Upcoming Performances

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“All the world’s a stage…”
LTI’s Shakespeare Season

by Michael Tilley

While most people would readily name Shakespeare the greatest playwright in history, perhaps fewer realize that he has also inspired more music than any dramatist or author. Besides the operatic settings of his plays by Verdi, Britten, Berlioz, and numerous others, we have incidental music by Mendelssohn and Sibelius, William Walton’s scores for the Olivier films, Tchaikovsky’s overture-fantasias on Hamlet, The Tempest, and Romeo and Juliet, whose star-crossed lovers inspired six ballets, including Prokofiev’s.

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Beatrice & Benedict Conversation

continued from front page

We immediately got to work as we only had five weeks to study and design our shows.

I looked forward to exploring the landscape of the Italian island from a purely emotional and poetic point of view. I had just completed a project proposal with colleagues Olga Maslova and Kim Weidl for a future production of Catin’s Il Postino. I was enthralled by the glorious music and the story resonated deeply with me, as I studied Art abroad, and Neruda’s work, when I was younger.

When I heard that we were transposing the story to a more urban American landscape in the same period, I was slightly concerned and overwhelmed. Firstly, I had five weeks to “unload” the music, the story, and have it make sense drammaturgically in this new landscape. New Orleans has always been both a dynamic city port and a potentially racially charged urbe- all major cities are, but this one is highly cosmopolitan and American at the same time- this duality is tricky to navigate. New Orleans in the 1810’s and into the 1840’s is exploding in every direction, with local communities growing and new ones arriving and claiming their nooks in and around the city.

We are all professors, so I was also concerned about what the period / local research would provide our students – would it be confusing? How do we organize it all effectively? How could we honor the charm and beauty of Berlioz’s music without first clarifying our intent and setting parameters?

Some clarity was provided immediately by William Dale Cockiel’s dissertation from 1973 and his comments on artistic conventions of the 1860’s:

“Here we approach the heart of Berlioz; a compound of energy, melancholy and serene detachment, an unfathomable sadness beneath a shimmering surface of high spirits. Again and again… he conveys a unique sense of the transitoriness – even the ambivalence of all human experience.”

Yes, of course, the heart! I was hooked, and then felt much better about responsibly separating our New Orleans from any attempt at poetic realism. Most importantly, the music allowed us to organize our landscape free from any potential anchor to a city, to any color palette in particular.

Regina: When you were asked to direct and where faced with the challenge of setting it in New Orleans, where did you go first with your research and prep work? Or did you come up with the idea after your conversation with Julie and Nathan?

Michael: The idea of setting the opera in New Orleans was actually my idea that started as a hunch. I suppose I set myself up for my own challenge, but I'm actually glad of it. For educational purposes, this production of Beatrice and Benedic was to be sung in French with spoken dialogue in English, but the idea of having the work of a British author about characters in Sicily realized with French music and English dialogue seemed like a cacophony of cultural influences. I didn't think that would be easily digested by the audience. So to clarify the story, I felt it best to change the location to an area that was bilingual where people spoke French and English. This location also had to have commonalities to historical references in the script. For example, a few of the lead characters are officers returning from a naval conflict in North Africa. New Orleans was and continues to be a naval hub and coincidentally, the United States was involved in the Barbary Wars in the early 1800's, which is when we set this production. There has been more than a fair amount of serendipity in the research of this project, which I feel proves NOLA to be a great setting for the opera on many levels.

Regina: What are your goals, as a professor/director for this production?

Michael: I shared a handful of goals with the students at our first meeting, which boil down to this: tell a great story. That is a deceptively simple goal that involves understanding how to perform with relatable acting style, fine vocal technique and an added dose of theatre magic. My personal goal is that the students, production team and audience come away from the show with a sense of having participated in the best things that life has to offer: good relationships and a beautiful communal experience.

Regina: I know you love small, intimate spaces. But the garden idea spoke to you from the very beginning. What is it about a garden that inspires people to be romantic and flirtatious?

