



**Lyric**  
**Unlimited**

LYRIC OPERA OF CHICAGO  
2015/16

**BACK-  
STAGE  
PASS!**

# The Merry Widow

By Franz Lehár

Photo: Ken Howard (Metropolitan Opera)

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Dear Educator,

Welcome to the latest edition of Lyric Unlimited's *Backstage Pass*! This is your ticket to the world of opera and your insider's guide to Lyric's production of *The Merry Widow*. Thank you for joining us and for sharing this experience with your students.

We have designed *Backstage Pass*! to prepare young people with the essential information needed to understand the opera and enjoy the performance. These resources are designed to enhance your curriculum and can, ideally, be seamlessly incorporated into your regular, daily learning objectives.

Please review the materials in this guide and online, and consider how they can be used in your classroom. We recommend setting aside small blocks of time over several days or weeks before and after the performance to share this content with your students. The more students know about the opera, the more they will enjoy the experience.

It is our sincere hope you enjoy the performance, and we look forward to seeing you and your students at the opera!

# Preparing for the Performance

**These activities are designed to help you quickly and easily develop effective lesson plans built around clear objectives.** Objectives are written in “I Can” statements using student-friendly language, and all activities can be used to address state and national learning standards.

## Objectives:

- I can tell the story of the opera I am about to see.
- I can recognize major musical themes from the opera.
- I can use the essential vocabulary associated with the production of modern opera.

## Activities:

### I can tell the story of the opera I am about to see.

- Refer to the “[Synopsis of the Opera](#)” section of this guide.
- Have students read the synopsis, then discuss the time period, setting, characters, and story of the opera with the class.
- Have students write narrative predictions, or create artwork reflecting what they think the set and costumes will look like.
- Assign a character from the opera to each student. Next, provide brief descriptions of each character and have students determine how their character should stand, speak, and behave. Read the synopsis aloud while students act out the story.
- Working in small groups, have students choose celebrities they would cast in each role if they were making a modern movie of the opera. Have groups present their choices to the class and make an argument for why each celebrity would be a good fit.

### I can recognize major musical themes from the opera.

- Refer to the “[Musical Highlights](#)” section of the online teacher resources.
- Play the musical examples in class and use the commentaries provided online to familiarize your students with the music, its significance, and its context within the opera.
- Play these selections many times over multiple classes so students become familiar with the music.

### I can use the essential vocabulary associated with the production of modern opera.

- Refer to the “[Opera Terminology](#)” section of the online teacher resources.
- Have students research and define these terms, then compose sentences using them appropriately.
- Give each student a card with either a term or a definition. Have students find the partner who matches their card.



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# A Synopsis of the Opera

## The Merry Widow *(Die lustige Witwe)*

Operetta in three acts in German

(Lyric performances in English; translation by Jeremy Sams)

by Franz Lehár (frantz LAY-hahr)

Libretto by Victor Léon and Leo Stein

Premiered December 30, 1905, Theater an der Wien, Vienna

### CHARACTERS

(in order of vocal appearance)

**Viscount Cascada (KAHS-kah-dah)**, a French aristocrat ..... Baritone

**Baron Mirko Zeta (TSAY-tah)**, Pontevedrian ambassador to France

..... Bass-baritone

**Valencienne (vah-law-SYENN)**, Zeta's wife ..... Soprano

**Count Camille de Rosillon (kah-MEE duh ro-see-YAW)**, the Pontevedrian

embassy's French attaché ..... Tenor

**Njegus (NYAY-goosh)**, assistant at the Pontevedrian embassy ..... Actor

**Raoul de St. Brioché**, a French diplomat ..... Tenor

**Hanna Glawari (HAH-nah glah-VAH-ree)**, an immensely wealthy widow

..... Soprano

**Count Danilo (DAH-nee-lo)**, Pontevedrian embassy first secretary ..... Tenor

**Assorted diplomats and their wives, grisettes**

### SETTING

Belle Époque Paris (1905)

### ACT I

#### The Pontevedrian embassy

At a glittering ball, the dashing French count Camille de Rosillon flirts shamelessly with Baron Zeta's young wife, Valencienne. Camille is madly in love with her, but she insists that she is a respectable spouse (Duet: "When one's a respectable wife"). Baron Zeta is hoping to match his countryman, Count Danilo Danilovich, with the wealthy Pontevedrian widow Hanna Glawari. At the same time, Valencienne hopes that Camille will be the one to marry Hanna. But it is vital to Pontevedro that Hanna not marry a foreigner and take her money out of the country—without her wealth, the economy would collapse!

