

Friends of Opera

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UNIVERSITY OF NEBRASKA – LINCOLN

February 2007

UNL Presents Loesser's Classic

Wouldn't it be great for UNL Opera if there was one work that would challenge its student performers in every possible way, delight local audiences, and serve as a perfect piece of Americana to take to the Waterford International Festival of Light Opera? *The Most Happy Fella* may be that perfect piece of musical theatre. It is the most operatic of all American musicals; but it also contains such Broadway show-stoppers as "Standin' on the Corner," "Big D," and the hauntingly beautiful "My Heart is So Full of You." In fact, six of the leading parts require operatic voices and six call for musical theatre voices. Within this expansive frame, Loesser has placed arias, recitatives, duets, canons, choral numbers, dances, instrumental interludes, parodies and folk hymns.

This emotionally powerful love story, based on Sidney Howard's Pulitzer Prize-winning play *They Knew What They Wanted*, is a quintessential drama of immigrants to America, the Depression years, and, naturally, of the course of true love not running smoothly. *The Most Happy Fella* tells the story of Tony, a middle-aged owner of a vineyard, who proposes through the mail to Rosabella, a young woman who does not know what he looks like, enclosing a photo of his young, handsome foreman.

She is hurt and humiliated when she learns the truth, but, after suitably heart-wrenching obstacles are negotiated, a loving understanding blossoms between the two during Tony's long convalescence from a near-fatal accident.



UNL's production features in the title role of Tony Esposito T. Doyle Leverett, the current reigning Tony, who comes to Lincoln from performances of the role on Broadway and at the New York City Opera. (See related story on page 3.) The production is co-directed by Ariel Bybee and James E. Ford, with Tyler White conducting the UNL Opera Orchestra.

The Most Happy Fella

By Frank Loesser

Thursday, February 22 Noon
Friday, February 23 7:30 p.m.
Sunday, February 25 3:00 p.m.

Kimball Recital Hall

Adults \$20
Faculty, students and seniors . \$10

Tickets available at the door or through Lied Center Box Office, 472-4747

Opera Previews by Alisa

Belflower, 45 minutes prior to Friday and Sunday performances, in the Kimball Hall lower level.

Friends of Opera Reception

Friends of Opera members and their guests are invited to a reception on stage following the Friday, February 23 performance. Principal cast members will attend.

Friends Fundraising Event on May 19

The annual Friends of Opera fundraising event will take on a different appearance this year. Rhonda and James Seacrest have graciously offered to host the event in the garden of their beautiful home on May 19. Further details will be announced in the coming weeks, but please **save the date!!**

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PRESIDENT'S CORNER

Dear Friends,

I'm certain many of you were stunned, as I was, to learn that NET Radio has canceled the longest-running American radio series in existence, The Metropolitan Opera "Live from the Met" Saturday afternoon broadcasts. It is regrettable that no clear public explanation was offered for this decision, even though NET officials responsible for it were virtually unanimous. According to NET officials, Arbitron studies showed, among other things, that NET Radio Saturday morning listeners continued to listen to the radio on Saturday afternoon - they just switched stations when the Met broadcasts started.

For NET, reduced listenership equates to reduced donations and reduced funding. I have no basis to dispute the research which drove NET's decision. At last check, NET did not have enough data to determine the success of its new Saturday afternoon format. Many Nebraskans are discouraged by this decision, and will be expecting public commentary from NET before the 2007-08 opera season addressing the success of the new programming and continued justification for this decision.

In the meantime, other opportunities do exist. Subscription radio broadcaster Sirius is offering numerous Met broadcasts. Perhaps the most appealing option for eastern Nebraskans is the video presentation of Met productions carried at the Mary Riepma Ross Theatre in Lincoln. I have seen two (*I Puritani* and *The First Emperor*, a world premiere) and they are spectacular! Up-close-and-personal camera shots, high quality sound and high-definition video, backstage tours and interviews of principal performers by Beverly Sills and Rene Fleming during production intermissions are just a few of the highlights. It should be noted that NET is co-sponsoring these showings at the Ross.