Michael: I actually enjoyed the garden because you, Regina, enjoyed the garden. I was happy to see this pique your interest, but as a director, I don't marry myself to any concept until I'm in it. I always feel like the location is a character in the show and so I don't try to shape it as much as I try to accept what it is. There are some practical things that we had to create such as levels and sight lines, but I really wasn't fixed to any particular set until the deadline came to approve one. The last model of the set that you created became vital to me because I was able to spend time with it seeing how it might impose its will on the story.
Once I see all the structures, nooks and crannies of a set, then the story just kind of unfolds in my mind.

Michael: What attracted you to the courtyard design?

Regina: Like many of my friends and colleagues, I explore space in three-dimensions. I sculpt space for performance, so I build a crazy number of rough white models throughout the process. I am quite methodical about it actually. There are “many roads to Rome” as they say, and when I design I like to be prepared for any kind of feedback from the director. At our first meeting you asked me about my process and what I love and hate about it. I believe I was very honest when I said - I love the research and considering the potential of each idea. I hate having to do research later on in the process, so that's why I cast the net nice and wide from the very beginning. As partners, if we decide that we hate the idea along the way, most likely I have something already that could help us.

So for this project, we ended up with four different rough designs, each one responded to a different impetus, while still focusing on storytelling. We arrived at the courtyard composition, because at the end of the day, the community in this story is very connected to one another. So we developed this open courtyard as a way to provide a place to frame stories and moments for the lead characters.

A space for contemplation, romance (around the doorways and through the garden) and also a public square where you can hear the latest gossip or fool around with a friend.

Regina: How do you see the courtyard working? I know that you have a great sense of humor, how do you see the story unfolding in the space, especially the comedy and the romance?

Michael: One of the fascinating things about New Orleans, and especially the French Quarter, is the dichotomy between openness and secrets. New Orleans is well known for its bawdy lavishness, but if you look closely, you will see residential courtyards that are tucked away and closed-off. They are heavily guarded from the general population. That is representative of Beatrice and Benedict as well as several of the other characters in the opera. The characters, like New Orleans, have secrets to reveal. The set with balconies and courtyard details gives us plenty of chances to hide literally and figuratively, which then heightens the reveal of subsequent vulnerabilities such as love or insecurity couched in comedy.

Michael: The design is conceptual and not a literal. How do you feel this is a benefit practically speaking or to the feeling of the show?

In this very open landscape, as an audience you are very aware of the performers and the subtle nuances of character. That is a plus. This is true for the two leads and the supporting characters including Ursula and Hero, whom I anticipate will be counterpointing each entrance of the officers and chorus, physically as they do musically.

Visually the landscape is light, evocative of a town center or family compound- so it informs the way the performers travel through and engage with the space. These are the benefits, but this openness has its challenges and we will work through them directly on stage.
Alumni Spotlight: Matthew Scolin

This is the first installment in a series designed to showcase the work our students are doing and the success they are finding after they leave the classroom.

Our first Alumni Spotlight is on baritone Matthew Scolin. Matthew graduated in 2012 with an MM in Vocal Performance and Literature. You may remember his performances on the Tryon stage as Monterone in Rigoletto, Don Quixote in Man of La Mancha, Sarastro/Sprecher in Die Zauberflöte, and Don Basilio in Il barbiere di Siviglia. Since leaving Illinois, he has participated in several young artist programs, including San Francisco Opera’s Merola Opera Program, Seattle Opera, Santa Fe Opera, Virginia Opera, Glimmerglass Festival, and currently Pittsburgh Opera. Some of his favorite roles to date include Sprecher in Zauberflöte, Truffaldino in Ariadne auf Naxos, Dick Deadeye in H.M.S. Pinafore - all with Virginia Opera; Colline in La bohème with DC Public Opera; Martin in Candide with the Glimmerglass Festival; and High Priest of Baal in Nabucco with Pittsburgh Opera.

When asked to give advice to current students seeking a professional singing career, Matthew had this to say:

“Always be extra, extra prepared for everything you're doing. Seriously. People will know you as “that dependable person who is always prepared” and you will get work. Also, be a good colleague. Don't gossip; be kind to everyone. Finally, gather a team of industry professionals who believe in you and your work to use as a sounding board. We need people to advise, guide, and teach us even after we graduate.”

