

A Scandinavian Bohème

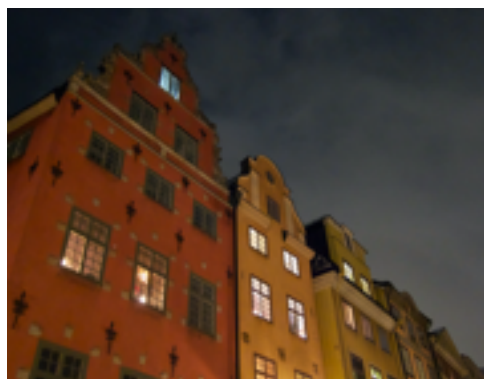
Genesis and plot synopsis

José Cura

In the 19th century, Scandinavia produced some of its greatest cultural achievements. Grieg, Sibelius, Strindberg, Ibsen, Andersen, Kierkegaard, Krohg, Munch, among many others. It was a golden age of creativity. In 1885, Hans Jæger, a very influential intellectual of that era, publishes the novel *Kristiania-bohèmen*. The novel, set in Kristiania (early Oslo), narrates the everyday life of two friends who live in lodgings and spend their days in cafes, discussing philosophy, literature and societal reforms. The book was a scandal, so much so, that Jæger ended up being thrown in jail. Later on, the same Jæger, together with a bunch of radical, anarchist comrades, would found the *Kristiania-bohèmen* group. Eduard Munch was part of that group.

In June 2012, the RSO invited me to direct and design Bohème for the 2015/16 season. I was walking through *Gamla Stan* (the old town), when I looked up and saw that a light was shining through the top window of that beautiful red building which is almost an iconographic postcard of Stockholm. This room could have been my Bohemian's attic, I thought. Why not set Bohème in *Gamla stan*? In order to do so however, I needed stronger arguments than simply that of my liking the look of a light shining through the window of the top floor of an old building...

Being an admirer of August Strindberg since the time I performed *Miss Julie's* servant, Jean, almost 25 years ago, I started thinking that using him to inspire my Rodolfo was actually not a terrible idea. But how could I make sense of it? I went to Strindberg's house in central Stockholm, in search of clues. There I was when, while no one was around, I sat on his bed... Imagine how shocked I was when, on the other side of the room, protected behind a cristal door, I was faced with a book titled "*La Bohème Suedoise*" ... I had no idea what that book referred to at the time, but the coincidence was too big. Maybe it was August trying to tell me something. Investigating the Strindberg/Bohemian connection, I found out that in 1879, August Strindberg, published "*Röda rummet*" (The red room), a satire of Stockholm's society in which he narrates the adventures of a young idealistic civil servant called Arvid Falk, who quits his job at the public administration to become a journalist and author. Looking for likeminded souls, Arvid encounters a group of bohemians, who would meet and discuss politics, theatre, philanthropy, and business matters, in a red dining room in *Berns Salonger*. Even if any resemblance between Arvid Falk, August Strindberg and Puccini's "Rodolfo" is a mere coincidence, I was convinced to have found the "concept" for my Bohème production: Hans Jæger's *Kristiania-bohèmen*, with Eduard Munch as one of its leading figures, would allow the conflictive personality of the Norwegian painter "to possess" Puccini's Marcello, and Strindberg's *Bohème Suedoise*, to be the inspiration for the portrayal of Rodolfo. It was much later that I decided to go even further and, with the blessing of RSO's dramaturg, change the names of the characters as they originally appear in the score. The aim was not to make a biographical production, which is impossible considering that the text and music in Puccini's masterpiece does not fit all of Munch and Strindberg's character traits, but to borrow from a bohemian movement which actually existed in 19th century Scandinavia, in order to inspire the dramaturgy of my production.



FIRST ACT: Christmas Eve. It is freezing cold in the attic where young writer August Strindberg and his roommate, the painter Edvard Munch live. Sitting at the piano, a promising composer called Edvard Grieg, is drafting some melodies. Munch is struggling to finish his painting, later on called *Vampire*. All of a sudden his model, tired and cold, demands she be handed payment. But Munch is broke. She throws her wig at him, and leaves the room in anger. August and Edvard are left alone complaining about the cold when Colline, an admirer of philosopher Sören Kier-



kegaard, dressed as his hero, pops in. The trio are engaged in disquisitions about life, and the weather when Grieg, who has just been paid for music lessons, brings in food and wine for all. As they all raise their glasses in celebration, the landlord walks in, demanding he be paid the rent. The four men manage to talk themselves out of trouble. Sören, Grieg and Edvard leave in order to enjoy the Yule festivities, as August stays behind in order finish an article he was commissioned to write. But he is out of inspiration. A gentle knock on the door distracts him: a woman he has never seen before appears...