On the UNL front, congratulations to director Bill Shomos, conductor Tyler White and talented principals, chorus, orchestra and crew for an outstanding *La Bohème* production in November, which played to three packed houses. In addition, Bill's production of *Amahl and the Night Visitors*, conducted by Peter Eklund, was a delightful Christmas present to Lincoln. *Amahl*, which utilized a select choir from the six public high schools, played to about 800 Lincoln 5th graders at the Johnny Carson Theatre and to nearly 400 guests at the FOO-sponsored public performances at Good Shepherd Presbyterian Church. We thank all the performers and musicians and, especially, the congregation of Good Shepherd Presbyterian Church for the donated use of their facility.

UNL Opera's season will conclude with Frank Loesser's classic *The Most Happy Fella* on February 22, 23 and 25 at Kimball Hall. You will find much more about this exciting production on pages 1 and 3. I hope to see all Friends of Opera members and their guests at an onstage reception following the Friday, February 23 performance.

Sincerely,



Don Burt, President

Nebraskans Excel at MET Districts

Singers with Nebraska ties fared well in the recent Metropolitan Opera District Auditions. In the Nebraska District, UNL Masters graduate Jeff Keele and current UNL Masters candidate Thomas Gunther were among five performers selected to advance to regional competition. UNL undergraduate Tertia Hock received the Friends of Opera Greg and Dorie Kallos Award, while recent Nebraska Wesleyan graduate Talea Schroeder received the Opera Omaha Award, and former Omahan Ashley Evans received the Gary Jones Award given to a first-time auditioner. In the Iowa District, Nebraska Wesleyan undergraduate Icy Simpson (who missed the Nebraska event because of a choir trip) was one of six winners advancing to the regional. Keele, Gunther and Simpson will all compete in the Minnesota Regional Auditions on February 17.

Friends of Opera Board of Directors

Don Burt, President Kathy Friedman, Vice-President Diana Warner, Treasurer
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James Seacrest, William Shomos, Jo Stewart, Carol Walker, James Weesner

Friends of Opera is a tax-exempt, nonprofit corporation supporting opera at the University of Nebraska—Lincoln and throughout Nebraska.

QUITE A FELLA!!

Guest artist T. Doyle Leverett recently talked with *The Most Happy Fella* co-director James E. Ford. Here are some excerpts:

Ford: *What is your general experience in playing The Most Happy Fella and, specifically, playing Tony?*

Leverett: It's been one of the two touchstone shows of my career (the other being *Fiddler on the Roof* - 24 productions to date). I first came upon the show in 1971, while I was the youngest equity apprentice at Little Theatre on the Square in Sullivan, Illinois. Bruce Yarnell, may he rest in piece, was our incredible Tony - what a voice, and what an impression he made on the teenaged me! I also remember that he and the leading lady did NOT get along - in fact, they stopped speaking offstage about the second week of rehearsal.

Fast forward through several forgettable stock productions to the year 1991. I had not lived in NYC very long when my agent called me for a production to be done at Goodspeed Opera House. I was stunned when the brilliant director Gerald Guitierrez started reading me for Tony. Although I knew I was way too young, I prepared and read as if I wasn't. Not only was I cast, but I was cast as the understudy to Tony, who was to be played by the opera basso Spiro Malas. After it got out that I understudied, the offers came in right and left to sing everywhere - everywhere Spiro was unavailable! It led me to Florida, Wyoming, California, and Indiana - not a bad tour with it.

In the fall of 2005 I got a call from my agent that New York City Opera was interested

in hearing me for the chef's roles, so out came my faithful score. Once again, before I knew it I was being read for Tony, and after my third audition they offered me the standby to Paul Sorvino. *Fella* provided my City Opera debut. My debut came on March 4 of last year, and a more wonderful time I can't remember - friends and family in the house, and Jo Loesser herself in my dressing room after. Since then, I sing it whenever I have a chance, and I am pleased to be here in Lincoln.



T. Doyle Leverett stars in
The Most Happy Fella

Ford: *Any spicy or touching stories of backstage?*

Leverett: Well, back to the Yarnell feud with his leading lady, I got a lesson early on that you left your problems at the proscenium. They never let a bit of their feud show on stage. Yarnell was five hours late to the first rehearsal. He flew his own private plane, and he couldn't find the little airport in Sullivan. I remember the producer saying "Someday, he'll kill himself in that plane..." And then of course, tragically, a few years later, he did just that.

