

Opera Improvises With Few Dollars

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In a 1987 performance of "Madama Butterfly" by the New Rochelle Opera, two performers bowed to each other on a tight-fitting stage and got their wigs caught, holding up the performance for a minute while they untangled. The show went on, but that incident was one of many inconveniences that the company has had to endure because it has no permanent home.

In hindsight many things seem humorous, said Alex Perlov, general manager of the company. "But at the time they seemed calamitous," he added.

The New Rochelle Opera is in its 19th season and has survived through the determination of a growing group of opera lovers. The company has done more than 75 performances of full operas, including the two Puccini favorites "Madama Butterfly" and "La Boheme," and next Saturday and Sunday it will present "Die Fledermaus" by Johann Strauss at Joyce Auditorium at Iona College here.

Opera is usually performed in large halls capable of accommodating elaborate scenery and huge casts -- depending on the opera -- Mr. Perlov said. The New Rochelle Opera has operated with significantly scaled down productions at places like the New Rochelle Library and the band shell at Hudson Park in New Rochelle. The library auditorium, where most of the operas have been performed, has no back stage, wings, dressing rooms or orchestra pit. "It forces us to be very creative because it is extremely restrictive," Mr. Perlov said. "The auditorium seats 148 people but only 130 with an orchestra, and it is a big obstruction for patrons."

Despite not having a permanent home or any corporate sponsors, the company has built a loyal following, mostly from New Rochelle and Pelham. "New Rochelle has a large Italian population who are very fond of opera," Mr. Perlov said. "It was a dream for our creative director, Camille Coppola, to bring opera to the people of New Rochelle."

The company has an operating budget of under \$25,000 a year, which makes them a G-scale opera, with G being the smallest, according to the International Directory of the Performing Arts. Opera companies like the Metropolitan Opera and the New York City Opera are rated A and have budgets ranging from \$1 million to \$5 million.

The company relies heavily on people like John Fraioli, a retired plumbing contractor who is a member of the board. "When I first saw their performance of 'La Traviata' I had to go through a whole box of Kleenexes," Mr. Fraioli said. "It was that moving and well done. I decided to get involved, and I do everything from taking tickets, to handing out fliers and serving refreshments."

All of the singers are paid professionals from the New York metropolitan region and are selected through auditions. Although this is professional opera, there is no room for prima donnas. Rehearsals are usually done in the home or apartment of cast members or at a theater or studio that is willing to donate time. "You have to be flexible and change how you sing and how much you move because we usually end up practicing in different places from where the performance is held," said Julie Majchrzyk, who has sung with the opera for five years.

Mr. Perlov and Ms. Coppola would like to expand their reach and find a hall suitable for their productions. This season the company almost signed on for the Music Hall in Tarrytown but the board decided not to assume the financial risk. "We would love to have our own opera house, but the board has balked at expansion," Mr. Perlov said. "They don't want to risk putting the company in bankruptcy, which could easily happen, because of bad judgments."

Mr. Perlov and the board are seeking support from corporations that have funds for cultural affairs. The company has received funds from the city of New Rochelle, the Westchester Arts Council and the Heritage Foundation of New York State. "Die Fledermaus" is partly financed by the Iona Council for the Arts, and the school is allowing the company free use of its theater.

Maintaining a sense of humor is the key to keeping the company going as the performers improvise rehearsal space and stage action. Mr. Perlov recalls a time when scenery panels were donated by a church and several of them fell off on Route 287 and ended up in a puddle after being run over about 50 times. A patron who had a truck retrieved the panels and an artist volunteered to restore them free.

At one of their early performances at the New Rochelle Library there was an overflow crowd that almost stampeded through the doors to get seats, but Ms. Coppola was able to convince enough people to leave so the performance could proceed without violating fire regulations.

Mr. Perlov and Ms. Coppola stay with it for love of the art and the loyalty of their devoted patrons. "We stick with it because opera is a very special kind of discipline," Mr. Perlov said.

"We have built up a loyal following of opera lovers in the community, and many of them had never been exposed to opera before attending one of our performances."