

Unveiling a Michelangelo

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BY CHANNING GRAY

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It is midafternoon, and composer Enrico Garzilli has cracked open a bottle of pinot grigio and is tossing together a plate of linguini and clams.

He's in the open kitchen of his rambling South County beachfront house, with its spacious second-floor deck and sweeping view of Block Island, which, on this clear, still day looks almost swimmable.

Garzilli, a former Roman Catholic priest, will soon be leaving for choir practice at Kingston Congregational Church, where he is preparing his singers for Easter Sunday. But until then, there is time to talk about the major project in his life, the premiere of Michelangelo, the musical slated for Friday and Saturday at the Providence Performing Arts Center.

The venture, being put on by Opera Providence, is something of a gamble for a relative unknown, having to fill 6,400 seats over two nights for a musical about a long-dead, albeit famous, artist. But the mild-mannered Garzilli is such a master tunesmith, such a superb storyteller, that Michelangelo might just be the hit of the season.

"This is a big deal for Opera Providence mounting it at PPAC," said Opera Providence's Loreana De Crescenzo. "But it's a beautiful work that will maybe get people in the doors for the first time.

"It's haunting music that stays with you."

Anyone who heard his musical Rage of the Heart a decade ago at Providence's Veterans Memorial Auditorium knows the Cranston-born Garzilli has the magic touch when he comes to fashioning a song.

Rage is based on the passionate 12th-century romance between scholar Peter Abelard and his student Heloise. And it is filled with melodies to die for.

It now looks like Rage is headed for Broadway next spring. German producer Fritz Kurz has assembled a creative team, and is putting together the \$10 million in production costs. All that remains is to find a theater.

"I think it will happen," said Kurz, who made his money in European productions of Phantom of the Opera and Starlight Express, which has now been running for two

decades in the Ruhr region of Germany. He built a \$150 million house for Phantom and sunk another \$20 million into production fees.

“I’ve never read a better book in my life,” Kurz said of Rage. “I think Enrico is a huge talent. He’s better than Andrew Lloyd Webber, and I like Andrew Lloyd Webber.”

But more on that later. First Michelangelo.

This is Garzilli’s coming-of-age tale about the young artist overcoming jealous rivals and self-doubts.

It is not Garzilli’s first musical, but it has been in the works longer than any other.

De Crescenzo, of Opera Providence, called it a “cross-over piece, not quite an opera, not quite a musical.”

The project dates back to the 1970s, when Garzilli was teaching music and literature in Rome and began writing poems based on the little-known sonnets of Michelangelo. Those were published in an Italian literary magazine called The Blue Guitar.

At the time, though, he had no interest in writing a musical about Michelangelo, not until work on the star-crossed Rage of the Heart stalled — after a car crash in which the intended director was killed.

Rage suffered two setbacks, in fact. The first was the death in a London car wreck of Peter Coe, considered one of the outstanding directors of his generation. Coe had invited Garzilli to his home to play Rage on the piano and told him that out of the 200 or so scores he’d heard that year, this was the only one he was interested in directing.

The plan was to open it in Coe’s theater in Bromley, just outside London, and then bring Rage to the West End.

Garzilli’s agent, James Brook, closed his Los Angeles office and moved to London to work on the project. Amanda McBroom, who wrote the song “The Rose,” played the role of Heloise during a workshop. Garzilli gave up a tenure-track teaching position at Providence College to move to London.

Meanwhile, EMI, the recording giant, was interested in doing a high-end demo and sinking 2 million pounds into the project, but the team went instead with First Night Records and David Cullum, Andrew Webber’s arranger.

Rage looked like a go. Then the unthinkable happened: Coe and his mother were killed in a car crash while driving through London. Brook returned to his office in California and the project stalled.

A few years later, out of the blue, August Everding, known as “the pope of Bavarian opera,” called Kurz and said he had refurbished a state-owned opera house, the Prinzregententheater, and was looking for a musical. Kurz had just the project for him — Rage.

Everding loved Rage and was all set to produce the work when the second setback occurred: the government of Bavaria offered him untold sums to turn the building into a theater school. The offer was too good to refuse, and the project again died.

Michelangelo as Rocky

At that point, Garzilli took up work on Michelangelo. The first draft was completed in 1989 and it then went into workshops. Excerpts were performed when Garzilli was an artist-in-residence at Johnson & Wales University.

Now the show will be seen in its entirety, in a quasi-staged version with professional singers and members of the Rhode Island Philharmonic. The PPAC stage will be divided into three segments, with the drama taking place downstage and about two-dozen musicians playing behind a scrim at midstage. The chorus of 30 or more will be stationed to the rear of that. The fine tenor Jason McStoots will sing the title role.

Although Kurz has thrown most of his money and energy into getting Rage on a Broadway stage, he is planning to build a \$500 million house in Berlin for Michelangelo. The show would run at night for the foreseeable future, and performances reflecting the glory days of Berlin would be staged during the day.

As for the weekend production at PPAC, there will be no “hard-built” elements, said Opera Providence’s De Crescenzo, although there will be projections of Michelangelo’s art work.

The show is a sort of flashback. It opens with the aged Michelangelo near death and Tommaso Cavalieri recounting how his old friend had to fight his father over becoming an artist instead of a banker, how he faced opposition from the right-wing fanatic Savonarola, and how he began to question his calling when assigned to “decorate” the Sistine Chapel ceiling.

