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The Unknowable: A Preview of Lowell House Opera's Upcoming Production

Benjamin T. Rossen's original operatic ballet is a unique, stunning interplay of music and movement.

KAYLA REIFEL AND LUCAS COHEN-D'ARBELOFF | VISUALS: CRYSTAL MANYLOUN | 02.08.24:
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The Unknowable: An Operatic Ballet in Two Acts, a stunning original production written by Benjamin T. Rossen '23, presents a mesmerizing blend of emotion, music, and dance. Premiering on February 10th and 11th at Sanders Theatre, the show dazzles from start to finish. Featuring a diverse cast of performers both from within the Harvard community and beyond, the show poignantly portrays the complexities of family dynamics and the tension between personal desires and familial expectations.

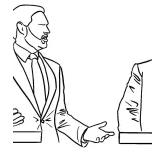
Directed by Haley Stark '25, *The Unknowable* follows Edna, portrayed by Boston University student and dancer Lavinia Kosher, who is torn between attending a prestigious forum or a music festival. Edna opens the opera with a longing, emotional dance solo. Rossen's original score, with additional music by Hector Berlioz and Gustav Mahler, shines immediately. The piano builds in intensity throughout the opening number, grabbing the viewer's attention and refusing to let go. As the second scene unfolds, characters Adèle (Caroline Wolfe) and Immanuel (Marcus Schenck) initiate the narrative using their voices, marking the beginning of Rossen's brilliant libretto with plans for an upcoming dinner party.

The rest of the ensemble cast arrives for dinner, consisting of Grace (Logan Trotter), Sara (Sula Frausto), Thomas (Benji Pearson '25), Carol (Isabella Meyer '24), and Michel (Leo Balkowitz). Percussive, witty conversation rife with intellectual jokes and references ensues. We are soon introduced to vocalist Edith (Aurora Martin), who stands still on stage left as she begins to sing the inset operatic piece of Hector Berlioz's "Les nuits d'été." Edna is enthralled by the music, dancing to the vocals solo until she finds a dance partner and friend in Hannah (Katy Nairn '26).

But Edna is soon presented with a pivotal decision—she can spend her two weeks of summer vacation at a music festival or attend a forum with



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her mother where she will network for her job.

“She has to decide whether or not she wants to stay in this beautiful fantasy world that she is so enjoying and so prosperous and thriving in, or if she wants to return to her capitalist nine-to-five,” said Lauren Perl ’25, the production’s co-producer. “And so it’s a story that really is about ambition and about familial pressure in terms of chasing ambition, and I think that this is a story that rings true to a lot of Harvard students.”

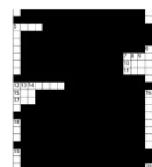
“The way I like to read into it is that Edna is unaware of what this siren song is that is calling her into this fantasy world,” Perl said. “Another possible explanation is that Edna is unaware of her own personal goals and ambitions—that she finds herself and her desires to be ‘unknowable.’ This show is about chasing your ambitions and curiosity in the face of a demoralizing reality.”

The second act follows Edna and Hannah as they embark on a metaphysical journey through dance, song, and emotion. We meet Anna (Emerald Barbour), who stands still to the side and sings the second inset operatic piece, Gustav Mahler’s “Lieder eines fahrenden Gesellen.” As the lines between reality and fantasy blur, an ensemble cast of “spirits” join Edna and Hannah in dance. Anna continues to sing Mahler’s piece as Edna reckons with the conflict between reality and the sublime transcendental world she has discovered. The opera appears to maintain a stark yet cooperative dichotomy between the body and the voice until the show takes a turn in the middle of the act.

In this pivotal moment, the two primary dancers, Edna and Hannah, are imbued with voices in the form of opera singers Edith and Anna. Four characters effectively become two, and the lines between sound and movement are blurred in such a manner that intensifies the work’s larger themes of identity, reality, and the transcendental realm. The show ends



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Mind Games



ambiguously, leaving us to contemplate the delicate balance between the worlds we inhabit and those we dream of.

The Unknowable is the second work written by a Harvard undergraduate or recent graduate produced by Lowell House Opera, with the first being Benjamin Wenzelberg's '21 *Nighttown*, performed in Sanders Theatre in 2022. Rossen first began drafting *The Unknowable* as his Harvard senior thesis, and he is now pursuing a Master of Music degree at the New England Conservatory. Before the pandemic, the Lowell House Opera mostly mounted productions from the opera canon, but it has since shifted toward original productions from within the Harvard community. The organization learned of *The Unknowable* through an open call for new productions last May, according to Kenneth Kaufman '69, President of the Lowell House Opera Board of Directors.

"I think we will continue on the newer path that we've charted, in looking to create opportunities for productions which are composed by students, or where the libretto is written by students, or where the production team, even the senior members of the production team, are students or recent graduates or other people affiliated with Harvard," Kaufman said.

Reflecting this commitment to fresh, student-driven creativity, *The Unknowable* blends music, dance, and narrative in a seamless spectacle. The success of the opera rests on an extremely solid foundation of talented musicians: violinists Enoch Li and Christian Maloney, violist Joshua Cai, and cellist William Tan play with fervor and passion without missing a beat. Rossen, also the music director, masterfully executes his original compositions at the piano. The orchestrations provide a foundation from which the soaring operatic vocals emerge to highlight the movement of the dancers.

The production's staging is clean and effective, differentiating time and place while neatly conveying the emotional progression of the plot.



Choreographer Emily Parker's work is astounding, displaying complex emotions and storylines through movement. Overall, *The Unknowable* is smart, self-aware, and impressive. For anyone interested in vocal or dance performance, it is a must-see event.

The Unknowable: An Operatic Ballet in Two Acts is showing at Sanders Theatre on February 10th and 11th, 2024. Tickets can be purchased at the **Harvard Box Office**.

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