

The Dallas Opera's poignant 'The Diving Bell and the Butterfly' set for world premiere

The moving true story of a man "locked in" after a stroke, yet determined to communicate, opens at Winspear Opera House in November.

Jean-Dominique Bauby had already experienced a life of success before the events that led to writing his international bestselling memoir. He was the editor-in-chief of the French *Elle* magazine, married to his best friend and had two children who loved him. He had credits as an actor and author. He was handsome and enjoyed fast cars, good food and banter with famous friends from the publishing world.

Then, while out driving with his son one day, he began to see double. Bauby was rushed to the hospital after experiencing a stroke — one which would take his mobility, his independence, his ability to communicate and his connection with the outside world.

Almost.

That's because what's most striking about Bauby wasn't his talent, but his determination to not stay locked in. "*The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* is the remarkable true story of a man whose determination leads to one of the most poignant memoirs ever written," says Ian Derrer, the Kern Wildenthal general director and CEO of The Dallas Opera. "We are honored to bring this story to our stage for the first time anywhere."

As the cast and crew prepared for the premiere, they worked closely with both the composer and the librettist — a truly unique situation, notes Derrer. "There are a lot of wonderful opportunities when you can call them or email them questions. This is not the case with Wagner or Puccini —you can't just get ahold of the composer to find out what they meant."

Composed by Joby Talbot (*Everest*) to a libretto by Gene Scheer (*Moby-Dick*, *Everest*) and directed by Leonard Foglia (*Moby-Dick*, *Everest*), *Diving Bell* depicts Bauby's strength and desire for connection as it comes to life. Derrer says those qualities drew him to this work.

"I think that's the beauty of this story," he shares. "Though the subject matter certainly seems very heavy at times, there's such inspiration and determination that comes out of this story and the creativity that is unleashed by his imagination. It really instills hope."

The Diving Bell and the Butterfly is based on Bauby's memoir, which he authored after the stroke. Paralyzed and unable to speak due to locked-in syndrome, a visiting friend noticed he could still respond to questions by blinking his left eye. Following this discovery, a speech therapist was brought in to teach him the "alphabet of silence," or partner-assisted scanning. The transcriber would list off letters and when they got to the correct one, Bauby would blink. This process continued until the word was complete.

Bauby dictated his entire memoir by blinking. It took him two months, working with a transcriber three hours a day, six days a week — more than 200,000 blinks in all. Rather than taking a linear approach, the memoir features snippets of his day-to-day life punctuated by memories of his world before the stroke, his innermost thoughts, and the intense daydreams and fantasy worlds that kept him entertained.

"There is so much to do," Bauby wrote. "You can wander off in space or in time,



Director Leonard Foglia, center, works with Lucas Meachem, who sings the lead role. Also pictured (left to right) are Christopher Devlin, music preparation; Kirk Severtson, music preparation; Joby Talbot, composer; and Gene Scheer, librettist. (Kyle Flubacker)



'The Diving Bell and the Butterfly' tells the true story of a man determined to connect and communicate after a stroke leaves him almost completely immobile. Baritone Lucas Meachem sings the lead role in The Dallas Opera's production. (Joe Mazza)

set out for Tierra del Fuego or for King Midas' court." Bauby died shortly after the book's publication and did not get to see the remarkable impact his story has had on so many people. He did not get to see it translated into many languages or made into a documentary, an Academy Award-nominated feature film and now, an opera.

The Dallas Opera's production, sung in English with English supertitles, features a powerhouse cast: Grammy Award-winning baritone Lucas Meachem, renowned mezzo-soprano Sasha Cooke, tenor Richard Croft, soprano Andriana Chuchman, soprano Deanna Breiwick, bass Kevin Burdette and tenor Andrew Bidlack.

Meachem, who plays Jean-Do (as he was known to friends and family), says it's been amazing to be a part of the world premiere and a life story that's so unusual and relatable at the same time.

"The first question they ask me is, 'How are you going to sing a role if you can't move?' It's about a quadriplegic. How could I understand that?" he reflects, adding that part of the power of opera is its ability to draw out empathy for the characters onstage no matter



Ian Derrer, Joby Talbot, Lucas Meachem, Gene Scheer and Leonard Foglia (seen here from left to right) bring 'The Diving Bell and the Butterfly' to the stage for its world premiere at The Dallas Opera. (Kyle Flubacker)

the uniqueness of their situation. "What makes opera special and what has kept this art form around for so many centuries is that it speaks about the human condition. A person can put themselves in the shoes of the people on stage and say, 'I really understand that.'"

Meachem worked intensely with the composer and librettist to musically shape the role of Jean-Do, which is one of the benefits of a role that's never been played by anyone else before, he says. "This role is a tailor-made suit for me. It's written to take advantage of my strengths, and it's wonderful being with it from the start to this moment and beyond. It's been a dream come true. It's really been a cool, cool process doing a world premiere."

Shortly after The Dallas Opera commissioned this piece in 2019, the world went into pandemic lockdown. While the emergence of COVID-19 delayed the premiere, it also casts the piece in a new light for audiences. "Living through the COVID pandemic

has certainly reminded us of our own urgent need to find a way to connect and celebrate those we love," writes Scheer, the librettist. "[Bauby's] life-affirming story also poignantly reminds us that there is no time to waste."

"The reason this book spent years on the international bestseller list is because Jean-Dominique's story speaks so movingly of our deepest need to connect to the world and each other. To me, this piece feels especially relevant now."

The Dallas Opera's world premiere of *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* runs at the Winspear Opera House Nov. 3-11. ■

By **Emerson Greenlee**
Special Contributor