

Advancing an Art Form:
Emerald City Opera's Young Artists Create New Companies
By Valerie Davia

Emerald City Opera's Artist Institute (OAI) began in 2008 to bring talented young singers to Steamboat Springs to work with the company's professional artists. The goals included: 1) to provide aspiring professional singers with opera training and stage experience; 2) to improve the annual production with accomplished classical singers; and 3) to increase ECO's offerings and outreach in Colorado and Wyoming by producing additional shows geared to the emerging artists' needs and repertoire. Over the years, the ECO Artist Institute has earned an excellent national reputation. Nearly a hundred young artists have graced Steamboat's stages and gone home with enhanced resumes. A delightful consequence also turns out to be that some of our alumni have created their own opera companies, often as a direct result of their experiences in Steamboat.

Producing a professional opera in a small, rural community without a bevy of performance venues, stage professionals, designers, etc., is decidedly difficult. Developing a company that endures is somewhere between impractical and impossible. Yet, thanks to extraordinary work on the part of ECO's founder Keri Rusthoi, a committed band of volunteers and donors, and ECO's new Artistic Director Andres Cladera, ECO begins its fourteenth season in 2016 as one of Steamboat's most celebrated and stable arts organizations. ECO has provided everything from classics like *The Magic Flute* and *Madama Butterfly* to specially written and produced children's operas performed in schools all over northwest CO and southern WY. Now we find its success is providing inspiration and example to some very exciting new companies.

Tenor Jason Stein lives in Bend, Oregon with his wife, soprano Nancy Engebretson. He is well known to Steamboat audiences as Alcindoro in 2010's *La Boheme*, Peter (the father) in 2011's *Hansel & Gretel* and Dr. Blind in *Die Fledermaus*, and as a featured singer in the 2013 "Opera Pops" Concert. Nancy joined Jason in Steamboat during his third year with the Artist Institute and while driving home, they concluded "we can do this too." They founded Opera Bend to "produce opera, provide cultural educational experiences in schools, encourage young artists, and present accomplished guest artists." Not surprisingly, some of those "accomplished guest artists" are people Jason collaborated with in Steamboat. "I worked with terrific coaches, singers, conductors, and directors, now mentors," he says. "These contacts were instrumental in helping us start Opera Bend."

"We're growing like a weed," continues Jason. Opera Bend's fourth season includes a brand new work created and produced by a team of Oregonians. Entitled *Via Lactea*, (The Milky Way) and subtitled "A Woman of a Certain Ages Walks the Camino," the libretto was adapted from poet and author Ellen Waterston's work about her pilgrimage along Spain's Camino de Santiago.

Oregon composer Rebecca Oswald set it to music and the team at Opera Bend will produce the world premiere to run June 10-12, 2016. "This project is about ten times the budget of anything we've done so far," explains Jason. "It's really putting us on the map." Opera Bend will also produce *Die Fledermaus* and a concert version of *Carmen* in 2016.

Tamara Ryan, a two-time participant in the Artist Institute, sang the role of Sally in ECO's 2011 production of *Die Fledermaus*. She planned to return in 2012 to be the understudy for the lead role of Susanna in *Le Nozze di Figaro*, but the contracted soprano backed out and Tamara performed Susanna exquisitely opposite Keith Miller, veteran of the Metropolitan Opera stage, as Figaro. Soon after her first year with ECO, Tamara founded Opera Fayetteville, a company "dedicated to featuring up-and-coming singers in high-caliber productions of contemporary, English-language operas." Though she lives in Boston, Tamara is a native of Fayetteville, Arkansas, home of the University of Arkansas, and felt that the time was right for opera in her hometown.

"My experiences in Steamboat were really helpful," states Tamara. "I was impressed by what Keri (Rusthoi) was able to accomplish at ECO. Seeing someone who had succeeded at what I was just beginning gave me much needed encouragement and inspiration." With its focus on contemporary operas in English, Opera Fayetteville has produced *Little Women*, *Flight*, *Dead Man Walking*, and *The Little Prince*. *The Picture of Dorian Grey* is in rehearsal for January, 2016.

A number of Steamboat alums have joined Tamara. Baritone David Malis, last seen in Steamboat as John Falstaff in 2014, is a veteran performer, OAI singing coach, and stage director. He directed *Little Women* for Opera Fayetteville, in which ECO alumna Ruth Carver Bondurant sang the role of Alma March. Rose Sawvel, Despina in ECO's 2008 production of *Così fan tutte*, sang the title role in *The Little Prince* in 2014. And Kate Kostopoulos, a 2011 alumna, serves as chairwoman of the board.

Nationwide, big opera companies have been struggling. Tamara believes that small companies might be the future of the art form. "Being tiny and limber, we can take more risks, do more dramatic, contemporary pieces. Our goal is to always be engaging both intellectually and emotionally. I know we get a lot of people who've never been to an opera before, and we want them to feel the direct connection to the characters and story that opera is so good at delivering, especially when it's in their own language and cultural context." Sounds like Opera Fayetteville is right on target.

Third Eye Theatre Ensemble in Chicago is the creation of mezzo-soprano Rena Ahmed. Rena sang the role of Principessa in ECO's 2010 production of *Suor Angelica* and chorus in *Carmen*. Third Eye's mission is "to present quality productions that inspire conversation." Rena explains: "After the tragedy at Sandy Hook Elementary School, I wanted to do something. A recital to

generate funds is something I could do, but I wanted to find a way to use art, especially opera, to stimulate discussion about the difficult issues facing us.”

Third Eye, named for the symbol of enlightenment, therefore produces works that foster conversation, and performances include talk-backs with the audience and/or with members of communities involved with the subject matter of the show. For example, Third Eye’s second production, Sumeida’s Song by Mohammed Fairouz, is an opera based on a contemporary Egyptian play. The gripping story follows a traditional village mother as she pleads with her son to avenge her husband’s murder seventeen years earlier and the son’s unwillingness, as a university educated young man, to understand or approve of his mother’s plan. Several performances featured introductions by members of the Egyptian community, including the Consul General of Egypt, as well as opportunities for the audience to speak to cast and crew. “Mr. Fairouz’s work seeks to promote intercultural communication and understanding,” says Rena, “so it’s the kind of program that fits with our mission and that we’re honored to share with our audience.”

Rena has spent some time in the corporate world, amassing skills that now help her in running a theater company. “When I attended ECO,” she writes, “I was transitioning out of the world of working a full-time corporate job. Learning from professionals in the field confirmed that I wanted to dedicate more of my life to the arts. Performing is my first love but I also feel it’s important to keep the art form moving forward, while providing a professional environment for young artists to learn and grow.”

“A professional environment for young artists to learn and grow” is also what Emerald City Opera’s Artist Institute is all about. We salute our enterprising alums and can’t wait to see their continued progress and success.

For more information about these new companies and the amazing artists creating them, please visit their websites at: www.operabend.org, www.operafayetteville.org, and www.thirdeyete.com.