Walsh's astute narration, immediately shattering the fourth wall and establishing its self-aware, meta sensibility. He sketches the world in quick strokes: crooked floorboards, a bridge table, a gigantic stuffed gorilla, a poster of Kate Moss. One by one, his housemates emerge in plaid robes, exuding boyish bravado as they trot across the stage.

The residents of 17 Edgewood Ave. are your typical Yale students — literally. Leo Greenberg '26 leans into the overachieving polymath. George Baily '26 plays the suave, self-serious English gentleman. Oleg Laskov '26 relishes the role of the affable goof. Rounding out the household are the fictional Marty Bukowiee, portrayed by Eason Rytter '27, and the honorary housemate — Columbia-Walsh's girlfriend — Maisie Bilston '26.

Their story stretches from junior year through commencement and into a hazy ten-years-later epilogue. We see vignettes of Yale "traditions" — Conservative Party debates erupting with spitty hissing and shady backdoor deals to secure leadership positions, eccentric professors who dazzle with their brilliance but baffle with their nonsense, even the tragedy of gorgeous women settling for merely available men.

Columbia-Walsh knows exactly which corners of Yale College to skewer. Drawing shamelessly from his own experience, he pushes "write what you know" to theatrical extremes, recasting professors and classmates as razor-edged caricatures, mining his memory for texture. The result is uncanny, unconventional and wildly imaginative — veering from narrated fraternal antics to impromptu talk shows featuring sensational guests like the illustrious Dean of Yale College and the ever-infamous president of the fraternity LEO. These segments, commonly in Act One, are where the production locks into place, propelled by Columbia-Walsh's deadpan delivery and a script sharp enough to feel both meticulously engineered and gleefully unhinged.

Columbia-Walsh's performance as himself is hilarious and surprisingly moving. He juggles his roles well: part omnipotent narrator, part exasperated playwright, part faithful friend. One moment he's corralling an overzealous chorus of Whiffenpoofs, the next he's flashing a conspiratorial smirk that punctures the scene's self-importance. He lets the audience catch up to the joke rather than fishing for laughs. Later in the show, his sentimentality surfaces in raw flashes, particularly in moments grappling with his religious convictions and quiet reflections in mourning.

Casting your friends is a controversial practice. Casting them to play themselves is practically unheard of. Yet, Columbia-Walsh takes that chance. To their credit, the central cohort rises to the occasion with commendable — if occasionally tentative — performances, made all the more impressive by the fact that some are stepping onto a Yale stage for the first time. Their chemistry carries the early scenes. Morning skirmishes over the shower unfold with lived-in ease and ritualistic card games bristle with just enough competitive bite to feel authentic, even when the acting itself still searches for firmer footing.

Rytter emerges as the undeniable standout. His Marty, the house's affectionate punching bag, radiates such earnest sweetness as the group's scapegoat. Laskov is a riot in his own right, with soaring Barbra Streisand impressions and an easy-going demeanor that Emma Fusco '26 marvels as the Dean, wielding a blindingly toothy grin and perfectly calibrated word-salad platitudes to capture the toxic positivity and gentle absurdity of collegiate administration. Talia Namdar-Cohen '27 relishes the genuine eccentricity of drama professor Deborah Margolin, while William Barbee '26 delights as a stoic, intellectually foggy yet impeccably credentialed English Professor that may or may not be based on a current Yale faculty member.

The most surprising yet welcome performance of the evening was that of Meg Columbia-Walsh, Brennan Columbia-Walsh's mother, who made the trek to New Haven to play herself. Effortlessly charming, she leans into her maternal instincts with a knowing ease that grounds the production.

"College Play" succeeds because the writing is ruthlessly observant. Columbia-Walsh has an ear for the kind of dialogue that sounds absurd until you realize you've heard some iteration of it in a dining hall booth. "I'm leaving Yale and the only thing I gained is the ability to be a Yale student," one character confesses, a line so simple yet sympathetic. Elsewhere, platitudes soar with unironic conviction: "We're all going to be fine because we have beautiful souls." And in a moment of delicious melodrama, a character sputters, "We're not in the swimming pool. How are you drowning?" These thoughts and sentiments are recognizably ours. Columbia-Walsh understands that Yale students oscillate between existential crisis and unearned confidence, sometimes within the same breath, and he writes accordingly.

That being said, the play's most lyrical prose arrives at a moment when its structure begins to fray. Near the end of the second act, the ensemble lines up beneath a sterile wash of white light, each stepping forward to deliver an impassioned monologue. The speeches themselves are often striking, but their sudden appearance feels abrupt.

From there, the production veers into melodrama, trading the sly observational humor of its opening for a heavier hand that dulls some of the earlier brilliance. It's not that the sentiment is unwelcome, it's that the play, so deft at skewering Yale myth-making, momentarily forgets how sharp it once was.

For all its uneven turns and bursts of theatrical self-indulgence, "College Play" remains a deeply Yale production, one that could only exist here, shaped by the peculiar ecosystem that produces both pragmatic overachievers and reluctant romantics. Columbia-Walsh doesn't stop at staging a play about Yale College. He stages the fragile, occasionally ridiculous relationships that make this place feel singular. The next time you wander down Edgewood Avenue — past crooked porches and windows still glowing long after midnight — consider the friendships, rivalries and moments of sincerity unfolding behind those doors. At Yale, the mythology is loud, but it's the people who make the story worth telling.

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CAMERON NYE / CONTRIBUTING PHOTOGRAPHER
The senior thesis play by Brennan Columbia-Walsh places Yale College under a microscope, exposing every myth-like ritual and commonplace folly through a meta analysis of his own life.