

PATRICIA RACETTE: COMING HOME

This season's Susannah, Patricia Racette, is celebrating her 25th anniversary with San Francisco Opera. She receives the San Francisco Opera Medal, the highest honor the Company awards an artistic professional, on September 21.

Patricia Racette's career is one of the most remarkable of all San Francisco Opera success stories. The New Hampshire-born soprano has risen from the Company's young-artist ranks to star in a vast repertoire with the world's most prestigious opera companies. But no matter how far afield she travels, her artistic life invariably finds its anchor at San Francisco Opera, where her 31 roles have been as varied musically and dramatically as Luisa Miller and Jenůfa, Marguerite and Dolores Claiborne. The artistry Racette brings to the stage is limitless, whether in vocal prowess, stylistic range, or emotional depth.

Racette is returning this season for her latest challenge—the vibrant, restless heroine of Carlisle Floyd's *Susannah*. “It's always a gift to be able to sing in one's native language,” she declares, “albeit with a Tennessee accent in this case!” No doubt the heroines she's sung in San Francisco were still a dream for Racette when her career was launched with the Merola Program, Western Opera Theater (a touring arm of San Francisco Opera), and an Adler Fellowship. She recalls, “I was what you might call ‘GOA’—Green on Arrival!” Fresh out of college, she was overwhelmed by new tasks, “from learning to juggle six cover assignments in one season to choosing an appropriate concert gown.” It was also during her Merola/Western Opera Theater tenure she debuted her now-celebrated portrayal of Puccini's Cio-Cio-San.

As an Adler Fellow she covered Pilar Lorengar as Alice in *Falstaff* (“magnificent” is her word for the late Spanish soprano) and sang that role in student performances. She relished week-long master classes with great artists—Crespin, Söderström, Hotter, Tozzi: “For the record, I would personally love to bring back that tradition of working with young singers for more than 30 minutes in a master class.”

What Racette describes as her “crystalline moment” happened during Boito's *Mefistofele*: “Sarah Billinghamurst approached me out in the house during the intermission of the dress rehearsal. The next thing I knew I was being pushed onstage to sing Act Two as Margherita for an indisposed Gabriela Beňáková. I will never forget the rush of that experience! After the performance, I was offered artistic management on the spot—suffice to say it was a good night!”

In this 25th-anniversary year, Racette feels a veritable floodgate of memories opening up, especially regarding two personalities—each, alas, no longer with us. “I've never enjoyed my interaction as Madama Butterfly more than with our adored Zheng Cao [who sang Suzuki opposite Racette in 2006 and 2007]. What a spirit—we both howled with laughter and cried like babies during basically every performance!” And essential to her life as an artist was “my beloved Elena Servi.” The revered diction coach arranged for Racette to study Italian in Perugia—“not Rome, not Florence, or anywhere else where people might speak English to me! That summer stint, combined with her meticulous teaching, shaped me and continues to inform every phrase of Italian that I speak or sing.”

The city of San Francisco offers endless joys to Racette. She and her wife, mezzo-soprano Beth Clayton, have a ritual of taking their 16-year-old toy poodle, Sappho, to Ocean Beach. And, of course, the years have brought Racette many friends here: “Some of them I've known for the entire 25 years, and others have come into my life over the past few years. The only downfall is that I'm always here to work. There's not enough time amidst rehearsals and performances to see everyone as much as I'd like!”

And then there is the San Francisco audience, for whom Racette feels immense affection: “There is both loyalty and passion, and I'm quick to remind that we *do* feel the energy of the audience when we're on the stage. It really is palpable—you can just tell when the crowd is ‘with you.’ I'm lucky enough to sing around the world, but when I come back to San Francisco, I know that I'm home.” 🌸



Read the complete interview and see a full list of the roles Patricia Racette has sung here, including photos, at sfopera.com/Susannah.