

Relative to DAVID BELASCO

by Cheryl Green BA [Hons] ©2010 GB

David Belasco was my larger than life, illustrious, great-grand uncle. In over a decade having researched my ancestor's life he had accomplished a great deal in his seventy-six years of living, especially because he lived in a time before computerisation!

The more I read about Belasco's multi-faceted talents the more his life's work fascinated me. In fact, I find him an awe-inspiring, grand figure. The man dealt with every genre in the art of theatre. If it was not to be found, he invented what was needed; that intrigues me.

Belasco required a spotlight with defused light that left no hint of unattractive shadows on his actors. He said, "When I started we performed in front of gaslights and those awfully distorting footlights on actors faces. I *had* to revolutionise a new system of lighting for stage set and the actors, subtly. Although, at that time, I had no idea how to achieve such a goal!". As far back as 1879 he could foresee the present established system of front lighting as a replacement for footlights and in 1889 he dispensed entirely with footlights for his productions. Since then he worked tirelessly for over thirty years with his equally inventive, like-minded, chief electrician, Louis Hartmann. Eventually, Belasco had all the tools he required at his fingertips to create, for instance, a Californian sunset for his production of *The Girl of the Golden West*. He could select his colours by choosing from his paint box of shafts of light and mix these hues together juxtaposed to the centre; he was an artist who knew his palette. Belasco compared stage lighting to sun or moonlight and is reported to have stated that, "All light comes from above, as in nature."

By 1911 the Belasco Theatre on West 44th Street, between 6th Avenue and Broadway, possessed the most modern lighting switchboard in the American Theatre. The spotlights should have been named after Belasco but he did not have time to register the copyright. However, he showed other theatre managers and electricians how to put every piece of equipment that he invented into use. This enabled them to upgrade their old lighting systems and in the long run benefited their theatres and all others worldwide.

Belasco's play *The Girl of the Golden West* had its origins in his parents' Gold Rush adventure after they emigrated from the City of London, England to California, in the true pioneering spirit of Gold Rush fever. There was more truth than fiction about the incident in which Johnson, wounded and hiding in the loft of the Girl's cabin, is discovered when drops of blood fall on the sleeve of Rance, the Sheriff. Belasco based this on a similar dramatic tale that his father Humphrey had experienced in a gold mining camp.

Belasco began work on his play and at the end of 1904 he wrote to Miss [Blanche] Bates, who was his first leading lady in 'The Girl of the Golden West' and 'Madame Butterfly' explaining that he was eager to see her and, "go over the story before I get at the dialogue". Below is an excerpt from a letter that Belasco sent to Miss Bates in San Francisco. It reveals his infectious enthusiasm and expectations for his new play:¹

"Belasco Theatre, New York,
July 20, 1905.

My dear Blanch B.:-

I got a little behind on my play; you know I had to run off to London to do big things for the future, and when I got back I went under with my old attacks of neuralgia. I am glad to say I am all right again and am working night and day, hoping that it is the best play I ever wrote. Your part fits you from your dear little feet up to your pretty head. It's a bully part, and I know you will like it. I call the play 'The Girl of the Golden West.' The characters call you '*The Girl*.' The models of the play are fine—the last scene of all, 'In the Wilderness,' is a gem. There are some beautiful speeches in the play—very 'Batesesque'; the lines just *crackle* and all the situations are human.

Yes, send in a photo, and I will have a poster made for you.

'*Entre nous*' we open in Pittsburgh, before coming into New York,² playing there for two weeks at the new Belasco Theatre, as the stockholders have named it. It will be a great night.

Just keep enjoying the summer, and in about three weeks, —I will rush it into your hands.

With love, hugs, kisses and things,
Faithfully
David Belasco"

¹ William & Jefferson Winter, *The Life of David Belasco*, [Moffat Yard, 1918] Vol. 2, p. 194–5.

² The New York premiere was held at The Belasco [Republic] Theatre on 42nd Street, now The New Victory Theatre.

A few years after Belasco wrote 'The Girl of the Golden West' in 1907. Puccini was consumed with trying to choose the subject for his next opera. Considering his options, after a lot of soul searching, he turned down two of Oscar Wilde's plays, a *Florentine Tragedy* and *Salome*. He entertained the possible concept of Pierre Louys's *La Femme et le Pantin* [Woman and Puppet'], later to become Zandonai's *Conchita*, and a play about Marie Antoinette. While Puccini was in New York a friend, Tuscan nobleman, Marchese Piero Antinori, suggested that he see two plays by David Belasco, *The Rose of the Rancho* and *The Girl of the Golden West*. On his return journey to Italy Puccini wrote a letter to Belasco showing which play he favoured:³

"Hôtel de Londres, Paris [France],
March 7, 1907

Dear Mr. Belasco:-

I was exceedingly sorry to have left New York without seeing you once more. I have been thinking so much of your play, 'The Girl of the Golden West,' I cannot help thinking that with certain modifications it might easily be adapted for the operatic stage. Would you be good enough to send me a copy of the play, to Torre del Lago, Pisa, Italia? I could have it translated, study it more carefully, and write to you for further impressions.

I cannot express to you all the admiration I feel for your great talent, and how much impressed I was at the drama I saw at your theatre.

With kindest regards, and hoping to hear from you soon,

Yours sincerely,
Giacomo Puccini"

Belasco acted in accordance with Puccini's request and sent a copy of his manuscript of *The Girl of the Golden West*. Puccini, along with Carlo Zangarini and Guelfo Civinini, transformed the play into an Italian libretto.

In the last act, the hero Johnson is saved by his Girl from a lynch mob—a gang composed of the sheriff, cowboys, Indians and Mexican outlaws. That scene itself had to be saved: it had been intended for use in Belasco's play but it was later dropped by him. However the scene became the climax of the opera.

The noteworthy operatic cast, who were conducted by Arturo Toscanini, were Emmy Destinn [Minnie, the Girl], Enrico Caruso [Dick

³ Winter, *Belasco*, p. 214.

Johnson] and Pasquale Amato [Jack Rance]. Belasco directed the production, and the rest is history.

Although Puccini dropped the word “Golden” from the title in his operatic production, as it transpired, Puccini wrote a golden score for his opera.

It was the final act of the play, set in the land Belasco loved, California, which gave him inspiration; that lies at the soul of his art in the theatre. The preface to his play, as well as the novel he created from it, includes:⁴

In those strange days, people coming from God knows where, joined forces in that far Western land, and, according to the rude custom of the camp, their very names were soon lost and unrecorded, and here they struggled, laughed, gambled, cursed, killed, loved and worked out their strange destinies in a manner incredible to us today. Of one thing only are we sure—they lived!
[Early History of California]

And the final words in both versions are Belasco’s:

*“Oh, my beautiful West,
Oh my California!”*

One hundred years later, here I am, his English descendant, far from the Golden West, writing to celebrate Belasco’s work and originality in the theatre worldwide.

⁴ David Belasco, *The Girl of the Golden West: novelized from the play*. [New York: Grosset and Dunlap, 1911]. Accessible online at: www.fanciulla100.org or <http://books.google.com/books?id=qi9AAAAAYAAJ&printsec=frontcover&dq=belasco+golden&cd=1#v=onepage&q&f=false>