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Opera has a voice in Rhode Island

Douglas Hadden

"I have always believed that opera is a planet where the muses work together, join hands, and celebrate all the arts."

--Franco Zeffirelli, film director

PROVIDENCE -- Running an opera enterprise on an annual \$250,000 budget is not exactly running on empty, but it doesn't leave much margin for error.

So Opera Providence the last couple of years has refocused on grassroots offerings that continue to connect to the community, though no longer bringing to Veterans Memorial Auditorium the larger touring shows that even the better-heeled Rhode Island Philharmonic recently decided to drop.

But that doesn't mean opera in this state has gone silent, said Loriana De Crescenzo, executive director of Opera Providence.

OP is the descendant of Ocean State Light Opera, which morphed into Ocean State Lyric Opera in 1990 featuring a summer series of primarily Gilbert and Sullivan operettas. It evolved to a professional opera company, staging Verdi's "Rigoletto," and became associated with the VMA Arts & Cultural Center in 1998, and was renamed Opera Providence in 2002.

The idea, said De Crescenzo, who hails from West Warwick, was to dovetail with a resurgent city that was fast becoming a destination.

Over the past five seasons, OP has drawn more than 27,000 to its fully staged opera productions and performances for students. Its OPERAtunity enrichment program brings artists-in-residence and after-school activities to students throughout greater Providence and beyond.

It has worked with Festival Ballet to offer "Carmen," been an integral part of Waterfire, done programs at the Providence Children's Museum and "Enchanted Evening" concerts at Rhode Island College.

And Sundays this July (except the July 4th weekend) OP will reprise its "Opera on the Hill" concerts that showcased its resident company of singers to a packed DePasquale Square on Providence's Federal Hill last summer.

Most recently, OP wrapped up a season of four opera performances at the Columbus Theatre on Broadway with the Rhode Island premiere of "Fiesta de la Zarzuela," a style of Spanish popular opera that De Crescenzo said reached out to a new audience.

Running an opera company is not what De Crescenzo had first in mind when she studied at the University of Hartford's Hartt School of Music then sang for several years in New York City (where her singing repertoire moved to opera), and later in the north of Italy.

That's where she met her husband, Valter Maina, who comes from outside Turin, then moved back to Rhode Island, where Maina works in research and development at Cooley Inc. in Pawtucket, as they began raising their first child, a daughter. "And then we had (fraternal) twins," bringing the North Kingstown family to "three little divas," she said of their daughters, now ages 10 and 7.

De Crescenzo thinks the local future of opera as a popular art form needs to develop from seeds planted in the schools, such as Pawtucket's performing arts high school set to debut in September. She pointed to cities in California as well as schools in St. Louis as places where students receive training from opera professionals, "learn the languages [French, German and Italian are the primary languages in which opera is

sung] and become familiar with the repertoire."

"The Italians say it's the appoggio -- something to lean on, someone to help you," she described such mentoring. "Giving youth guidance through training allows them a further chance to be expressive," from singing and writing scripts to creating scenery, she said.

While in Rhode Island the larger touring companies are not being brought in, at least for now, De Crescenzo said she also sees in that an opportunity. "We know there are opera lovers, so I want to be the supplier of the art form here," she said. "People shouldn't have to venture out, and there's a tremendous amount of talent to draw on," from Boston to New York.

"It matters with us to do things where we advance the art form, help people appreciate the opera, connect with our community and give back to our community. So my (mission) is to connect as much as possible with the local talent."

Not that OP has sworn off bringing back a touring company or two down the line, though the process can be daunting -- and expensive. "You have to deal with housing (performers), three weeks' rehearsal, marketing and ticketing. The financial strains were enormous. We didn't reach the level of funding from our loyal patrons to meet the levels of those full productions," and OP's budget had to be trimmed.

Another focus is demystifying opera to make it accessible to a new audience. "You take down the barriers, make people more comfortable with the art form. (Audiences are) swept away by the music and human stories that transcend ages.

"Dramatic? Yes. But that's the theater. Opera is theater," she said. "In opera we want to be swept away. We want to be over the top. Our daily lives are rarely over the top. We don't (necessarily) need lavish sets and costumes, but the way the story is told through the singing."

Just past is OP's annual "Neapolitan Night" fundraiser at Metacomet Country Club in East Providence, and next fall brings brings the Caruso Awards Gala benefit on Sept. 29 -- then the new season.

"We haven't announced our season yet but our focus will be presenting the best of our local and emerging talent," De Crescenzo said.

"We want to be the ones that continue for the long run, the longterm (opera) company. So we're looking for longevity, a long-lasting presence," she said.

Making Rhode Island a planet, in Zeffirelli's phrase, where the muses "join hands, and celebrate all the arts."