Audiences filing in to the DCR Steriti Memorial Rink to attend the Boston Lyric Opera’s tribute to the 100th birthday of Leonard Bernstein are in for a surprise: BLO has created an installation within the rink—not just a stage but also of an entire seating area for the public. It looks like an intimate and glamorous cabaret/supper club modelled on the historic New York venues of the 1940s and 1950s, such as El Morocco or the Stork Club. Nine chandeliers illuminate the area, and the wall patterns are of lush tropical vegetation; the décor is all greens and gold, with a rose carpeted floor. The space seats about 400, some of them at small tables where the public can sit and have a drink by lamplight, others on risers along the three walls surrounding the thrust stage. About the only thing missing will be the zebra-striped upholstery that identified El Morocco in every photograph taken there.

In a way, the setting by Paul Tate DePoo III is a kind of metaphor for the kind of event that will unfold—the characters in Bernstein’s one-act opera Trouble in Tahiti retreat into fantasy worlds rather than confront the realities of their lives while the singers in Arias & Barcarolles reveal and reflect those realities. It’s a secret nightclub in an ice rink where the opera onstage is about the secrets we withhold from each other.

Both works deal with family values. The opera has its basis in the mismatched marriage of Bernstein’s parents and Bernstein wrote the libretto himself. It is in colloquial English with some ingenious wordplay; it is also full of deep feeling. For the song-cycle the composer found a new destination and form for some miscellaneous music he had composed over the course of his life—he created the earliest music before he wrote Trouble in Tahiti. Many of the seven pieces in the cycle had been inspired by family occasions, including the birth of his son, the marriage of his daughter, the 88th birthday of his mother. Bernstein again supplied the lyrics himself, although one of them relates a story his mother had told him and his siblings when they were children. In different ways, all the texts are about the mysterious nature of love.

These pieces have been combined before in university settings—in Kansas and in Lancaster, in England—but the BLO’s forthcoming production appears to be the professional premiere of the double bill.

Recently BLO’s David Angus and Brett Hodgdon sat down to talk in the BLO conference room about the production. Angus has served as the company’s Music Director since 2010 and will conduct the opera and join Hodgdon to play the accompaniments to Arias & Barcarolles four-hands at one piano—Hodgdon will play the treble, Angus the bass. Hodgdon has worked as coach and rehearsal pianist at the Boston Symphony, Emmanuel Music and BLO for years and frequently appears in chamber music concerts and assisting artists in vocal recitals; he shone in the huge piano part in BLO’s recent production of Weill’s The Threepenny Opera and will play in the small jazz ensemble that accompanies Trouble in Tahiti.

“We present each of the works intact and the production will last about 75 minutes without intermission,” Angus says. “We have made a few adjustments with the permission of the Bernstein estate—in addition to the two singers Bernstein calls for in Arias & Barcarolles, the three members of the Trio make brief contributions, and we will perform.
the final piece of Arias & Barcarolles twice—first as a kind of opening of the evening and then again in its original position at the end of the song-cycle. I also made an orchestration of one of the songs, using the players from Trouble in Tahiti as a klezmer band, so that they are not just sitting there, and this helps create a continuity between the sound worlds of the two pieces.’

There are two principal characters in Trouble in Tahiti—Sam, a brash, boastful and successful businessman, and his wife, Dinah. We see scenes from their marriage, their lives together and apart from each other. Together they bicker, yet when they are not together they are not happy either. In the end, the couple again tries and fails to communicate and decides finds happiness where it can be bought and sold: at the movies. Throughout, a jazz vocal trio comments on the action, in the manner of singing commercials on network radio and television; their praise of the perfections of suburban life and the joys of consumerism provides a satirical and ironic context. Although BLO usually resists amplification, Angus and the team decided to employ it for the vocal jazz trio, following Bernstein’s suggestion that the trio should sound as if emerging from a radio.

