

A Diva Who's Done It All for 25 Years

By ROBERTA HERSHENSON

Published: August 9, 2009

When the New Rochelle Opera began in the mid-1980s, Camille Coppola was virtually its everything. She produced and directed, sang all the leading soprano roles, made the costumes and recruited her friends for the chorus. But that was before the nonprofit company had accomplished its mission: to provide fine opera at affordable prices to Westchester audiences, while also helping young singers develop their careers.

Now, as the company she co-founded begins its 25th season, Ms. Coppola's role is chiefly as its artistic director and producer. All the singers are professionals, as are the conductors, orchestra members and the longtime music director, Gregory Ortega. Ms. Coppola, who studied voice but sang as an avocation, recalls her last performance with the group — as Cio-Cio-San in a 1987 production of “Madame Butterfly” that she also directed and produced. The evening was memorable for a near calamity. An assistant had tied the obi, or sash, of her costume too tightly. “When I hit a high note, I almost passed out,” she said in a recent phone interview. “My doctor was in the audience, and it all turned out all right.”

Her Pinkerton that night was Francisco Casanova, a tenor who she said “looked like Pavarotti,” and who went on to sing with the Metropolitan Opera. Like other directors of small opera companies, Ms. Coppola enjoys spotting talent and watching it blossom. But fine voices alone do not impress her: Singers must want to learn. “There are some who think they know it all, and they won't take direction,” she said. “But no matter how beautiful their voices are, I tell them, you can't just come and audition — you have to know the role. ‘Piangi’ means cry. They have to know things like that.”

Each June, the company presents a major production, complete with orchestra and sets, as well as several smaller-scale concerts and recitals. The group's next event is “A Night of Musical Maladies,” a free concert at 7:30 p.m. Wednesday at the Hudson Park Bandshell in New Rochelle. The event is part of a summer concert series being presented by the New Rochelle Council on the Arts. Five singers, including the baritone Lawrence Harris of Yonkers, will perform selections from Verdi, Puccini, Johann Strauss and others. Georgianna Pappas of Mount Vernon will accompany them on the piano.

“Love and Laughter in Opera” will follow on Sept. 13 at 3 pm. at the Christopher J. Murphy Auditorium of Iona College in New Rochelle. On Oct. 18, at 3 p.m., the group will present “Viva Italian Opera” at the Academic Arts Theater of Westchester Community College in Valhalla.