

THE SECOND TOSCA

synopsis

(Four men and four women)

AARON STEINER, a conductor, forties

LISA DUVALL, his fiancée, a soprano, mid-thirties

STEPHEN DUVALL, her brother and manager, early thirties

GLORIA FRANKLIN, a legendary diva, African-American, fifties

DARCY GREEN, her personal assistant, an aspiring singer, mid-twenties

NATHANIEL COLBY, a music student, early twenties

BEN, an assistant stage manager, thirties

ANGELINA, a soprano from the Golden Age

SETTING: Backstage at Opera California

TIME: The present

The play begins on the first day of staging rehearsals for a new production of Puccini's *Tosca*, starring the legendary soprano Gloria Franklin and conducted by the ambitious Aaron Steiner. When the staff receives word that Gloria's flight has been delayed, Aaron thinks his fiancée, Lisa Duval, a gifted young soprano who has been engaged to cover (the operatic word for understudy) the role, will have to sing that day's rehearsal. But Gloria has managed to get on an earlier flight, and arrives on time after all. Coming upon Lisa in the star dressing room, she at first assumes the younger singer is a dresser, and commences to give her orders, including sending her out to get food for The Princess Eboli, Gloria's tiny dog. Lisa, who idolizes the older singer, is a good sport about it, and finally Aaron arrives and sets things right—but not before Darcy, Gloria's personal assistant, manages to embarrass herself a couple times over the mistake.

On the closing night of *I pagliacci*, Aaron and Lisa are invited to a reception to hobnob with potential donors, accompanied by Lisa's gay brother, Stephen, who also works as their manager. But Lisa's arrival at the party is delayed by a backstage visit from Nathaniel Colby, a young music student from Juilliard who has traveled cross-country to hear his favorite soprano sing Nedda. Flattered by the attention, Lisa agrees to look over the score to a song cycle Nathaniel has written for her.

As rehearsals for *Tosca* progress, Lisa begins a casual flirtation with Ben, a handsome stage manager who is new to the company and has little interest in, or use for, opera. As he shows her and Gloria how to do the famous "Tosca leap" onto a backstage mattress at the end of the opera, Lisa expresses frustration with the role. She can't understand the character's grandiose behavior, and she feels intimidated by the legacies of all the great divas of the past who have sung the part, many of them in that very opera house. Fearing the aficionados will compare her *Tosca* to theirs and find her wanting, she begins to imagine she's hearing the voices of these legendary singers echoing the halls of the theatre. Or *is* she imagining it?

One afternoon Gloria storms out of a rehearsal over a clash with the director, leaving Lisa to take over the role for the rest of the day. She asks Stephen who the elegantly gowned woman sitting behind him in the audience was, and he tells her no one was there. Ben volunteers that it might have been Angelina Rinucci, the opera house ghost; the stage hands have told him an old story about how she died in the house after a performance as *Tosca* in the 1950's and has been

haunting the place ever since. Though Stephen and Aaron are skeptical, Lisa is fascinated by this and thinks it may explain the voice she's been hearing.

Though Lisa tells herself she genuinely wants to marry Aaron, the pressure his perfectionism puts on her in rehearsal is beginning to wear her down, and in spite of herself, she finds herself drawn to both Nathaniel and Ben, who are becoming more and more infatuated with her, each in his own way. Lisa offers to sing Nathaniel's songs at the upcoming company gala, much to the irritation of Aaron, who had wanted her to sing a Wagner aria.

Now that Lisa believes in her, Angelina, the ghost, makes her presence known, playfully taunting Lisa with snippets from *Tosca* and *La traviata*, among others. Undaunted, Lisa asks her advice on *Tosca*, and both Angelina and Gloria proceed to weigh in with their own conflicting interpretations of the character. This only confuses Lisa more. Hoping to escape temporarily from her professional and artistic woes by enjoying a late-night rendezvous with Nathaniel, she is driven to the breaking point when she finds him in her dressing room making out with Stephen instead. A furious Lisa kicks Nathaniel out of the theatre and proceeds to upbraid Stephen, but their catfight is interrupted by a phone call: Gloria's father has died. She's taking off for the funeral, leaving Lisa to save the day, and appease the disappointed fans, by stepping into the role of *Tosca* on opening night. Not only that, but a casting director from the Met may be in the audience.

Lisa's struggles to come to grips with her artistic doubts and the tangle of her personal relationships in time to meet this challenge comprise the last couple scenes of the play, which, given that divas are involved, are not without surprises.