Hanna arrives and is embarrassed by all the men clamoring to greet her (Song: "This is all too much!"). She graciously invites everyone to a Pontevedrian-style party at her home the next day. Danilo appears and reflects on his dull life as a diplomat. His bright spot is the fashionable restaurant and dance hall Maxim's (Song: "[Then off to Chez Maxim](#)"). He is astonished to learn that Hanna is in Paris. Meanwhile Camille corners Valencienne and they daydream about what it would be like if they could be together (Duet: "A place where we could meet"). Valencienne again insists that Camille must give her up.

Hanna and Danilo finally run into each other. Their backstory: he had wanted to marry her back in Pontevedro, but his family threatened to disinherit him since she had no money. She laments that now that she's a wealthy widow, when a man says he loves her, he's really saying he loves her money. Danilo asserts that he'll never say "I love you." When Hanna is out of earshot, Zeta insists that Danilo must marry Hanna for the sake of his country. Danilo adamantly refuses. All the men surround Hanna, anticipating the next dance (Finale: "Ladies choice!"). Hanna will only dance with a man who shows no interest in her. Danilo is her choice, and he in turn offers the dance for sale for 10,000 francs. The other men depart in outrage, leaving Danilo and Hanna alone. He draws her into his arms and they dance delightedly.

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# A Synopsis of the Opera

## ACT II

### The next day in the garden of Hanna's mansion

Hanna entertains in lively Pontevedrian-style, including singing an old folk song about a hunter and the wood nymph who breaks his heart (Song: "[The Vilja Song](#)"). When Danilo appears, Hanna notes that he's been avoiding her. He claims it's military strategy (Duet: "If a girl's admiring you"). Danilo and the other men commiserate about how difficult women can be (Septet: "Who can tell?"). Once Hanna is again alone with Danilo, she asks him whether it's all right if she goes ahead and marries the man she has in mind. He snaps that she can marry whomever she wishes, and they stomp off in different directions.

Camille continues his pursuit of Valencienne against her weakening objections. As she wavers, he draws her into the garden pavilion (Duet: "At the first kiss of April"). Having seen them and fearing a scandal, Njegus (Zeta's assistant) manages to pull Valencienne out of the pavilion and replace her with Hanna. Despite this precaution, Zeta thinks it's his wife in there anyway. He's thus totally confused when Hanna emerges from the pavilion with Camille (Finale: "Bonsoir messieurs, did someone call?"). Hanna announces that she and Camille are engaged; Camille plays along to save Valencienne from disgrace. Danilo storms off, telling Hanna that he's going to forget everything by enjoying himself at Maxim's. His anger convinces Hanna that he, in fact, really does love her.

## ACT III

### A ballroom in Hanna's mansion

For the party, Hanna has transformed her mansion to look just like Maxim's. When Danilo arrives, he's completely astonished. The dancing girls delight him with a rollicking number (Chorus: "The grisettes are on their way"). Danilo confronts Hanna, declaring that both he and Pontevedro absolutely forbid her to marry Camille. She explains that she never meant to marry Camille; she was just trying to save the reputation of the married lady who was with him in the pavilion. Danilo at last admits that he loves Hanna (Duet: "[Music's playing](#)" or "The Merry Widow Waltz").

Zeta learns that his wife's fan was found in the pavilion. On it are the words "I love you." Convinced of Valencienne's faithlessness, he tells her he's divorcing her. Now unattached, Zeta offers himself to Hanna as her bridegroom. (Remember, he's trying to rescue his country's economy!) Hanna bursts his bubble by explaining the terms of her late husband's will: should she marry again, she loses her fortune—at which Danilo ecstatically blurts out to her: "I love you!" With her union to Danilo assured (what they both wanted all along but were too proud to admit!), Hanna then clarifies the terms of the will: if she remarries, she loses her fortune—to her husband!

For Zeta, there remains the mystery of the fan—but he sees that Valencienne has written the words "I'm a respectable wife" upon it, proving her to be loyal after all. All are delighted with the outcome (Finale: "Who can tell?").