Savonarola regarded art as the work of the devil and burned scores of paintings. He even tried to sack the palace of Michelangelo’s patron, Lorenzo de Medici, who was forced to flee Florence.

“It’s like a Rocky story,” said Garzilli. “Michelangelo had to undergo everything working against him and triumph.”

Born in Cranston

Although Garzilli is an ordained priest, he has not been active for more than 20 years. He has devoted himself instead to teaching and composing. He was leaning in that direction even during his early days in Rome.

When a young Garzilli showed up at the Accademia Nazionale di Santa Cecilia, the acclaimed Roman music school, his teacher asked him what he was doing dressed in priest's robes. Garzilli, said his teacher, was the best pianist to walk through the door in 30 years. He was missing his calling.

There was no question Garzilli was destined to be a musician. He was born in the Knightsville section of Cranston to a family of bakers. His grandfather, also Enrico, moved the business here from Rome around the turn of the last century, when the streets of Cranston were still covered with dirt. The old man was a skilled pastry chef whose customers only wanted bread and pizza.

A picture of his grandfather standing proudly next to a 1916 delivery truck hangs in Garzilli's living room, in the beach house his parents once owned. Garzilli, who has three brothers, spent hours working on the truck as a lad.

Young Enrico's Cranston bedroom window was just a few feet from the sweet aroma of baking bread, and he can remember mornings when his folks would be up at 3 kneading dough and feeding it into two huge, wood-fired brick ovens.

He had a cousin who was an opera singer and by the age of 6 or 7, Enrico had memorized the arias from popular Verdi and Puccini operas. But more than anything he wanted to play the piano.

And he proved a talent. After a few years of lessons, he would take the bus to Providence to perform evenings on a local radio station. Neighbors on summer evenings would leave the windows open so they could hear his rendition of Chopin's Fantasy Impromptu wafting through the streets of Cranston.

Garzilli said that by the time he was 16, he had about 150 pieces of music committed to memory. He can still recall most of them.

After graduating from Cranston East High School, he spent four years at the Our Lady of Providence seminary, where he was a student and served as school organist. At the same time, he became the assistant to the late Alexander Peloquin, organist at the Cathedral of Sts. Peter and Paul in Providence. Garzilli was 19 at the time.

Peloquin often turned his famed chorale over to Garzilli when he was out of town.

After seminary, Garzilli headed to Rome, where he split his time between teaching the classics and composing. He was head of music for the North American College and taught Homer and Dante for Gregorian University.

Then it was back to Our Lady of Providence, where the seminary, which melded with Providence College, was interested in training someone to teach English literature. So Garzilli was sent to get a master's degree in English at the University of Rhode Island, and later, a doctorate in comparative literature at Brown.

A jazz-age tale

Garzilli does not strike one as the typical Broadway composer, one who has traveled the world to push his music.

He was in London with Coe to try to clinch the deal with Rage and in Munich with Kurz, when it looked like the Prinzregententheater deal might happen. But he is otherwise soft-spoken, reclusive and a little self-effacing — hardly the loud, hubris-filled creator of four musicals.

Besides Michelangelo and Rage of the Heart, Garzilli has written a musical about the fall of the Berlin Wall, and something called Save Me the Waltz, a jazz-age tale about Ernest Hemingway and Zelda and F. Scott Fitzgerald that takes place on the French Riviera. In it, Zelda falls for a French aviator while Fitzgerald is working on Tender is the Night.

“Enrico is the humblest man I’ve ever meet in my life,” said Kurz, who has known the composer for perhaps 20 years. “He’s hugely accomplished, but quite humble.”

Kurz said he introduced Garzilli to major New York producer Gerald Schoenfeld, of the Shubert theater group, and Schoenfeld reportedly said, “Where’d you find him?” Schoenfeld was surprised to learn that Garzilli lived just three hours up the coast, in Rhode Island.

“He found me,” said Kurz.

Kurz admits that Garzilli leads a rather pastoral existence on the coast, but says that will all change if and when Rage and Michelangelo take off. He will insist Garzilli travel with him to centers like Rome, Paris and Madrid, places where most musicals haven’t had great track records. But he feels the message of Rage — love conquering violence — is so powerful that it will appeal to audiences the world over. In the story, Heloise loves Abelard even though her jealous uncle had him castrated.

“Enrico will create history,” said Kurz.

‘You can’t worry about fate’

Garzilli spends his mornings overlooking the Atlantic, writing lyrics and composing. “The ocean can be magnificent,” he said, “but I could write anywhere.”

Asked if he was bitter that Rage has yet to make it on the stage, and that he has had such trials gaining recognition as a composer, Garzilli said bitterness is not part of his makeup.

“But I’m a very happy person,” he said. “It’s like Hemingway said, ‘You can’t worry about fate, you just have to go on with your work.’ And writing and composing brings me great happiness.”

Michelangelo takes place Friday and Saturday at 8 p.m. at the Providence Performing Arts Center, 220 Weybosset St., Providence. Tickets are \$25-\$60. Call (401) 421-2787 or to go ppacri.org. Gala packages that include dinner and parking at the performance are available through Opera Providence for \$150, at (401) 331-6060.

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Enrico GarzilliComposer

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