Attention Donors:

Lyric Theatre @ Illinois is a program that is fortunate to have a wide base of support from the College of Fine and Applied Arts, the School of Music, and the Krannert Center for the Performing Arts. Because of its wide reach it touches students in majors from the performing arts to engineering, faculty members across the arts and sciences, and community members of all ages, from elementary school kids to retirees. We are grateful to have a growing audience and robust ticket sales, but we still need your financial help to continue to fund outstanding resources four our students, including bringing in guest artists from Karachi, Paris, Vienna, New York and London to work with them and to inspire our audiences. We are also in need of scholarships for our younger students at a time when many families are pressed to afford to send them to us for their education. Your gifts make all of this possible. Thank you for your generosity—we promise that we will show you what a profound impact it has.
Lyric Theatre T-shirts are here!

Show your support for LTI and get yours today!
On sale now at Promenade in the KCPA Lobby!
$20 ($15 for students)

La Creazione di una Nuova Opera
The Creation of a New Work
A letter from our General Director

Opera is intimidating. It's often in a foreign language. It costs a lot of money. There are traditions surrounding when to applaud, what to wear, what to say and how to say it. The truth is that opera is absolutely and entirely for all of us. I've had the opportunity to sing in many of the great opera houses of the world offering my interpretation of characters in operas that are considered staples. I've also had the opportunity to create new roles in those same opera houses. What I have found is that the later not only improves the former but it keeps the art form from becoming irrelevant.

Now, more than ever, the performing arts need to be united and the performers need to be well versed in all disciplines. Not only are opera companies, large and small, producing new vocal works, but orchestras around the world are as well. For example, beginning this season the New York Philharmonic in partnership with Lincoln Center for the Performing Arts is committing to a multi-year project which will present fully staged productions of new operatic works that have yet to be seen in New York. Opera Philadelphia is in its fifth year of a ten-year commitment to develop and produce one new work per year for ten years. Santa Fe Opera this past summer in collaboration with Opera Philadelphia produced the first opera ever written by Pulitzer Prize winning composer, Jennifer Higdon, to great critical and public acclaim. Dallas Opera is producing two new pieces, "Great Scott" by Jake Heggie and Terrance McNally and "Becoming Santa" by Mark Adamo. Our team at Lyric Theatre not only recognizes this changing landscape but are a part of it as well, and we are developing a curriculum to prepare our students for professional careers that may span from Monteverdi to Muhly and Lerner to Laird.

New works don't, however, develop on their own. They need to be worked and reworked. They are written and rewritten, tested and tried. One of the most critical periods in the development of a new piece is the “workshop” phase. At the center of our mission here at LTI is to have our finger on the pulse of the professional performing world. One of the ways we are doing this is by bringing the professional world to us and offering them something that they can only get here: a safe environment to experiment. Last year we workedshopped Polly Peachum, a new piece by Gene Scheer and Billy VanHorn. This year we will begin workshopping Bhutto by composer Mohammed Fairouz and writer Mohammed Hanif about the life of Benazir Bhutto, which will debut at Pittsburgh Opera in February of 2018.

These opportunities in combination with the teaching of solid fundamental skills is what makes Lyric Theatre at Illinois unique among programs the country. Preparing students for a professional career is our responsibility. Developing artist who will shape the performing world for future generations is our goal.

With your attendance, support and help we can continue to make a footprint on the art world here in our little prairie town.

Go Illini!
Nathan Gunn
LTI Fall Season

Isabel Leonard Master Class
Grammy award winning opera singer Isabel Leonard gave a master class on October 15th for four students. She is starring in La Cenerentola at the Lyric Opera of Chicago. Don't miss her Krannert Recital with Sharon Isbin, guitar, November 14th in the Great Hall.

Opera Scenes Concert
This fall we are excited to present a scenes program of Mozart and Rossini operas: Così fan tutte, Die Entführung aus dem Serail, Don Giovanni, and La Cenerentola. The performance will be on November 19th at 7:30pm in Smith Recital Hall, and admission is free.

Lyric Theatre Studio Concert
From discovery and desire to disguise and deceit, this fall's Lyric Theatre Studio program features bel canto favorites with excerpts from Norma, Falstaff, L'elisir d'amore, and more. Additionally, we will sing and dance through the Golden Age of musical theatre with selections from Oklahoma, Wonderful Town, Guys and Dolls, The Music Man, and The Pajama Game. Catch the performance in the Opera Rehearsal Room on Level 2 of Krannert Center on December 2nd at 3:30pm. Admission is free.