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Photo: Ken Howard (Metropolitan Opera)

# La Vie Parisienne—

## *The Merry Widow* and the Belle Époque

**The Merry Widow premiered in Vienna in 1905**, during the heyday of operetta and the height of the era known as the Belle Époque. The Belle Époque—the Beautiful Era—refers to the period of European history between the years 1871 and 1914. It was the end of one century and the dawn of another—a time of technological progress, scientific discovery, and burgeoning arts and culture. The industrial revolution, chugging dutifully into its second century, meant that the middle classes had more leisure time and more money to spend enjoying it. Art, literature, and music were reaching a broader audience.

Paris was a major hub of the arts, science, and technology. Moreover, throughout Europe and in the U.S., the well-to-do looked to emulate *la vie Parisienne* (Parisian life). *The Merry Widow* capitalized on the public's romance with Paris, setting the tale in a Parisian embassy and peppering the libretto with mentions of the iconic bistro Maxim's, the cabaret, and the can-can girls who typified the era. Lyric's production is steeped in turn of the century Paris, as well, with costumes inspired by the artwork of Toulouse-Lautrec.

The Belle Époque saw a succession of inventions that would fundamentally change the way we live: the harnessing and use of electricity, the internal combustion engine, vaccinations, photographs, films, and bicycles. Scientists in Paris played a leading role in many major developments. Founder of germ theory Louis Pasteur was French, as were Pierre and Marie Curie and Henri Becquerel, who shared the Nobel prize in 1903 for their research in radiation. French aviators were the first to fly across the English Channel and the Mediterranean. Brothers Louis and Auguste Lumiere captivated audiences with the first motion pictures. At the Universal Exhibition of 1900, Paris showed off a feat of engineering known as the Eiffel Tower.

Prominent artists in Paris such as Paul Gauguin, Henri Matisse, Henri Rousseau, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, and a young Spaniard named Pablo Picasso experimented with new ways of representing the world. In a reaction to the Industrial Revolution, the Art Nouveau movement sought inspiration in nature, in particular the graceful lines of stems and leaves.

In the words of Hector Guimard, the architect who designed the Paris metro entrances, "It is from nature that one must always seek advice." ([philamuseum.org](http://philamuseum.org))

Then there was the City of Light's famous nightlife. As Danilo sings in "[Then off to Chez Maxim](#)":

**Then off to Chez Maxim  
Where things are *tres intime*  
Surrounded by chantoozies  
And all my favorite floozies...**

**A Danube of champagne  
And girls who entertain  
I don't like spreading rumours  
But have you seen their bloomers?**

Paris was home to dozens of cabarets, cafes, and music halls like the Moulin Rouge, where the wealthy and famous rubbed elbows with bohemians and artists. Danilo's can-can dancers shocked and delighted bourgeois audiences with their suggestive dance moves.

*The Merry Widow* hints at some of the changing morals of the Belle Époque as well as a shift in women's roles in society. Hanna, who clearly has a mind of her own when it comes to choosing a husband, declares, "Rigid morals lead to quarrels; you have to make your marriage fun." Yet she expresses ambivalence about women's independence and increasing presence in the public sphere when she quips:

**This modern obsession with politics  
It seems a particular curse.  
The men who indulge are appalling  
The women decidedly worse.**

In the late nineteenth century, women were admitted to universities for the first time, and the women's suffrage movement was gathering steam in

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# La Vie Parisienne—

## The Merry Widow and the Belle Époque

Europe and the U.S. Nevertheless, women in the States would not be granted the right to vote until 1919, and French women would have to wait until 1944! The term *grisette*, which Danilo uses in Act II, refers to the young working women who were a fixture in bohemian Paris. In some ways, they were independent, yet they still often relied on the artists and writers with whom they formed relationships.

"Le tout-Paris" or "all of Paris" was the name given to the group of artists, politicians, and the wealthy who frequented cultural venues and attended glittering parties at embassies like the one in *The Merry Widow*. Certain fashionable places in the city, such as Danilo's beloved Maxim's, were associated with this elite clique. In the words of fashion editor and Parisian Diana Vreeland, "The Belle Époque was the culmination of everything having to do with the grandeur of high society." (Duka)

What's interesting about the Belle Époque is that it didn't really exist until after it was over. The phrase was coined after World War I, when Europeans looked back on what, after the devastation of war, seemed to be a carefree time of optimism and prosperity. However, social hierarchies during the era remained rigid and stratified. In some neighborhoods of Paris, entire families lived on the street or in shanties and slums. The years of the Belle Époque were not as rosy as hindsight made them appear.

