

NEWS

Front Page

EVANSTON
ELECTIONS

CAMPUS

ASG ELECTIONS

CITY

FORUM

SPORTS

PLAY

Special Reports ▼

ABOUT THE
DAILY

Archives



College Newspaper Network

COLLEGE LIFE

Wireless Services

SWAT THE FLY!
Get a **FREE* iPod®!**



PLAY

Singing for their supper

Opera grads bridge post-college gap with their own company

By Anna Maltby
October 14, 2004

Mary works in Nordstrom's fashion jewelry department. Genevieve has her own Internet start-up. One man works in a cancer research lab. Another woman is a nanny. And you would never think it to look at their jobs, but every one of these 20-somethings is a classically trained opera singer with a graduate degree from one of the most prestigious universities in the world.

"It scares me to see all the grad students who graduated (from Northwestern), and none of them have jobs," Senior voice major Melissa Treinkman said. "I mean, they may have jobs, but most of them are not making their living singing."

Enter Mary Lutz, Genevieve Thiers, and their brainchild OperaModa. After these two women received their master's degrees (Lutz in 2003, Thiers in 2004) from NU's School of Music, they decided to create an opera company in which recent voice graduates would have the opportunity to add a professional role to their resume, thus helping them bridge the awkward gap between school and full-time professional work.

Both Thiers, the company's general director, and Lutz, its artistic director, will perform in OperaModa's premiere production, "Tartuffe," running this weekend at the Athenaeum Theatre (2936 N. Southport Ave.).

And the company's NU links hardly stop with its founders. NU students fill the positions of stage manager, orchestra musicians, music director, rehearsal pianist and all but two performers.

"It's just Northwestern-tastic in this show!" Lutz said.

CULTIVATING THE COMPANY

Lutz and Thiers were inspired to create OperaModa when they completed graduate school and found themselves with a rare opportunity. While still in school the two had performed in a student-run production of "Dialogues of the Carmelites." Peter MacDowell, the artistic director of the Chicago Cultural Center, offered the students funding and use of the Center to perform the opera again, and the students agreed. With 600 people in the audience, the show was a wild success.

"(Thiers) and I got to talking about, 'What if we kept doing this?'" Lutz said. "This was a great experience for everyone in it. Everyone got to put another role on their resume, everybody got to learn all about the production of a show, so why don't we do more?"

In fall 2003 the two discussed putting on their own show, but because Thiers was in her last year of graduate school and Lutz had just begun her first 40 hour/week job, the

Ads by Goooooogle

[Apartments in Evanston IL](#)

Free Apartment Search at Rent.com. Report Your Lease To Us & Get \$100!
www.Rent.com

[Evanston Apartments](#)

Affordable, luxurious apartments Newly Rehabbed and Close to NU
www.bjbevanston.com

[Northwest Airline Tickets](#)

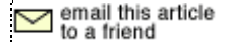
Book A Flight On Northwest Find Great Deals And Low Fares!
www.priceline.com

[Group Fox Apartments](#)

Considering a Group Fox rental? What careful renters should know
www.chicagolandapartm



click for a printable version



show didn't come together until spring 2004, when Lutz had a job with more flexible hours and Thiers was approaching the end of graduate school.

When the two were working out the initial details of the company, Thiers, as producer, was in charge of funding, which has come from a combination of private donations and seed money from the four founders -- Dan Ratner, Stay Ratner, Thiers and Lutz. Saint Scholastica Academy, a Benedictine Catholic girls' high school in Chicago, donated their space for the opera's rehearsals.

"These four founders and the independent donations have helped us afford the theater, crew, director and orchestra, and most importantly, they have allowed us to offer payment to the cast, since helping young artists is the primary thing that we are all about," Thiers said.

Because its members are generally young, most of the company either have full-time jobs or are still in school, so the rehearsals are at night. The average age of a person in the company is 28, which is considerably younger than the average opera singer.

"For an opera singer, unless they're a prodigy or very lucky, their voice peaks somewhere between 35 and 48. If you're under 35, you're considered a young artist," Lutz said.

Older singers often are preferred, in part, because their voices are more mature, said Sunny Joy Langton, an assistant professor of voice at the School of Music. Both Lutz and Thiers studied with Langton during graduate school, and Thiers continues to do so.

"Mary has an instrument that's a big voice, but she's still a young singer, so she sort of has to wait to be more settled vocally and more mature to do the kinds of roles that her voice is right for," Langton said. "For all young singers, going from college, where you are a non-professional, into the professional world, you're trying to make contacts and establish yourself in terms of reputation without having any professional experience."

This need for professional experience in order to develop a professional reputation amounts to a Catch 22 for many singers.

"All of the good music schools, including Northwestern, do a good job of training their singers, but once they graduate, they are released into a large pool of aspiring professionals competing for recognition," Langton said. "Basically opera is one of those forms of art that is very expensive, and so a lot of the professional companies want to hire someone that is either a known quantity or a proven quantity. A degree from a university doesn't necessarily make you a proven quantity, unfortunately. It's basically being given visibility in a competitive marketplace that is the most difficult thing."

