

# CHARMED AND DANGEROUS

Opera's leading heartthrob plays with fire.

BY MELISSA WHITE

*Eugene Onegin*, sung in Russian, opens June 28 at the Santa Fe Opera.

For more information on *Eugene Onegin* and Rodney Gilfry, visit [santafeopera.org](http://santafeopera.org) and [gilfry.com](http://gilfry.com).

Ralph Fiennes played the title character in the 1999 film, *Onegin*.

Sitting at the Santa Fe Opera cantina on a recent afternoon, listening to the smooth baritone of Rodney Gilfry, you can hear a hint of operatic power and articulation mixed with a soft southern California accent in his speaking voice.

This pleasing dichotomy also exists in Gilfry's best known operatic portrayals: the seductive Don Giovanni and the innocent Billy Budd, macho Stanley Kowalski and aristocratic Count Almaviva.

Gilfry's operatic career began in Los Angeles, where he continues to wow his devoted hometown fans not only with his Prince Charming good looks, but his expressive vocalization and truthful acting. His career has taken him around the world to the most famous opera houses in London, Paris, Zurich and Munich. He is also seen regularly at the Met, the San Francisco and Dallas operas and the Lyric Opera of Chicago. On the flip side of opera, Gilfry has performed in numerous musicals, including *Camelot*, *Carousel* and *The Most Happy Fella*. He's even put together a cabaret show of leading man Broadway tunes, *Two for the Road*, which attests to his versatility. He'll perform the show with Amanda McBroom this August at the John Anson Ford Theatre in Los Angeles.

Gilfry's romantic repertoire is only rivaled by his passion for his craft, a passion that has encountered on-stage success as well as danger. As we sit in the shade over lunch, he tells me about some of those dangers, including being (operatically) hanged.

"In Paris, during the dress rehearsal for *Billy Budd*," he recounts, "the guy was supposed to put the noose around my neck and connect the cable to the harness I was wearing, and he couldn't get it done in time. The music went on and they started to take out the slack. They tried to lift me up, but the harness still wasn't connected to the cable; there was just the rope around my neck. I could have been really hurt, if not killed, so I stopped the rehearsal."

As he goes on to describe the engineering of the whole harness system—bolts, bars, clips—it's obvious that this is just one example of Gilfry's constant, intensely focused interaction with his surroundings. In fact, he approaches every aspect of his work with a combination of study and faith. Although he personally checked the harness and its structure every night before a performance, he admits, "I'm always a little leery." However, he's quick to confirm, "I've never been hurt. I just say a little prayer and go for it."

And go for it he does.

During the final scene of a Zurich production of *Don Giovanni*, four flash-pots concealed in the dinner table pro-



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vided the bulk of the fireworks that accompany the Don to hell. "It's almost like a controlled explosion," Gilfry explains, "a blinding flash. You could feel the heat." The staging had to be pinpoint accurate, since he stood on top of the table for the last part of the scene. "I jumped on a cue. As I was in the air, this thing would go whoosh and blind the audience, basically, so I could land and scurry away and they wouldn't see me. That's what I did. I was on my hands and knees, crawling."

Gilfry executes his on-stage stunts with the same thoroughness that permeates his study of the character he portrays in this summer's *Eugene Onegin*.

As the central figure around which the action in this Russian opera takes place, *Onegin* is the epitome of 19th-century ennui. "He's supremely selfish and self-centered," Gilfry says. "His life is so completely empty. He has no one. He doesn't have any reason to live."

He adds, "When he first got the letter from Tatyana, and met with her, he was really moved, but he didn't want to allow himself to feel it because he didn't want to be tied down. Very independent guy, and certainly not a giver. Suddenly, his life is filled with meaning when he recognizes his love for Tatyana. That's why he's so passionate at the end, when he's never been passionate before."

It's a new role for Gilfry, and one he can understand and polish to perfection. Tchaikovsky's orchestration is lush, and the melodies have an aching beauty. "It requires a certain color of voice," Gilfry says, "a certain way of singing that's appropriate for the piece but that I find is also very good for my voice. So it's really a pleasure to sing."

And it will be a pleasure to listen. Just watch out for those pistols in Act II.