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For Release:  
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## Gary Griffin

Director, Tony-nominated Broadway production of *The Color Purple*,  
Associate Artistic Director, Chicago Shakespeare Theater

to debut at

# Lyric Opera of Chicago

stage directing a new production of Franz Lehár's

## *The Merry Widow*

starring Elizabeth Futral and Roger Honeywell

during Lyric's 2009/10 season

Creative team also includes returning conductor Emmanuel Villaume,  
set designer Daniel Ostling & costume designer Mara Blumenfeld,  
(both company debuts)

lighting designer Christine Binder, and choreographer Daniel Pelzig

Lyric Opera of Chicago General Director William Mason announced today that the director **Gary Griffin** will make his company debut next season with a new production of the operetta *The Merry Widow* by Franz Lehár, starring **Elizabeth Futral** and **Roger Honeywell**. Performances will be in English, with projected titles.

Lyric will mount 11 performances of *The Merry Widow* between Dec. 5, 2009 and Jan. 16, 2010, led by French conductor **Emmanuel Villaume**, who is currently conducting *Manon* at Lyric. Set designer **Daniel Ostling** and costume designer **Mara Blumenfeld**, will make Lyric debuts. **Christine Binder** is lighting designer and **Daniel Pelzig** is choreographer.

Among Viennese operettas, Franz Lehár's *The Merry Widow* is matched in popularity only by Johann Strauss's *Die Fledermaus*. Both of these works are regularly produced in opera houses, including Lyric. In *The Merry Widow*, government officials from the fictional Eastern European nation of Pontevedro come to Paris to try to persuade the widow, Hanna Glawari – a native Pontevedrian – to marry one of her countrymen, thus keeping her 20 million francs in the country. A good deal of amorous intrigue (including the rekindled romance between the widow and her old flame, Count Danilo) is wrapped up in a glorious happy ending. The comedy and bittersweet drama emerge through a musical score of unparalleled luster, with operetta “hits” including the “*Merry Widow Waltz*,” the heroine’s soaring “*Vilja*,” Danilo’s scintillating “*Maxim’s*,” two breathtaking duets for the young couple, Valencienne and Camille, and the hilarious “*Women, Women, Women*” septet for male ensemble.

**Gary Griffin** made his Broadway debut with *The Color Purple* in 2005, which earned 11 Tony nominations, including best musical, and which he directed in its national tour. He also received a Tony nomination the following year for his Broadway production of *The Apple Tree*.

Griffin’s new production of *Amadeus* opened Chicago Shakespeare Theater’s season in September and runs through early November. As associate artistic director of CST, Griffin has directed several innovative productions of music-theater works by Stephen Sondheim there, including *Passion*, *A Little Night Music*, *Sunday in the Park with George*, and *Pacific Overtures*. The latter production transferred to London’s Donmar Warehouse, where it won the Olivier Award for Outstanding Musical Production. Also at CST Griffin has staged *A Flea in Her Ear*, *The Herbal Bed*, and “Short Shakespeare!” productions of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* and *Romeo and Juliet*. Upcoming projects include *West Side Story* for Canada’s Stratford Festival. In Chicago, Griffin’s productions have also been seen at Court Theatre, Northlight Theatre, Apple Tree Theatre, Writers’ Theatre, The Marriott Theatre, Drury Lane Oakbrook, Pegasus Players, and Famous Door Theatre. He has received eight Joseph Jefferson Awards for directing.

“Gary is the first person I thought of when we decided to do *The Merry Widow*,” says Mason. “He’s an incredibly talented director who’s done both straight theater and musicals, and will bring a great deal to a show like this. Lyric has presented *The Merry Widow* twice before – in the spring of 1981 following the regular season, and during the 1986 season. It’s a wonderful piece, with glorious music, and it’s performed by opera companies all over the world. Gary is very pleased at the prospect of doing it here. I’ve seen a number of his shows, including his brilliant twelve-person adaptation of *My Fair Lady* for Court Theatre. His *Amadeus* at Chicago Shakespeare is well directed and strongly acted. He’s a local treasure. We have a lot of wonderful directors in Chicago and he’s one of them. It will be wonderful to work with him at Lyric.”