### For Further Investigation

#### McAuliffe, Mary.

*Dawn of the Belle Époque: The Paris of Monet, Zola, Bernhardt, Eiffel, Debussy, Clemenceau, and Their Friends*  
*Twilight of the Belle Époque: The Paris of Picasso, Stravinsky, Proust, Renault, Marie Curie, Gertrude Stein, and Their Friends through the Great War*  
"With uncommon skill, she [McAuliffe] blends each ingredient of an incredible époque into a vivid and hugely enjoyable narrative of extraordinary times." (New York Times)

#### Ross, Elizabeth.

*Belle Époque*  
This debut YA novel was inspired by a short story by Émile Zola titled "Les Repoussoirs." Ross expands upon Zola's premise of "plain Janes" hired by aristocratic women so as to appear more beautiful by comparison.

#### Moulin Rouge!

Baz Luhrmann's 2001 cinematic reimagining of Alexandre Dumas, fils' *The Lady of the Camellias*, set in 1900 Montmartre, Paris. Nominated for eight Oscars including best picture and best actress for Nicole Kidman.

#### Works Cited

Duka, John. "La Belle Europe Reigns Again A[t] Met Museum." *The New York Times*. nytimes.com. December 7, 1982. Web. October 4, 2015.  
Philadelphia Museum of Art—Collections Object : Chair. philamuseum.org. Web. October 3, 2015.

Sams, Jeremy. *The Merry Widow*. English version. Original book and lyrics by Victor Léon and Leo Stein. 2000: Glocken Verlag, Ltd., London.

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- ☐ Select a Belle Époque achievement in the arts or technology to research—the advent of bicycles, for example, or the artistic movement known as Fauvism. Present an overview of your topic for the class; explain how it related to the time period and the impact it had on society.
- ☐ Fashion was a major aspect of high society in the Belle Époque. Do some research on the changes taking place in women's fashion during that era. What conclusions do you draw about women's changing roles in society based upon the clothing popular at the time?

# The Merry Widow

## A Selected Cultural and Historical Timeline



The Theater an der Wien painted by Carl Wenzel Zajicek.



French composer Jacques Offenbach's *Orpheus in the Underworld*, considered by many to be the first classic full-length operetta, premieres in Paris. Act II's "Infernal Galop" will become the music most associated with the can-can dancers who will perform in Paris cabarets.

Victor Léon, who will collaborate with Leo Stein on *The Merry Widow* libretto, is born in Vienna on New Year's Day.

Construction is completed on the Theater an der Wien in Vienna. The visionary behind the project is Emanuel Schikaneder, Mozart's librettist and collaborator on the opera *The Magic Flute* (1791). The theater will become the center of operetta in the German-speaking world and, in just over a century, will host the premiere of *The Merry Widow*.

Leo Stein, co-librettist of *The Merry Widow*, is born in Lemberg, Austria.

The French comedy *L'Attaché d'ambassade* (The Embassy Attaché) by Henri Meilhac, the co-librettist for many of Offenbach's most popular works, premieres. In Meilhac's play, the Parisian ambassador of an impoverished German duchy must broker a marriage between his country's richest widow and an embassy attaché. The program notes for *The Merry Widow* won't make mention of *L'Attaché*, conceding only that the operetta is "partly based on a foreign idea."

*Merry Widow* composer Franz Lehár is born in Komárom in the Austro-Hungarian Empire (now part of Slovakia).



Le Chateau d'eau and plaza, Exposition Universelle, 1900, Paris, France

La Belle Époque ("The Beautiful Era") begins. This period in European history is typically dated from the end of the Franco-Prussian War in 1871 to the outbreak of World War I in 1914. During these years of relative peace, the industrial revolution will continue to chug along, the arts will flourish, and the upper and middle classes will reap the benefits. It's important to note that the term Belle Époque was coined after World War I and implies a nostalgia for an innocence and optimism that was destroyed by the Great War. What it doesn't portray are the racial, religious, and class tensions that were also present during that era and that threatened to crack society's glossy veneer.

