Roméo et Juliette: 40 singers, 50 orchestra members, 120 costumes, 2 casts, 5 acts, 3 hours. Those numbers barely begin to describe the extraordinary amount of work behind the staging of the BU Opera Institute’s spring production, which was nearly a year in the planning. Auditions for Gounod’s classic were held back in September and production meetings began a month later, and it all culminated in the April 21 opening at the BU Theatre.

In choosing operas to stage, says William Lumpkin, institute conductor and musical director of Roméo et Juliette, “we think about what repertoire will best serve our students from a pedagogical point of view.” Operas are selected with an eye toward giving students an opportunity to work in a number of different styles, languages, and time periods during their two years in the program.

“We also have to think about what will fit in the BU Theatre,” says the College of Fine Arts associate professor. “We can’t choose something that has six tubas and four harps, because it won’t fit.” The orchestra for Roméo et Juliette, which does include one harp, struggled to squeeze into the theater’s narrow pit. In the end, the harp had to be moved out of the pit and placed next to the bass drum at the edge of the stage.

French composer Charles Gounod’s opera differs from the Shakespeare tragedy that inspired it in several respects. “The way it flows is so different from what Shakespeare wrote,” says scenic designer Christopher Dills (CFA’12). “The political overtones of the rival families are practically gone.”

“We like to joke that this is a French opera based on a story by an English guy about a bunch of Italian people,” says Dills. “So it’s a big amalgamation of ideas and people and for my purposes, architecture.” Dills incorporated visual elements inspired by postwar Paris, Elizabethan England, the photography of Richard Avedon, and even local architecture into his set, built over four weeks by the Huntington Theatre Company’s scene shop.

Mitchell Zuckoff

knows a promising story when he sees one. But he concedes that his latest book is an embarrassment of narrative riches, a platter heaped high with heroism, history, human pathos and pluck, and nail-biting adventure.

Lost in Shangri-La: A True Story of Survival, Adventure and the Most Incredible Rescue Mission of World War II (HarperCollins, 2011) chronicles the May 1945 crash of the Gremlin Special, a plane carrying 13 U.S. servicemen and 11 members of the Women’s Army Corps on an R&R sightseeing flight over a valley frozen in time in the wilds of New Guinea. The wounded survivors were stranded among an isolated tribe, unable to gauge the potential dangers they faced.

Zuckoff, a College of Communication professor of journalism, former Boston Globe reporter, and author of several books, including Ponzi’s Scheme: The True Story of a Financial Legend, ventured deep in the equatorial rain forest to report the tale, which was widely covered at the time, but all but forgotten now.

The story is verifiable thanks to a trove of sources, from the recollections of a living survivor to a declassified U.S. Army report to a diary scrawled
in secretarial shorthand.

In spite of a torrent of press accounts in the weeks following the crash, U.S. Army photos, and a crude documentary film, Zuckoff’s elegantly woven narrative is the first book about the events leading up to the ordeal, the trials faced by the two men and one woman who survived, and their fate after the story faded from the headlines.

The bulk of the book is devoted to the grueling, poignant, and ultimately redemptive story of three decent, gentle souls, and Zuckoff admits to falling in love with each of them. Lost in Shangri-La has been praised by both Kirkus Reviews and Publishers Weekly.

Bostonia talked with Zuckoff about his research, his sources, and his slog through the rain forest.

so she could say to him, ‘Here’s the greatest gift you’ll ever find as a writer.’ It was a well-written and well-crafted narrative.

What was the trip to New Guinea like?
That was wild. I’ve traveled to a lot of strange and faraway places, and this was the most faraway. I flew from Boston to Hong Kong to Jakarta to Jayapura, then another flight on a small plane into the valley, through the same mountain pass where the plane crashed. As we headed toward that mountain, I thought, if my plane crashed, my agent would have been thrilled.

I was in the valley for almost two weeks. I went in January and February of 2010, though the crash was in May. But there really aren’t seasons in the valley; it’s an equatorial temperate zone. I climbed the mountain, a mile and a half hike, to see the wreckage. I was healthy, had not just suffered a plane crash, and I was exhausted.

One striking aspect of the story is how well the survivors behaved. Had you hoped to uncover some conflict?
You always look for conflict; it’s the nature of what we do. But I was very satisfied with how they ended up behaving, because John McCullom, one of the two male survivors, was such a thoroughly decent man. He’d just lost his inseparable twin in the plane crash and he held it together, and that became a model for how Margaret and Ken Decker behaved—if McCullom could keep himself together, so could they. They trusted him because he was such a great leader.

You go easy on the Gremlin Special’s pilot, Colonel Peter Prossen, who showed bad judgment in leaving his seat and letting the less experienced copilot fly the plane moments before the crash.
I hope any close reading of the book will show that this was an error. I became friendly with Prossen’s son, who didn’t know that his father had left the cockpit.
I got the declassified crash report very early in my research. John McCullom made clear that Prossen was standing in the radio compartment when the crash happened, that he’d left the controls to his less experienced copilot. It was a fatal mistake. One reason I didn’t feel the need to beat up on him was that he paid the ultimate price for that mistake.

Were any of the sources you contacted resistant or uncooperative?
Not one. Not a single person. I called people out of the blue and said, ‘Hi, I’d like to talk about your dead uncle or your dead aunt,” and they sent me all this material. I kept waiting for someone to say, ‘This is a family tragedy, please leave us alone.’ But I kept getting off the phone with the feeling that they were waiting for me to call. They couldn’t have been more helpful and generous and grateful. S U S A N S E L I G S O N