Hodgdon says, “The opera moves on parallel tracks—the idealized world the characters experience on TV and in the movies, represented by the trio, and their real situation; they wonder why their lives don’t work the same way, but each of them is also seeking for some kind of resolution, for finding a better way to live.” Angus adds, “I don’t think the opera is tragic, but it is very honest, and the message is about not giving up, about finding a way to grow; they know they want their lives to be different. In a way, Arias & Barcarolles arrives at a resolution. Each of the songs is completely separate, and each is in a different style—but that is characteristic of Bernstein, who travelled on many different roads.”

It is clear that the situation in the opera haunted Bernstein both as a child and as an adult—childhoods do that. In different ways and to different extents the family issues continued to mark the rest of his life. 1983 brought another opera, full-length this time, A Quiet Place. It opens with Dinah’s funeral, and incorporates Trouble in Tahiti as flashbacks; the tentative resolutions develop in the next generation.

The Belfast-born Angus grew up in Britain and grew up in a time when Benjamin Britten was universally acknowledged as that nation’s leading musical figure—just as Bernstein was here. The paths of the two composer-conductors did briefly intersect in the summer of 1946, when the young Bernstein led the American premiere of Britten’s Peter Grimes at Tanglewood—and Bernstein did conduct the “Four Sea Interludes” from that opera at his final concert. “In a way Bernstein was an American Britten—except that he didn’t concentrate on opera,” Angus says. “But he was like Britten in that he composed some of his best music for singing in the theater. He wasn’t interested in writing great songs—instead he was trying to create a new form that was neither Broadway nor grand opera. His music is both direct and subtle, and the content is both powerful and rewarding. The text is American English and the music crosscuts styles like a movie director crosscuts images and scenes. And the way the harmonies shift makes my heart swoon.”

Angus came to understand Bernstein as an adult, and admits he still uses some of Bernstein’s educational maneuvers with orchestras and students. “The way he could teach kids how to listen to Tchaikovsky by putting words to the music—I still do that. And some of the things he writes in his books—what he says is so obvious that I wonder how I could ever have missed it.”

Hodgdon was still a child when Bernstein died 28 years ago. “But I do remember watching the concert of the Beethoven Ninth Symphony he conducted when the Berlin Wall went down, and my parents bought me one of his books. We also had VHS cassettes of some of lectures and Young People’s Concerts so he was very much a presence in my life. ... He had a knack for making complicated issues sound so simple.”

Angus is very pleased with his cast. Baritone Marcus DeLoach sings Sam; he is a versatile singer at home in many different kinds of music. He’s won particular plaudits for his roles in contemporary works, which include his portrayal of Senator Joseph McCarthy in one of the most acclaimed recent operas, Fellow Travelers. Heather Johnson returns to the company as Dinah—she took the title role in Lizzie Borden a few years ago, having previously sung Hermia in Britten’s Midsummer Night’s Dream (2011), and returned in BLO’s 2016/17 Season for Baba the Turk in The Rake’s Progress. The singers in the jazz trio are Mara Conde, Vincent Turregano and Neal Ferreira, all of them familiar from ensemble roles with the Company. “The production integrates the trio into the action to represent some of the characters Bernstein keeps offstage, and they appear in Arias & Barcarolles too,” Angus says.

In the rehearsal process, Angus and Hodgdon are learning to avoid entangling all their fingers, hands and wrists. “One of the songs in Arias & Barcarolles is about some recalcitrant children so our hands are fighting over the keyboard position too,” Angus says. “Brett is doing the solo bits for piano, but he is allowing me to turn the pages!”

BY RICHARD DYER

Richard Dyer is a distinguished writer and lecturer. He wrote about music for The Boston Globe for more than 30 years, serving as chief music critic for most of that time. He has twice won the Deems Taylor/ASCAP Award for Distinguished Music Criticism.

Pictured: Set rendering for Trouble in Tahiti and Arias & Barcarolles by Paul Tate DePoo III. David Angus conducts in rehearsal. David Angus greets a fan from the orchestra pit at the Boston Opera House. Brett Hodgdon plays at a Boston Public Library community event.

Want to learn more about Trouble in Tahiti? Visit BLO.org/coda or blog.blo.org for additional articles and content. Tickets available now! BLO.org/tahiti