1801

1858

1861

1870

1871

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# The Merry Widow

## A Selected Cultural and Historical Timeline

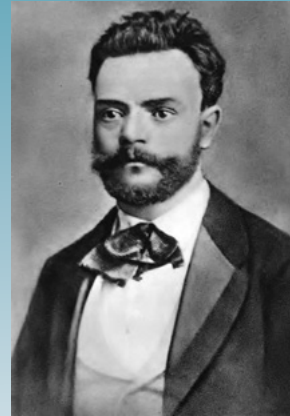


Thomas Edison invents the phonograph, paving the way for future opera lovers to listen to *The Merry Widow* in their living rooms.

The premiere of Johann Strauss Jr.'s *Die Fledermaus* at the Theater an der Wien ushers in the "Golden Age" of operetta in Vienna. These short, light, often romantic works typically incorporate spoken as well as sung dialogue and appeal to middle-class audiences seeking escape from the pressures of an increasingly industrialized society.

1874

1877



Antonin Dvořák

Twelve-year-old Franz Lehár enters the Prague Conservatory intending to study violin and music theory. He meets the Czech composer Antonin Dvořák, who encourages him to focus on composition instead.

1882

Lehár finds work as a violinist in the theater at Barmen-Elberfeld in Germany's Rhineland. Two years later he will be called for military service and will serve in the 50th Austrian infantry regiment band, of which his father is bandmaster.



Construction on the Eiffel Tower is completed in Paris.

1888

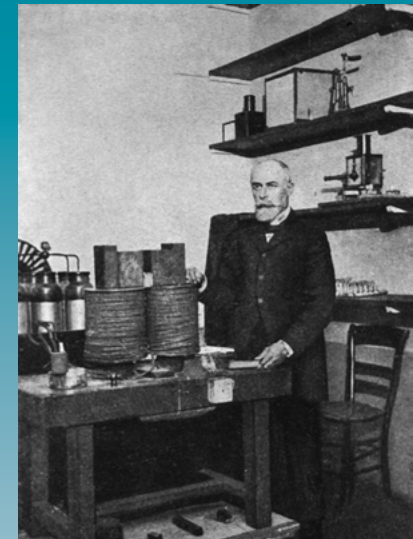
1889

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# The Merry Widow

## A Selected Cultural and Historical Timeline



Henri Becquerel in the lab.

Cornuché will decorate Maxim's in the Art Nouveau style popular at the turn of the century. Art Nouveau practitioners eschew the excessive ornamentation of 19th century design and believe the function of an object should dictate its form. They use both flowing, organic forms inspired by nature as well as geometric, angular lines.

French physicist Henri Becquerel discovers radioactivity while researching phosphorescent materials. The unit of measurement for radioactivity, the becquerel (Bq), is named after him.

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Legendary Parisian bistro Maxim's opens its doors. Its original owner, former waiter Maxime Gaillard, will sell it to Eugene Cornuché, who will assert that the secret to the restaurant's success is a steady supply of beautiful women: "I always have a beauty sitting by the window, in view from the sidewalk."

Lehár's first work for the stage, an opera titled *Kukuška*, premieres in Leipzig.

French brothers Auguste and Louis Lumière hold the first-ever public screening of films at Salon Indien du Grand Café in Paris. They shoot their films on a cinematograph, a sixteen-pound device operated with a hand crank, which can also project images onto a screen. The cinematograph will captivate audiences at fairs around the world, beginning with the Paris Exposition in 1900, and usher in a new age of entertainment.



The Paris metro opens with entrances designed by Art Nouveau architect Hector Guimard.

Henri Toulouse-Lautrec paints "Self Portrait in the Crowd, at the Moulin Rouge" which today is in the collection at the Art Institute of Chicago. Toulouse-Lautrec was a highly sought after poster artist in late 19th century Paris. Some of the costumes in Lyric's production of *The Merry Widow* are based on his iconic works of art, in colors like acid yellow, green, pink, and burnt orange.

1892

1893

1895

1896

1900



# The Merry Widow

## A Selected Cultural and Historical Timeline



Paul Ott / VBW

Inside the Theater an der Wien.



Twenty-six-year-old patent clerk Albert Einstein publishes the special theory of relativity.

