

RON LUCHSINGER EXPANDS COMMONWEALTH OPERA'S ARTISTIC HORIZONS

An interview with Janet Sadler, Commonwealth Opera Executive Director

As Commonwealth Opera celebrates its 30th anniversary season, the company gives a warm welcome to *Ron Luchsinger* of New Hampshire as the new artistic director to succeed founding Artistic Director Emeritus **Richard R. Rescia.**

The January appointment comes on the heels of Luchsinger's outstanding artistic direction of the company's fall production of Rossini's *The Barber of Seville* staged at the Academy of Music in Northampton. Media and public acclaim for the two performances catapulted Luchsinger to the center of the board's top choices for a permanent successor to Maestro Rescia.

Since Rescia's retirement in 2003, guest artistic directors including the area's acclaimed Li Cianglo have continued the company's reputation for top-quality performances reaching audiences throughout the Pioneer Valley and beyond. "We believe we've chosen the right candidate to lead us artistically," said President Richard Stromgren, "someone who is recognized for outstanding achievements at other companies and who has the artistic energy and vision for opera production to carry us into a new dimension."

Currently director of productions for Opera North, which has a summer season, Luchsinger has directed operas from Alaska to Oregon to Texas and back our way to Connecticut. He also has been artistic director of Simsbury Light Opera, guest artistic director at the University of Connecticut Opera Department, stage director at Lyric Opera of Dallas, and director of the New York Opera/Drama Studio.

Drawing critical acclaim for the special ways in which he treats a wide variety of repertoire, he has produced over 80 operas and 20 musical theater works, including *Carmen*, *Tales of Hoffmann*, *La Traviata*, *Norma*, *Man of La Mancha*, *Brigadoon*, and 12 Gilbert & Sullivan works.

Luchsinger holds a Master of Music in opera production from the Hartt School, where he has been a faculty member. He is co-director of a series of educational videos produced by the New England Arts Alliance to train young artists.

Interviewed by phone at his Enfield, N.H. home, he had interesting answers for our collective curiosity:

When did you first know that you'd be involved in a big way with opera?

Opera was a big interest for me fairly early on—I started listening to MET broadcast at age 10 and got my first full-length opera recording for my twelfth birthday— maybe a bit unusual for someone growing up in Iowa. I set out to be a singer, but I directed my first opera, *Carmen*, as a junior in college. The voice thing wasn't really working out so I started in grad school as a theory/comp major, only to find myself working with the opera workshop at Wayne State and directing Flowtown's *Martha*. Eventually, I got the idea that directing was my thing. And it has filled my life pretty much ever since. I started directing professionally in 1973.

What are some of the biggest challenges in directing staged productions?

Opera is the most collaborative of all the arts. Singers come from such a variety of backgrounds, and conductors may or may not have an understanding of theater. And those who attend and support opera can be really passionate about it, and have strong ideas of what it is. The director has to put it all together and make a great show—both relevant and entertaining. Relevance can be what draws new audiences to opera. I still encounter people (often young) who avoid opera because they consider it elitist.

How do you think the public's taste is running now in operas and musicals?

Opera has enjoyed a resurgence of popularity in recent years, and younger people are starting to attend. I like to say that opera is what you turn to when MTV is not enough! But the audiences are somewhat divided between the progressives, who are not interested in old-fashioned static productions, and the traditionalists, who are uncomfortable with anything “modern.” And there are those who love opera in any shape or form. There is a tremendous potential audience that has yet to discover the joy of experiencing opera. We have to help them overcome their fear. Notice I said “experience.” People used to argue whether one “saw” or “heard” an opera. . . I say opera is a total experience!

The most powerful and effective opera performance I have experienced recently was of Jake Heggie's *Dead Man Walking* in Pittsburgh. The large audience included hundreds of high school and college students who stood, cheered and stomped their approval at the final curtain. We ought to take note of how important it is to make opera relevant.

Music theater has had a sort of rough time and is now reawakening. National tours or popular shows make it challenging to produce professional music theater on a low budget. One of the things that attracts me to Commonwealth is the company's dedication to first-rate professional musical theater productions. The third show I directed in my career was *The Pajama Game* in my home town, Dubuque, Iowa, where it actually takes place! People ask how I can be interested in both musicals and opera and I remind them that I am, after all, an American, and it is part of my cultural heritage. In fact, my introduction to any kind of musical theater was going to movie musicals.

Is it a big risk to stage lesser-known or more contemporary works?

The big challenge for opera companies is to not be afraid to use aggressive marketing to fill houses for contemporary or less often performed works. There is no question that companies need to broaden their repertoires and audiences if they hope to survive this century. If we make opera fun and affordable, audiences will come. It's dangerous to depend on opera “name recognition” alone. . . you reduce your repertoire to a handful of works. The idea is to cultivate a spirit of adventure in your audience and with your board members.

Can you identify the most rewarding aspect of your work?

The most satisfying aspect is to see audiences moved to tears or laughter by what we do and also to see young singers develop into successful professionals.

What would you consider to be your greatest achievement and personal style?

I hope I have helped many young singers to incorporate good acting into their art. I encourage performers to be active participants in the process and to use the musical score to shape their portrayals. I give them space, within clear parameters. I also feel I've significantly helped introduce opera to a large number of people.

How do you see Commonwealth Opera advancing into the future?

We have much to do to expand our education and outreach activities and to bring more opera and musical theater to the area. We have an excellent reputation and a good foundation. I would like to involve more people in the process.

What kinds of collaborations do you envision between Commonwealth Opera and Opera North?

Opera North's great achievement is its Young Artist program. I want to explore possibilities of cross-feeding activities for young artists to gain more experience with both companies. That includes tech and production interns as well. With the number of colleges in the Northampton area, we should be able to find many exciting young candidates. I hope we can also find ways to share sets, costumes, scores, maybe even entire productions in the future.