Ford: *What are the challenges and rewards of playing Tony?*

Leverett: I think the main challenge is just remembering to pace yourself and your voice. Although it's a score that will sweep you up if you let it, I find it incredibly important to keep thinking, and pacing, through the whole score. It's fun to play someone whom every one else in town loves. I love the childlike faith he has in people and in love. Every part of Tony resonates in me! The biggest thrill for me is the chance to do the role with the encouragement of Jo Loesser. Frank Loesser poured his heart into every note and word of *Fella*, and he's still there. It's very moving to hear his whispers.

Ford: *What are your experiences working with students, etc.*

Leverett: I have worked with college students my whole career, and it's a joy. They keep me young! It's so wonderful to remember that drive and hope that I had as a young performer, and I love seeing that in people today. I remember being at Illinois State when guest artists came through. The ones who were effective were the ones who's first priority was to both teach, and learn - to share, not to dictate. I am the sum total of so much teaching, energy, and love from people my whole life, my first priority is to share that. To me, that's what it's all about. I also am very honest with young performers. I believe that to enter this business, you have to realize you are choosing a life of saying goodbye to people you love, constantly. With each show, with friends, with people with "normal" schedules, it's goodbye after goodbye.

Ireland Beckons - Are you 'N?

For the second time in recent years, UNL Opera will take a production to compete in the Waterford, Ireland International Festival of Light Opera in September 2007. Following its triumphant performance in 2002 of Irishman Michael William Balfe's *The Bohemian Girl*, UNL Opera will perform the American theatre classic *The Most Happy Fella* by Frank Loesser. Principal funding for the trip will come through a most generous donation by Friends of Opera Board member James

Seacrest and wife Rhonda Seacrest. The Seacrests also provided the principal funding for the 2002 Waterford trip.

As in 2002, the tour will be structured to accommodate about 40 UNL Opera supporters, at a cost of approximately \$2,000 per person, which will include economy airfare, lodging, transportation and several excursions. The tentative itinerary calls for one night each in Galway and Dublin before spending four nights

in Waterford, with daily excursion trips. Estimated departure date is September 24 with a September 30 return.

Anyone wishing to inquire further or reserve space should communicate with James E. Ford at jford1@unlnotes.unl.edu.

Persons who have already made tentative reservations should write Dr. Ford at the e-mail address above to provide contact information.

Wesleyan Presents *Streetcar*

Nebraska Wesleyan Opera Theater presents a regional premiere of André Previn's opera, *A Streetcar Named Desire*, under the direction of Dawn Pawlewski Krogh. The opera is based on the Pulitzer Prize-winning play by Tennessee Williams, one of the most celebrated plays in the history of American theater. The haunting story of lost youth and innocence is set in the romantic, shadowy world of New Orleans just after World War II. Wesleyan's production will feature Icy Simpson, Iowa District Met Auditions winner, in the title role of Blanche DuBois, and guest artist, Tom Westfall, as Mitch. Performances will be Friday, March 30th at 7:30 p.m. and Sunday, April 1st at 3:00 p.m. in O'Donnell Auditorium, 50th and Huntington Avenue.

Calendar of Events

FEBRUARY 22, 2007

The Most Happy Fella, UNL Opera
Kimball Recital Hall, 12:00 p.m.
Tickets: 472-4747

FEBRUARY 23, 2007

The Most Happy Fella, UNL Opera
Kimball Recital Hall, 7:30 p.m.
Opera Preview, 6:45 p.m. in
Kimball lower level
Reception for Friends of Opera mem-
bers and guests on stage after the
performance.
Tickets: 472-4747

FEBRUARY 25, 2007

The Most Happy Fella, UNL Opera
Kimball Recital Hall, 3:00 p.m.
Opera Preview, 2:15 p.m. in
Kimball lower level.
Tickets: 472-4747

MARCH 30, 2007 (7:30 P.M.)

April 1, 2007 (3:00 p.m.)
A Streetcar Named Desire,
Nebraska Wesleyan University
O'Donnell Auditorium,
50th & Huntington
Tickets at the door
Adults \$10, Students \$5

Opera Omaha presents:

Wakonda's Dream
(World Premiere)
March 7, 9, 11, 2007

The Barber of Seville
April 25, 27 & 29, 2007

Evening with Stewart Robertson
April 10, 2007

Call (402) 346-7372 for ticket
information and remember to
request the Friends of Opera
discount.

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