Treinkman summed up this idea bluntly.

"When you're 24 and you're just out of grad school, unless you make it into one of the very, very competitive apprentice programs, you're kind of screwed," she said.

BYPASSING "BOHEME"

OperaModa's premier fits well with the company's desire to perform non-traditional opera. Kirke Mechem, an American composer, wrote the work as an operatic version of the Molière play of the same name. Mechem composed the opera in 1984 for the young apprentices at the San Francisco Opera.

"Tartuffe" also sits well with the company's commitment to exposing Chicago's opera-going public to a different breed of operas as it is in English and was written recently.

"We were toying with the idea of keeping it to modern opera, opera written after 1935 or 1940, just because you don't get them very often. They're not operas that are in 'the repertoire'" Lutz said.

But judging from the initial response to "Tartuffe," some wonder why it's not.

"When we started rehearsing 'Tartuffe' and started doing outreach concerts, we had

people go, 'Why is this not done in real houses?'" Lutz said. "We'd probably like to stay away from just the Bohemes and Traviatas and things like that, because they're done so many other places. We'd like to offer the Chicago opera public something new to see, something they haven't seen or don't see very often."

"Tartuffe" also is perfect because its cast is small -- there are only eight characters and no chorus -- as is the orchestration.

"Normal orchestration is between 30 and 40 pieces; the one we're using is 14, which is good for younger singers, because part of the tough thing about being an opera singer is you're not miked. There's no amplification, so you have to project over an orchestra. It's a little easier when the orchestra's a little smaller."

OPERATIC MAKEOVER

Though "Tartuffe," like most operas, has somewhat adult themes, Lutz said opera-goers of all ages would enjoy it, partially because the dramatic emotions portrayed in operas make it a very "young" art form.

"Operas are full of what I like to call '5-year-old emotions' -- everything is black or white; there is no gray area. It's all like, 'I'm going to die!' and 'This is awful!' so it's a very young art form, just in terms of the emotions it portrays and the situations," Lutz said.

These dramatic emotions can liken opera to today's TV shows.

"There's a reason soap operas are called soap operas, because they have very similar situations and plots," Lutz said. "It's a lot like the WB, but set to music."

And like a good "Dawson's Creek" or "The O.C." episode, audiences flocked to operas in their day also.

"Operas were basically the 'Spider-Man 2' of their day -- that was where you went to see exciting plots and amazing visuals, and it was meant to be a form of very stylish entertainment -- it was very trendy," Lutz said. "Every opera I can think of, except for two, is all about sex and violence. The two I can think of that aren't about that are really heavy on the violence."

Lutz hopes highlighting these pop-culture aspects of opera will help her company do what so many others are attempting -- to draw in younger audiences.

"I would love to see more people in my age bracket, between 20 and 35, come," Lutz said. "But ideally anyone who wants to come is great. I'm not going to be picky when it comes to an opera demographic. If anybody in the theater is appreciating it, that's what I'm there for."

FINE TUNING

Though putting on OperaModa's opening season has been a rewarding experience for Lutz and Thiers, they would both like to see some changes in their mode of production before they put up another show.

"Ideally in the future if we did another show, Genevieve and I would need to find other people to come and work with us on it," Lutz said. "An opera is a beautiful thing, but it's not something two people should put up on their own."

This level of difficulty and complication (i.e. finding sufficient funding, locating a rehearsal space, producing the opera) makes this opening show an even greater accomplishment for Lutz and Thiers.

"As hard as it is to sing in an opera, it's probably even harder to run an opera company, and these two women are doing both," Langton said. "I'm not sure how they manage it, but they do. It's pretty amazing."

Richard Boldrey, a full-time School of Music faculty member, was a professor, music coach and accompanist for Lutz and Thiers. Boldrey said he predicts success for the two

young women.

"Talent is a small part of it, and they are both talented. It is 'gumption' that makes for success in this field. They both have it," Boldrey said.

Treinkman said she also admires the women for their contribution to singers.

"It's a great idea. Hopefully it will still be around when I graduate!" she said.

"Tartuffe" will be performed at the Athenaeum Theatre Friday and Saturday at 8 p.m. and Sunday at 3 p.m. Tickets are \$12-21 and can be purchased on Ticketmaster.4

Medill freshman Anna Maltby is a PLAY writer. She can be reached at a-maltby@northwestern.edu.

buy books at BestPrices.com	Spy Software & Keylogger	Sports tickets: Theater tickets
Dialup	Fundraisers & Fundraising Ideas	Spy Software
Shopping	The Solar System Site	Dish Network and Direct TV
Mortgage Quotes	Document Management Software	Dr Sears Omega Rx Fish Oil
Nascar Tickets : Concert Tickets	Small Business Loan	Custom Memory Foam Mattress