

diversions

Just a Slice, Please Loretta Devine (below) reprises her role as a no-nonsense campus security guard in the extra-lame teen slasher flick "Urban Legends: Final Cut."



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Smooth Operators

Opera Offers More than Arias

By KAREN WHICHARD
Staff Writer

Giant women roar across the stage singing unbearable arias in Italian. Eardrum-piercing solos place the crystal champagne flutes of the senior-citizen audience in unquestionable peril. In case you want to know what's going on, the impossible-to-read subtitles flash by at a mile a minute.

This is opera, right? Not necessarily so. Opera in the United States and worldwide continually breaks new creative molds, defying traditional expectations of what opera should be.

"I think there has been a new invigoration of the art form. Part of it is the new, hip group of people, and part is the reinstatement of standard operas by the avant-garde," said UNC music Professor Anne MacNeil.

And opera's audience is not just wealthy, older cosmopolites any more, said David Schmidt, a baritone with Raleigh's National Opera Company. "I've noticed, attending opera in major cities, it used to be the older generation attending," he said. "I'm seeing a lot more young folk attending opera, which I think will sustain it into the 21st century."

One project that has the modern opera community buzzing involves a proposed special-effects laden staging of Wagner's "Ring" cycle by the Los Angeles Opera.

The production will be designed by

Industrial Light and Magic, the special-effects company founded by George Lucas, creator of "Star Wars."

"I think it can be really good to expand on the art form. The general idea remains the same - it is still spectacle," MacNeil said, speaking of the project.

The National Opera Company has been working to bring opera to the citizens of North Carolina for 50 years, since its inception by Capitol Broadcasting founder A.J. Fletcher.

Fletcher, an opera lover, created the company with the intention to "get opera to the people," said Schmidt.

Fletcher thought there were three ways to do that, Schmidt said. The first is to perform everything in English; second is "to take it on the road, take it on the road to towns that wouldn't otherwise have opera companies visiting them and residing in them."

Finally, Fletcher wanted to perpetuate the health of opera by hiring singers early in their careers and giving them professional experience in lead roles early on.

The company signs members on for one-year contracts; during that year, members tour the state and reside together at the National Opera Home in Raleigh.

Scmidt said the company usually performs pieces from the standard opera repertoire. It plans, however, to stage a production of Hickory composer J. Mark Scearce's "Kitty Hawk."

And the state of opera, Scmidt said,

has never been better, infused with the vitality of new performance groups.

"There are a lot more new young companies starting up in the recent years, and I think that because of the work of companies like this one, and others similar to it, that opera has become much more accessible to people, less frightening," he said. "People are starting to appreciate the beauty of the art form."

The cybercommunity, utilizing the ever-expanding technology of the past decade, created its own opera in 1996. Brain Opera, which moved into its permanent home in Vienna, Austria, this summer, is the brainchild of Tod Machover and a team of media specialists at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

The project strives to allow every type of music lover to create sounds for the ever-changing piece. Brain Opera takes contributions from both live and cyber audiences, and continuously transmits their broadcast both online and in its music hall. The group plans to release a CD this fall.



New York's Glimmerglass Opera company creatively strays from the pervasive stereotype depicting viking-hat-capped actors. The group boldly defines the middle ground between eccentric contemporary pieces and traditional forms. The company, known for its summer opera festival near Cooperstown, N.Y., utilizes simple sets -

Central Park, for example - instead of the more elaborate, somewhat pretentious look of traditional opera.

For Triangle residents, seeing quality opera doesn't require an expensive trip to New York. Two companies, Opera North Carolina and Triangle Opera Theatre, regularly perform in the area.

Longleaf Opera, a new professional company now entering its sophomore

season, provides yet another outlet. Longleaf concentrates primarily on American and British opera.

In addition, the Carolina Union Performing Arts Series has brought an opera to campus each season for five years. The series contracts Western Opera Theatre, a professional troupe from San Francisco.

Least people think that opera is an art form for the stuffy upper crust, Donald Luse, director of the Carolina Union, has proof otherwise.

"There is a tremendous interest in the Triangle, and the opera consistently sells out. The crowd is a real mix of students, faculty and local community members."

The Arts & Entertainment Editor can be reached at artsdesk@unc.edu.



PHOTO COURTESY OF WESTERN OPERA THEATRE

Western Opera Theatre will bring "Die Fledermaus" to Memorial Hall Dec. 8 and 9 as part of the Carolina Union's Performing Arts Series.