“It will be thrilling to work right here in Chicago at one of the world’s premiere opera companies on a much-loved operetta,” says Griffin. “I am eager to work with this unparalleled company of artists to bring to life a beautiful and entertaining *Merry Widow* onstage at Lyric.”

Lyric’s 2009/10 season production of *The Merry Widow* will star soprano **Elizabeth Futral** in the title role of Hanna Glawari and tenor **Roger Honeywell** as Prince Danilo. Both are former members of Lyric’s Ryan Opera Center with international careers. In 2003/04 they performed the

leading roles of Mabel and Frederic in Lyric's acclaimed new production of *The Pirates of Penzance*. Last season at Lyric, Futral portrayed Violetta *La traviata*, and Honeywell portrayed Capt. James Nolan in *Doctor Atomic*. Futral's other starring roles at Lyric have included Handel's Partenope, Susanna in *Le nozze di Figaro*, Adina in *L'elisir d'amore*, and Gounod's Juliette. She has sung these and other leading roles (including world premieres by André Previn, Tan Dun, and Ricky Ian Gordon) at the Metropolitan Opera, Vienna's Theater an de Wien, the Bayerische Staatsoper, San Francisco Opera, Washington National Opera, Los Angeles Opera, New York City Opera, Vancouver Opera, among others. Honeywell makes his Metropolitan Opera debut this month as Nolan in a new production of *Doctor Atomic*. Other recent and upcoming roles include Macduff/*Macbeth* (Opéra de Montréal), Don José/*Carmen* (Fort Worth Opera, Opera Calgary) Cavaradossi/*Tosca* (Florida Grand Opera) Troilus/*Troilus and Cressida* (Opera Theatre of Saint Louis), Rodolfo/*La bohème* (Opera Company of Philadelphia), Dick Johnson/*La fanciulla del West* and Laca/*Jenufa* (both at Glimmerglass Opera), among others. Honeywell has created roles in world premieres of operas by Ricky Ian Gordon, Richard Danielpour, and Paul Moravec at Minnesota Opera, Michigan Opera, and Santa Fe Opera.

**Emmanuel Villaume** is currently leading performances of Massenet's *Manon* at Lyric through Oct. 31, and will return next season for *The Merry Widow*. He debuted at Lyric in 2003-04 conducting *Samson et Dalila*. Newly appointed music director of the Slovenian Philharmonic (Ljubljana), the French conductor is currently in his eighth season as music director of Charleston's Spoleto Festival USA, where his many acclaimed performances have included a Mahler symphony cycle, Henze's *Der Prinz von Homburg* (American premiere), *Manon Lescaut*, *Der fliegende Holländer*, *Lakmé*, *Ariadne auf Naxos*, *Don Giovanni*, *Mahagonny*, and most recently this season's *Amistad*. Villaume's native repertoire brought him during the past two seasons to the Metropolitan Opera (*Carmen*, *Samson et Dalila*), Turin (Dukas's *Ariane et Barbe-bleu*), Madrid (*Les contes d'Hoffmann*), and Cagliari (Massenet's *Chérubin*). Other recent productions include *La bohème* (Washington) and Meyerbeer's rarely heard *Il crociato in Egitto* (Venice). He has also led productions at Covent Garden, Paris, Toulouse, and at the major companies of San Francisco, Dallas, Los Angeles, and Santa Fe, among many others.

Set designer **Daniel Ostling** (Lyric debut) has collaborated with Gary Griffin on *Amadeus*, *A Flea in her Ear*, *A Little Night Music*, and *Pacific Overtures* for Chicago Shakespeare Theater, where he also worked with CST artistic director Barbara Gaines/*The Merchant of Venice*. Ostling debuted at the Metropolitan Opera with Mary Zimmerman's new production of *Lucia di Lammermoor* starring Natalie Dessay, and returns this season for a new *La Sonnambula*. An ensemble member of Chicago's Lookingglass Theater Company, he has collaborated frequently with Zimmerman on productions for LTC, at the Goodman Theatre, and elsewhere, including *The Mirror of the Invisible World*, *Lookingglass Alice*, *Argonautica*, *Pericles*, *Secret in the Wings*, *Metamorphoses*, *Trojan Women*, Philip Glass's opera *Galileo, Galilei*, *Odyssey*, *Eleven Rooms of Proust*, and *Arabian Nights*. His designs have been seen at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, the Public Theatre, New York Shakespeare Festival, Washington's Shakespeare Theatre, Steppenwolf Theatre, La Jolla Playhouse, the Mark Taper Forum, Seattle Rep, Berkeley Rep, the San Francisco Opera Center, Portland Center Stage, and Tanglewood Opera Theatre, London's Barbican Centre, and the Melbourne Theatre Company.

