Everything Jersey

The Star-Ledger

A CLOSE BRUSH WITH OPERA

Wednesday, February 11, 2009

BY PEGGY McGLONE

Star-Ledger Staff

Lisa Vroman had rehearsed all day for her starring turn as Rosalinde in the Johann Strauss comic operetta, "Die Fledermaus."

Dinner was the singer's only break before heading back to the rehearsal room. The Broadway veteran shared her meal with 86-year-old Don Smith, a retired rehearsal pianist who worked with the New York City Opera five decades earlier.

They chatted about music, show business, about his career and hers.

After eating, they went together to the rehearsal room, where Vroman worked on the operetta's second act and Smith watched approvingly from the audience.

"We're meeting the most delightful people," said Vroman, who is from Pasadena, Calif. "And they are having a ball. I'd retire here if I could bring all my friends."

"Here" is Meadow Lakes, a senior community in Hightstown where professionals of Opera New Jersey are living and rehearsing for four weeks. A collaboration between Opera New Jersey and PHS Senior Living Foundation has been bringing live opera to Smith and the other residents of Meadow Lakes while providing the opera company's 15 singers and production staff with accommodations, meals and a place to work.

"It's a perfect marriage," said Joseph Claffey, executive director of PHS Senior Living Foundation, the philanthropic arm of the operators of Meadow Lakes. "More collaboration between nonprofits needs to be done, especially in these times."

"We are giving the rehearsal process to Meadow Lakes," said Opera New Jersey's producing artistic director, Scott Altman. "They have everything they could ask for here, so we are adding a culture experience to that. You open your front door, walk down to the auditorium and see the same people they would see at the Met."

The residency began Jan. 30 and has included daily open rehearsals and, two nights ago, a full dress rehearsal. (The English-language production premieres Friday at Princeton's McCarter Theatre Center.) Next week, the opera company will offer a costume presentation and lecture, a master class and an artist round-table to the 320-resident community.

The collaboration extends beyond the rehearsal room. The opera cast has been embedded at the senior community, where they interact with residents during meals and downtime.

The residents learn about opera by watching rehearsals and reading a specially printed study guide that provides background on the composer, the artists, the opera itself. It even offers tips for how to behave in the rehearsal room.

The seniors give up some of the production values for the convenience of having the opera company perform on their campus. The partnership began last winter with '"Rigoletto," and many residents say they hope it continues.

"We're lucky to have them," said Smith, the retired pianist. '"It's a lot of work to do what they're doing."

The artists, too, are enjoying the convenience.

"I got here at night and the next morning somebody made me breakfast, and then after rehearsal somebody made me lunch," said Vroman. '"It's a treat."

'NO JUDGING'

There are some challenges, of course. Opera singers don't perform with amplification, but Meadow Lakes requires them to wear microphones so the rehearsals can be heard by those residents who use hearing devices and the residents of the medical facility.

By working before an audience, the singers also sacrifice the privacy and artistic safety of the rehearsal room. Some, like Vroman, say the trade-off is worth it -- what is lost in privacy is made up by the energy of the room, she says.

Allan Glassman, who plays Rosalinde's husband, Gabriel von Eisenstein, says the residents have been very respectful.

"They are so quiet, and there's no judging," he said.

But Rachele Gilmore, who plays Rosalinde's maid, Adele, says it took a little time to adjust to the open rehearsal.

"It can be hard, you lose focus," said Gilmore. '"But you get to a finished product sooner. You like to put on a show for the audience."

While not a fan of opera, Meadow Lakes resident Frank Elliott gave the program high marks.

"I'm thoroughly enjoying it," said Elliott as he watched a recent rehearsal with his wife, Betta. '"The music is great and it's fun to watch the professional being whipped into shape."

The Elliotts enjoyed the artists, too.

"We're pleased to have them here," said Elliott. "I haven't seen a prima donna in the bunch."

Opera New Jersey's production of "Die Fledermaus" will also appear Feb. 20 in Morristown at the Community Theatre at Mayo Center for the Arts, and Feb. 22 in New Brunswick at the State Theatre.

Peggy McGlone may be reached at (973) 392-5982 or pmcglone@starledger.com.

©2009 Star Ledger

© 2009 NJ.com All Rights Reserved.