'Susannah' Puts Folk Twist on High Art

By DAVID POVILL
Staff Writer

Dr. Randolph Umberger wants to make an opera lover out of you.

Long Leaf Opera's production of "Susannah," premiering Sept. 28 at Durham's Carolina Theatre, is the perfect opportunity to do just that, said Umberger.

An American opera set in Tennessee during the Great Depression, "Susannah" tells the story of a woman caught between a preacher's earthly desire and the jealous revenge of his congregation. With a peculiar combination of revival hymns and

Appalachian square dancing, "Susannah" is a unique retelling of the Biblical story of the same name - and a unique opera experience. The story addresses a variety of strong themes, Umberger said. "It's about prejudice, jealousy and bigotry. It's a very strong story, thematically."

Susannah is an outcast in her little village, shunned by the others because of her alcoholic brother. When the new preacher unexpectedly comes into town, Susannah catches his eye.

The next day, while searching for a

stream for performing baptisms, the elders come across Susannah bathing naked.

The elders' wives start spreading rumors, and soon, Susannah is completely ostracized by the village.

But Georgia McEever, who plays the role of Susannah, said the heroine is far from a weak character.

"She's a sweet, innocent, wonderful young girl who is destroyed by her little town and its petty jealousies. She doesn't understand why everything has turned on her, but she ends up becoming hardened. It's a very positive message at the end of the play," she said. Elizabeth Elliott, who was the artistic director when "Susannah" was performed for Opera Fort Collins in Colorado, also said the story focuses on Susannah's strength. "Susannah shows a lot of courage in the face of intolerance," she said. Elliott said there is a lot of tension and passion in the story, both romantic and religious. Carlisle Floyd, an eminent American composer and son of a Methodist preacher, wrote "Susannah" in 1954,

during the "witch hunts" led by Senator Joseph McCarthy.

"Floyd combined the idea of the witch hunts and the strongly conservative fervor of the time with the beautiful Appalachian folk ballads and square dancing that he grew up with," Umberger said.

Maestro Benjamin Keaton, co-founder of Long Leaf Opera, is conducting the music.

"It's a really wonderful show," McEever said. "There are two beautiful arias in it. It's a challenge, but it's fabulous."

Umberger said the appeal of "Susannah" is universal, even for those that don't consider themselves opera fans.

When the opera was performed in

Colorado, a local paper ran a story with the headline, "You don't have to like opera to love 'Susannah,'" Umberger said.

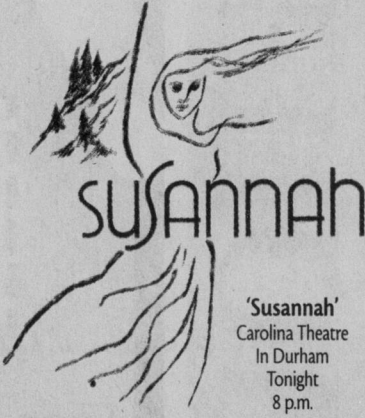
"If you have ever been afraid of opera or thought it wasn't for you, this is the time to fall in love with the art form," she said.

"It's our most dynamic American work."

Performances are Thursday and Saturday at 8 p.m. and Sunday at 2 p.m. at the historic Carolina Theatre in Durham.

For more information, call 968-9595 or e-mail tantarah@aol.com.

The Arts & Entertainment Editor can be reached at artsdesk@unc.edu.



'Susannah'
Carolina Theatre
In Durham
Tonight
8 p.m.

'Til the Fat Lady Sings

Good opera doesn't mean making a trip to New York or Paris. The Triangle hosts a number of opera companies, and travelling operas make regular stops at the area's university campuses.

Sept. 28-29, Oct. 1: Long Leaf Opera presents "Susannah" at the Carolina Theatre in Durham. (919) 560-3040.

Nov. 1: Duke University presents Renee Fleming, "America's Favorite Soprano," at Page Auditorium on the Duke campus. (919) 584-4444.

Nov. 2: Western Opera Theatre and the Carolina Union Performing Arts series present "Die Fledermaus" at Memorial Hall. (919) 962-1449.

Dec. 8-9: UNC Opera Workshop presents Puccini's "Suor Angelica" and "Gianni Schicchi" at Hill Hall Auditorium. 962-1039.