Mohammed Fairouz is busy composing the first act of his opera Bhutto, which will be heard in a workshop April 7th in the Tryon Festival Theatre at 1pm. Nathan Gunn will sing the role of Zulfikar Bhutto, prime minister of Pakistan, and father of Benazir. With a libretto by Mohammed Hanif (A Case of exploding Mangoes) and produced by Beth Morrison Projects and Pittsburgh Opera in collaboration with the Krannert Center/LTI, it promises to be a major addition to 21st century opera.
Over 250 composers have set the lyrics of ‘It was a lover and his lass’ and ‘O mistress mine’ to music. In fact, with the exception of A Comedy of Errors (which inspired both a 1978 Olivier award-winning musical and Rodgers and Hart’s The Boys from Syracuse), every Shakespearean play explicitly demands vocal and/or instrumental music: dances for festivities, serenades, lullabies, drinking songs, songs of madness. Many of Shakespeare’s theatre-goers came to hear the improvised singing of his clowns, especially the star ‘fool’, Robert Armin, who originated the role of Feste in Twelfth Night among many others.

Twelfth Night is unique, with music at the opening and close, and featured its star clown performing seven songs, probably accompanying himself on lute and also playing the pipe and tabor (a hand drum). We have original settings of four of Twelfth Night’s songs by Robert Jones and Thomas Morley, a student of William Byrd and contemporary of Shakespeare. His A Plaine and Easie Introduction to Practicall Musicke contains a wealth of information about the music of Elizabethan England, as well as an astonishing number of misspellings!

Lyric Theatre @ Illinois is celebrating the Bard with three productions ranging from literal adaptation (Benjamin Britten and Peter Pears’ A Midsummer Night’s Dream), to romantic reimagination (Hector Berlioz’s Béatrice et Bénédict), which concentrates the action of Much Ado About Nothing on the title characters, and features a character of Berlioz’s invention, the parody of the learned musician—supposedly based on his elder contemporary, Gaspare Spontini—named Somarone, or “Big Donkey,” to free fantasy (Cole Porter and Sam and Bella Spewack used a fictional production of The Taming of the Shrew as the play-within-a-play of Kiss Me, Kate.

Britten is inspired by Athens’ vast and diverse array of characters to a virtuosic display of his compositional prowess, and an astonishing array of orchestral effects elicited from a relatively small ensemble. The worlds of the lovers, fairies, and mechanicals are each complete and self-contained, yet unified in effect. The opera-within-an-opera of Pyramus and Thisby references at least 21 works from the operatic canon, from Purcell to Mozart to Verdi to Richard Strauss to Stravinsky to Britten himself!

When Kiss Me, Kate opened in 1948, Broadway had already done the Bard twice. Legendary writer/director/producer George Abbott had provided The Boys from Syracuse with a nimble book and many anachronistic winks to theatregoers of 1938. Swingen’ the Dream set A Midsummer Night’s Dream in New Orleans, and despite starring Louis Armstrong as Bottom and featuring a “jukebox” score with music by everyone from Armstrong to Benny Goodman to Dorothy Fields and Jimmy Van Heusen, closed after only 13 performances. Bella Spewack claims credit for the idea of embedding Shakespeare in a drama about the backstage antics of a struggling Baltimore theatrical troupe, and inspired Cole Porter to his greatest success. Porter provided essentially two scores: a jazz and swing infused score for the “real” world, and a brilliantly parodic pastiche of theatre music for the theatrical world.

