



**“I DON’T WANT IT TO BE ABOUT THE SINGING. FOR ME, THE VOICE IS JUST A TOOL TO STORYTELL.”**

*— Matt Hanscom*



# OPERA MAN (Dad)

Written by JOHANNA HICKLE Photography by DANIEL GARCIA

Picture yourself leaning on the balcony railing inside the California Theatre, watching an Opera San Jose performance. The show is *Rigoletto*, the tragic tale of a court entertainer who fails to keep his daughter out of harm's reach. For two hours, that set is its own world and situated at its center is Matthew Hanscom, his rich vibrato entwining with strains of music mounting from the orchestra pit. He's clad in a red and yellow jester costume—which might have been cheery if it weren't paired with smeared clown makeup evocative of Heath Ledger's Joker.

When asked about his favorite role, Hanscom recalls this one, his first with Opera San Jose. "Verdi wrote a lot of really good fathers," Hanscom says of the composer as he points out the *Rigoletto* poster, one of many show posters lining the conference room walls. Stripped of stage makeup, Hanscom looks like an entirely different person. But his booming baritone—acclimated to projecting to a large audience in a large space—prevails, filling the small room. "I'm a father myself. I remember loving my son and holding him and being like 'oh yes you're so cute,'" his voice raises an octave in typical parental fashion. "But when I do it with my daughter and she smiles, it's something a little different. There's no way to put it into words—unless you have a daughter. Then you know what I'm talking about."

Hanscom has been with Opera San Jose for three years now. In a move modeled on the regional opera companies of Germany, Opera San Jose employs a resident company, offering professionals early in their careers annual contracts—and free housing. This approach provides principal artists stability in location and work, which means relief from traveling place to place chasing gigs. For a family man like Hanscom, it's ideal. "I need to be around those people and those people need me around," Hanscom says of his wife and kids. The living arrangements also enrich the work relationship. "We play video games after rehearsal, eat dinner together, go grocery shopping. You build a partnership that doesn't exist anywhere else," he says with a smile.

Hanscom hasn't always been a Californian. His childhood was spent in Minnesota. "When I was growing up, you went to choir every day of your life at school," he recalls. During his teenage years, he opted out of choir, period, for voice classes and began acting in his high school's musicals. As graduation neared, he faced the same self-scrutiny, and litany of questionnaires, all students face when deciding on a college major. "Inevitably there was the question, 'What do you love to do in your free time?' And for me it was singing, so that's how I ended up here." Hanscom attended Northwestern University, and it was there his passion for opera was kindled.

Hanscom credits American universities with offering the best vocal training in the world, remarking that all singers graduating from major universities can vocally satisfy the general public. But vocal mastery is only the starting point. "I don't want it to be about the singing," he says. "For me, the voice is just a tool to storytell."

Although plays similarly stir an audience's imagination, songs introduce a special element. "Music sets an atmosphere," Hanscom says, leaning into his point. "If you don't know anything about a straight theater show going in, you have to find your way into whatever mood you've been dropped into." In contrast, operas offer an overture to set the tone before the curtain is even lifted. "If you're at *The Barber of Seville*, it's going to be full of little flighty, giggly things. And if you're at *Silent Night*, it's going to be more ominous. It's going to be a little more weighty, have more gravitas. So you have that expectation before anyone opens their mouth, before you hear any words whatsoever. The music will inevitably make you feel a particular way."

In April, Hanscom will be performing in Puccini's *La bohème* as Marcello, an impoverished painter. "Puccini, in general, is very popular," Hanscom observes. "It's a happy opera up until the end, and then it is the most heartbreaking thing that you've ever experienced...it's kind of perfect in that way. If I were taking my children to their first opera, it would be *La bohème*."