Searching for paintings with a connection to Boheme's love duet, I ran into one of the versions of the "*Lonely ones*" by Munch. It was fascinating to discover how much this painting represents Mimi and Rodolfo's struggle, their desperate need to be together and their even more desperate determination to stay away from each other, convinced that they would be better off apart... But in order for me to use this painting as the through line of my show, the blond lady needed to step out of the canvas...



SECOND ACT: Christmas Eve, Munch exhibits his latest painting, *Gamla stan at sunset*, as the sun set over the old town square. The shops are full, families throng the streets and pedlars cry their wares. Munch watches with intent: these people are all "his" creatures, and he is deeply moved and excited to see them come to life.



Hans Jæger is sitting on an armchair (as per Munch's portrait of the writer). In Berns, the four friends have managed to get a table, and August sings his praises to Mimi, accompanying his voice with a guitar. While they were about to toast, Tulletta¹ arrives on the arm of rich banker Alcindoro. Having just had another heated discussion with Edvard, she plans to make the painter literally explode with jealousy. She succeeded, and after making a fool of wealthy Alcindoro, the couple reunites in a passionate embrace. Edvard, Tulletta and their friends join the crowd as they all disappear behind a band passing through the square, leaving the banker alone to foot the bill.



Of course, there is no painting by Munch called *Gamla stan at sunset*, so I was faced with a new challenge for the second act: I needed to be sure I could make Störtorget's skyline look like a Munch landscape. I sent painter Jan Edlun this picture:



And after a few weeks, he got back to me with an incredible *Gamla stan* "à la" Munch:



¹ (NOTE: Although it is known that it was a certain Mrs Heiberg whom Munch obsessed over throughout most of his life, and that the "Tulla Larsen affaire" happened much later in the painter's life, I had to pick Tulla as Munch's obsession in this production due to the rhythmical requirements of her name: she is Musetta in Puccini's piece, Tulletta in this version)

THIRD ACT: A year has passed. Edvard Munch and Tulla are working for the owner of a brothel. He paints portraits and she entertains customers... Using his friend August Strindberg, who is asleep, as a male model, and Tulla's shape as the background, the painter starts drafting *Ashes*. Mimi arrives: she doesn't understand why August has become so aggressive with her, and seeks Munch's advice. Pressed by Edvard, August confesses that he loves Mimi more than anything on Earth but that she is deadly sick and he is too poor and helpless to be able to do anything about it. Mimi, hidden behind the piano, hears August's confession. When she suggests they separate so he can move on with his life, August collapses with sadness. While the two say goodbye to each other, Edvard and Tulla have yet another violent quarrel.



Finding a painting by Munch that could fit the mood of Boheme's early morning promenade was not easy. I eventually decided to use *Evening on Karl Johan Street* because of the ambiguity in its treating Kristiania's middle class as if they were a group of alienated individuals. The depressing mood of this canvas suits the moment very well: the supposedly wealthy crowd remove their outfits revealing that, in reality, they are working class underneath. Later on, the use of *Melancholy*, conveys August's feelings as he separates from Mimi.



FOURTH ACT: Back in the attic, a few months later, Munch's "Scream" sets the mood: Edvard mourns the absence of his Tulletta and August that of his Mimi. While the painter is working on the writer's portrait, Grieg and Sören come in carrying a loaf of bread, which they all pretend to be the fanciest of meals. In order to cope with the bleakness of their situation, the four men begin "staging" a pretend lunch held by members of the same "high society" they often criticize. The game quickly turns sour when one of them, hurt by a comment, challenges the offender to a duel. As the tension rises, Tulla runs into the room: she announces that Mimi is badly sick and can hardly walk up the stairs. Mimi's presence brings the men back to reality: they are all broke, desperate, helpless people, unable to help the dying woman in any way.