The epigraph to Hector Berlioz’s posthumously published Mémoires belongs to Macbeth: “Life’s but a walking shadow; a poor player/that struts and frets his hour upon the stage./And then is heard no more; it is a tale/Told by an idiot, full of sound a fury,/Signifying nothing.” In truth, Shakespeare was the inspiration for the French composer’s career. Even though he did not at the time speak English, his attendance of a performance of Hamlet in 1827 struck him with a double thunderbolt—he fell madly in love with the Ophelia, Harriet Smithson, and with the Bard. He wrote: “The effect of her prodigious talent, or rather of her dramatic genius, on my imagination and on my heart can be compared only to the bewilderment into which I was thrown by the poet, whose worthy interpreter she was. I cannot say more. Shakespeare, falling thus unexpectedly upon me, dismayed and astounded me. His lightning, in opening to me the firmament of art with a sublime thunderclap, illuminated the most distant depths. I recognized true grandeur, true beauty, dramatic truth…I saw…I understood… I felt…that I was really conscious of life, and that I must now rise up and walk.” He would go on to compose Overtures on The Tempest and King Lear, a funeral march for Hamlet, La Mort d’Ophélie, the love duet of Les Troyens and of course, wrote his own translation and adaptation into French of Much Ado About Nothing—Béatrice et Bénédict.

And the Bard of Avon is still inspiring the creation of new adaptations, from your humble author’s incidental music for Macbeth, to Thomas Adès’s epic The Tempest, to The Lion King and 2004’s Illyria. My dear friend John Briggs has written delightful adaptations of Twelfth Night and The Taming of the Shrew, which he terms “Shakespeare Jazz.” Just as it has inspired works of genius and entire artistic movements in every generation since his own time, Shakespeare’s vivid, compelling, hilarious, tragic, audacious vision will no doubt continue to resound and inspire “‘til the last syllable of recorded time.”
Beatrice & Benedict

Music and Libretto by Hector Berlioz, after Much Ado About Nothing
Claire Levacher, conductor  Michael John Foster, director

the fine line between love and loathing

Krannert Center  KrannertCenter.com | 217.333.6280
Local HS students spend week in “MT Boot Camp”  
by Dawn Harris, Resident Director

For the past ten years, ISYM Musical Theatre Camp has been a popular week of training for hundreds of young High School singing actors from Illinois and beyond. As Camp Coordinator, I have worked with faculty members and guest artists from across the country, including Youtube sensation and recording artist, Natalie Weiss. This past summer, ISYM welcomed our two new Lyric Theatre faculty members Sarah Wigley Johnson and Michael Tilley to the staff. In addition, we were very fortunate to have three of our Lyric Theatre students assist us: Justin Brauer, Marla Moore and Gabriella Ciametti, as well as, Lyric Theatre Board of Advisors Member and pianist, Rick Murphy.

I have fondly referred to this intense week of training as “MT Boot Camp.” What these students accomplish in six days is nothing short of miraculous! The camp takes place for a week in late June each summer and is comprised of workshops designed to prepare interested singing actors for the musical stage. Workshops and classes begin at 8:00AM and run until 5:00PM each day and include movement, choreography, vocal technique and literature, musical and dramatic coaching, stagecraft, auditioning and diction. After the first day “Auditions”, the students are assigned roles in musical theatre scenes. They immediately go into musical coaching for the next two days, then have staging and

choreography, on the following two days. At the same time, they attend voice, acting and audition master classes. By the end of the week their scenes are memorized, fully staged and are in final rehearsals. Our Scenes Concert takes place on the final day. Last summer we had the privilege of performing in Tryon Festival Theatre in The Krannert Center for the Performing Arts. Our program consisted of fifteen scenes from all eras of musical theatre ranging from “Shrek” to “Oklahoma” to “Hairspray.” The campers had a blast, made new friends and were all wonderful!

One of the highlights of the week was a surprise visit by Lyric Theatre General Director, Nathan Gunn! Nathan graciously came to one of our rehearsals to give the campers his support and to answer any questions they might have about the business and Lyric Theatre at Illinois.

ISYM has always held such a special place in my heart! I believe with the addition of Sarah and Michael to the staff, the camp will now be the perfect opportunity for High School students to get a taste of what the Lyric Theatre program has to offer them as a full college experience. Many thanks to Sarah, Michael, Rick, Justin, Marla and Gabby for a successful week!
Phyllis Cline
1938 – 2015
Illinois Opera Theatre Enthusiasts (IOTE), Founder
1990 – 2015
We are eternally grateful to Phyllis for her faithful and unwavering support of our program. Her memory will be emblazoned in our minds, in our hearts and on our stage for generations to come.

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