Henri Rousseau exhibits his work at the Salon des Indépendants alongside younger artists like Henri Matisse—a group that will come to be known as The Fauves or “wild beasts.” Their paintings will mark a new style in art, utilizing broad brushstrokes and vibrant color.

Pierre and Marie Curie share the Nobel Prize with Becquerel for their discoveries in radiation.

Lehar becomes conductor at Vienna’s historic Theater an der Wien; his operetta *Wiener Frauen* opens in November.

*The Merry Widow* premieres at the Theater an der Wien. It will become an international sensation. Entrepreneurs will seize the opportunity to market everything from *Merry Widow* hats, to corsets, to cocktails.

“The Merry Widow Waltz” becomes wildly popular, while the enormous, ornate hat worn by the English actress who plays Hanna becomes the must-have accessory for fashionable women, remaining popular until the start of World War I.

English language versions of *The Merry Widow* open to acclaim in London and New York.

The Belle Époque comes to an end with the assassination of Franz Ferdinand, the archduke of Austria-Hungary, and the beginning of World War I. By the war’s end in 1918, seventeen million people will die and the political landscape of Europe will have irrevocably shifted.



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1902

1903

1905

1907

1914

# The Merry Widow

## A Selected Cultural and Historical Timeline



Adolf Hitler at the opera in Vienna, with Josef Burckel, Joseph Goebbels, and Martin Bormann

Lehár founds a publishing house, Glocken-Verlag ("Publishing House of the Bells"), to print his music. He gains the rights to all of his music except *The Merry Widow*.

GI guarding looted art stored at Schlosskirche Ellingen, Bavaria

In the same year the groundbreaking Rodgers & Hammerstein musical *Oklahoma!* opens on Broadway, audiences keep a *Merry Widow* revival running for 322 performances.

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The brand new Civic Opera House in Chicago opens, blending elements of Art Nouveau and Art Deco.

After Austria's annexation, the Nazis confiscate *Merry Widow* librettist Victor Léon's property. He will die of starvation two years later while in hiding.

Concerts of Lehár's music are given in occupied Paris. *The Merry Widow* is said to be Hitler's favorite operetta. Lehár curries Nazi favor, perhaps in an attempt to shield his Jewish wife from the regime. One of Lehár's librettists, Fritz Löhner-Beda, will be murdered in Auschwitz III the following year.

1929

1935

1938

1941

1943

- ☐ Which of the events on the timeline do you feel has most influenced your own life and why?
- ☐ Choose a work of literature or art and make your own cultural/historical timeline of events that may be relevant to the work you selected.



# Reflecting on the Performance

**These activities are designed to help you quickly and easily develop effective lesson plans built around clear objectives.** Objectives are written in "I Can" statements using student-friendly language, and all activities can be used to address state and national learning standards.

## Objectives:

- I can describe the experience of attending a Lyric performance.
- I can explain to others what aspect of the performance impacted me the most.
- I can write a critical review of the performance.

## Activities:

### I can describe the experience of attending a Lyric performance.

Have students write a paragraph reflecting on:

- their favorite part of the performance
- something new they learned about opera from the experience
- what part of the experience differed from their expectations

### I can explain to others what aspect of the performance impacted me the most.

1. Make a list with the class of parts of the experience that interested them: sets, costumes, dramatic themes, music, audience etiquette, building architecture, etc.
2. Divide the class into groups according to the listed categories and ask each group to come up with a creative way, *other than a lecture presentation*, to reflect on their experiences with content in that category.



Hanna's Garden, Act II of The Merry Widow.

Photo: Lyric Technical Dept.

### I can write a critical review of the performance.

1. First, have students create two lists -
  - 1) a list of facts about the performance: who sang which roles, what the costumes looked like, the setting, etc.
  - 2) a list of opinions they felt about the performance: how well the singers sang, if they liked the costumes, and whether or not they felt the setting was appropriate for the story. Be sure students address what they saw and *heard* at the performance.
2. Next, have students use their lists to write a brief description of the performance (facts) and what they thought about it (opinions).
3. Then, have students write about what they liked best about the performance and if they would recommend the opera to other people.
4. Have students organize these components into one coherent critical review.
5. To extent this activity, ask students to come up with five new adjectives to describe what they saw and heard at the performance. Have students revise their first draft to include this more descriptive language where appropriate.
6. Share the reviews with the school media team or [Lyric Unlimited](#).

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