Based in Chicago, **Mara Blumenfeld** (Lyric debut) has designed costumes for numerous productions at The Goodman Theatre, Steppenwolf Theatre Company, Court Theatre, Chicago Shakespeare Theater, and Lookingglass Theater Company, where she is an ensemble member. Previous collaborations with director Gary Griffin at CST include *A Little Night Music*, *Sunday in the Park with George*, and *Pacific Overtures*, which transferred to London's Donmar Warehouse (Olivier Award nomination); as well as abridged versions of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *Romeo & Juliet*; and Feydeau's farce, *A Flea in her Ear* (2006 Jeff Award for Costume Design). Blumenfeld's opera credits include several projects with director Zimmerman and set designer Ostling: the Met's new *Lucia di Lammermoor* (starring Natalie Dessay) and this season's new production of *La Sonnambula* (again starring Dessay). Also with Zimmerman, Blumenfeld designed Philip Glass' operas *Galileo Galilei* and *Akhmaten*. New York theatre credits include the Flaherty/Ahrens musical *The Glorious Ones* for Lincoln Center Theatre; *Measure for Measure* at the Public/NYSF; *Homebody/Kabul* at Brooklyn Academy of Music; Mary Zimmerman's Tony Award-winning *Metamorphoses* at Circle in the Square and Second Stage; and *The Notebooks of Leonardo da Vinci* at Second Stage.

**Christine Binder** has designed lighting for more than 150 theater and opera productions in Chicago and around the country. She's worked extensively at Lyric Opera of Chicago (most recently *La traviata*, *La bohème*, *Falstaff*, and *Eugene Onegin* last season; this season's *Madama Butterfly*), Chicago Opera Theatre, San Diego Opera, New York City Opera, Pittsburgh Opera, Michigan Opera Theatre, and Houston Grand Opera; and at Steppenwolf Theatre, Chicago Shakespeare Theater (*Hecuba*), Court Theatre, Redmoon Theatre (Jefferson Citations for *Frankenstein* and *Frankie and Johnny*), Northlight (*Pride and Prejudice*/Jeff-nominated), Lookingglass Theatre Company (*Sita Ram* and *Lookingglass Alice*, which toured the east coast), Chicago Children's Theatre (*Dandelion Wine*), The McCarter Theatre (Princeton, NJ) and Hartford Stage (CT).

Choreographer **Daniel Pelzig**'s Lyric Opera credits include *Die Fledermaus*, *The Cunning Little Vixen*, and *Regina*. Other opera choreography includes *Death in Venice*/Chicago Opera Theatre, *Don Giovanni*/New York City Opera, *Salome* and *Florencia en el Amazonas*/Seattle Opera, *Samson et Dalila*/Houston Grand Opera, *Aida*/Los Angeles Opera, *Un ballo in maschera*/Pittsburgh Opera, and *Regina*/Scottish Opera. As resident choreographer at Santa Fe Opera for three seasons Pelzig choreographed *Ariadne auf Naxos*, *Capriccio*, *Salome*, and other works. He choreographed the new Broadway musical *A Year with Frog and Toad*, and several off-Broadway productions. Recent projects include *Pericles*/Goodman Theatre, *Don Juan*/McCarter Theatre, *Guys and Dolls*/Long Wharf Theatre, *My Fair Lady*/Alliance Theatre and Cincinnati Playhouse, *Sweeney Todd*/Kennedy Center, *As You Like It* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream*/Seattle Rep, and *Company*, *Candide*, and *The Mikado*/Huntington Theatre, among others. Pelzig was resident choreographer for the Boston Ballet for four years. Pelzig has received numerous grants from the National Endowment for the Arts and the New York Foundation for the Arts. He earned his bachelor's degree in cellular biology from Columbia University.

Lyric Opera's new production of *The Merry Widow* generously made possible by **Jim and Vicki Mills/Jon and Lois Mills** and an **Anonymous Donor**.

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**Please note: Press release re. auditions for principal performers follows.**