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Magazine

Inner Life

Next month, Dallas Opera presents the world premiere of *The Diving Bell and* the Butterfly.

By Fred Cohn



Mathieu Amalric and Anne Consigny in Julian Schnabel's 2007 film of Bauby's memoir Moviestore Collection Ltd/Alamy











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resulted in five deaths. But Joby Talbot's music and Gene Scheer's libretto convey the ecstasy of the climb as well as the tragedy of its outcome. In November, the company will stage a reunion—the pandemic-delayed world premiere of Talbot and Scheer's *Diving Bell* and the Butterfly, adapted from Jean-Dominique Bauby's 1997 memoir. Leonard Foglia, Everest's director, is once again part of the team, as are three members of the earlier work's cast—Sasha Cook, Andrew Bidlack and Kevin Burdette. New to the crew is baritone Lucas Meachem, taking the central role of "Jean-Do." The source material is a book like no other. Bauby was a media celebrity, the editor of French *Elle*, when at age forty-three, he suffered a cerebrovascular seizure that left him with

THE DALLAS OPERA had a hit on its hands in 2015 when it mounted the premiere of

Everest. The one-act opera chronicles a real-life disaster—a 1996 climbing expedition that

"locked-in syndrome." His mind was as sharp as ever, but he could not speak; moreover, he was almost entirely paralyzed, able to move no part of his body other than his left eyelid. He wrote *The Diving Bell and the Butterfly* from his hospital bed in the channel town of Berck-Sur-Mer, working with an amanuensis. She would painstakingly read out the alphabet to him; when she would reach a letter he wanted to use, Bauby would blink. Letter by letter, word by word, they constructed an extraordinary testament. Bauby writes about the "giant invisible diving bell" that physically entraps him, but also of the "butterfly"

of his mind, taking flight. That "butterfly" is key to the book's success: despite Bauby's heartbreaking condition, his memoir is an exhilarating read, shot full of dry wit. Bauby died just two days after the book's publication, but he had created an enduring testament. The Diving Bell and the Butterfly quickly became an international bestseller, and Julian Schnabel's acclaimed 2007 film adaptation amplified its renown. An intrinsic irony of *Diving Bell* as a vehicle for dramatization is that its protagonist, mute and immobile, is unable to participate in conventional scenes. The Bauby character speaks

in voiceover throughout the Schnabel film. The very nature of theater demands that we see

the opera's Bauby before us. He stays front and center for most of the piece. "Early on, we

decided that he would be singing," says Scheer. "The notion is that we're hearing him sing, and everyone else onstage does not. He's trying desperately to communicate, and there's an insurmountable wall between him and the rest of the world." Even though he is trapped in the hospital, Jean-Do's mind travels to particular events in his past life. At one point, he is giving a dinner party, preparing boeuf bourguignon for his guests. But the first guest who arrives proves to be not one of his erstwhile Parisian friends but his doctor at Berck-Sur-Mer, who's treating him at the hospital. Jean-Do jumps on the

kitchen table, and it flips up to turn into a physical-therapy body board, placing him back in



his present circumscribed existence.



novel, *The Count of Monte Cristo*. Scheer has fixed on this detail to create a framing device for the opera, inserting Dumas's character the Abbé Faria into his libretto. (Tenor Richard Croft will take the role at the Dallas premiere.) The Abbé's presence has also helped the creators overcome a dramaturgical dilemma. "An operatic story needs conflict—the kinetic energy that develops between two people through interaction," Talbot says. "So we had the idea of creating a character that Jean-Do could have a dialogue with." The Schnabel movie concentrated on the "diving bell" aspect of the story—Bauby's "locked

in" condition—but the opera will put an emphasis on the "butterfly." "It looks at where his

imagination takes him," says Scheer. "So there are all these different musical styles, jazz,

At the time of his stroke, Bauby had a contract to write a modern adaptation of his favorite

walking bass—everything you can put into this." Just as he did in *Everest*, Talbot has written a score that conveys, in the midst of tragedy, the rhapsodic presence of life itself. In pursuit of the "butterfly," Talbot has revised an Act I scene for "Papinou," Bauby's father. "When I started to write it, it was all about the anger and confusion you'd feel if your son had been struck down," he says. "But if all we were going to do is wallow in just how dreadful it is for the duration of an evening—it's going to be a pretty boring evening. Bauby

finds laugh-out-loud humor in his situation, and exquisite, poetic joy. So I realized that's what our job is." Everest was Talbot's first opera, and he approached it with some trepidation. He had had significant success with his orchestral and choral works, along with film and television scores. But it was his experience writing the score for Christopher Wheeldon's ballets *Alice's* Adventures in Wonderland (2011) and The Winter's Tale (2014) that showed him he had

the creative tools to create a full-length work for the stage. "I had developed a vocabulary of how to tell stories in music," Talbot says. "I guess writing the score for a ballet is a little like writing the libretto for an opera, because you have to do that first before the thing exists. Now I was going to move on to telling a story where I actually had recourse to words as well, which was an enormous relief."

One element that had kept him away from the genre was a distaste for vibrato-laden

operatic singing. "I'm a big fan of pitch, and of how you can put several pitches together and create something called harmony," Talbot says. "But if all you're getting is a wobbly noise, then harmony goes out the window. I'm also a big fan of rhythm and of counterpoint, and that goes out the window, too, when you're not sure what the rhythms are meant to be." He

excepts his Diving Bell singers from his cavils—especially Meachem. "I think Lucas has one of the finest voices *ever*," he says. At a coaching session in Dallas, the trust between the creators and their star becomes clear. Meachem points out a line that sits uncomfortably; without a trace of friction, both Talbot and Scheer agree to amend it. "It had some jumps from the middle voice to the passaggio," Meachem tells me afterward. "I brought my experience to bear on it and said, 'If you want something that's vocally doable, it needs to be a little less wordy and a little less passaggio-

'Let's figure out the pitches.' And all of a sudden, you've got a perfect line. "Joby respects me and my expertise, just as I respect him and his expertise," Meachem adds.

ridden.' Gene said, 'You can cut out two words so that the line stretches,' and Joby said,

As Talbot explains it, "I want Lucas to have the role he wants to sing—and I want him to want to do it again and again and again."

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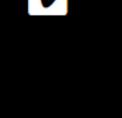
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