

TRAINING FOR THEIR FUTURE

Young artists stage Puccini opera

By **JONATHAN WILLIAMS**
COAST WEEKEND EDITOR

While the auditorium of the Liberty Theatre won't be filled with the colossal sounds of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony this summer, young artists in the Astoria Music Festival are still training to perform an opera.

The singers are mounting a fully staged production of Puccini's "Gianni Schicchi" at 7 p.m. June 27 and 28 at the Performing Arts Center in Astoria. The opera is directed by Dr. Mark Ross Clark. It is a pay what you can performance; a \$15 donation is suggested.

Training

For two weeks, the students have trained from 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. at Peace Lutheran Church in Astoria.

During this time, they get stage experience and coaching from Clark, who is director of Louisiana Lyric Opera and professor at the University of Louisiana; Kosta Popovic, who has worked as Assistant Chorus Master with the Metropolitan Opera; Metropolitan Opera singers Allan Glassman, professor at Chicago Conservatory of Roosevelt University, and baritone Richard Zeller.

In the morning, Clark gives them movement exercises to wake them up. Then they work on new concepts and methods for movement and acting before moving into staging rehearsals and coaching.

The group then has lunch, where the students can talk to each other, the faculty and coaches about what it's like to be a professional artist.

The afternoons are slated with more staging and private coaching.

Deac Guidi, board president of the Astoria Music Festival, said the program is one of the great breeding grounds for aspiring singers.

"We've had several people go on to win Met Opera auditions, we have people who are performing all over the world and they got their start here," he said.

Clark has directed the opera many times at universities.

"I realize how interactive the opera is and when you sing it in Italian there's a lot



Jonathan Williams

Students in the Astoria Music Festival's young artists program in rehearsal for Puccini's "Gianni Schicchi."

of passages which are rich, comic opera," he said.

There is lots of physical comedy, too.

Clark said, "to have 10 people on the stage at the same time that are all interacting with each other is really super good for young singers. It's hard opera that we do. It's not very long but it is really intense and no stops."

Last year, Clark gathered props from around Astoria for their production. He's looking for an armoire (Europeans don't have closets) and a bed, where most of the show's drama is centered around.

Clark is setting the opera in the 1950s.

"It has a story, a situation that people can relate to," he said. "It seems cynical, but it's the family that goes in their mourning to the deathbed of a relative but they are actually there because they expect an inheritance and begin to fight over the inheritance."

The opera originally premiered in 1918 near the close of World War I and was one of Puccini's last.

Singers from across the U.S.

Leah Huber, a student of Dr. Clark's at the University of Louisiana, plays Lauretta

and Nella.

Huber drove from Louisiana to participate in the program.

"I think the best thing to learn here is how to work kind of quick and dirty," Huber said. "It's a good learning experience in how to get really comfortable with your cast members really quick."

Casey Winkelman, a recent graduate of the University of Alaska Fairbanks, hopes to perform for a living, specifically as a professional opera singer.

She plays La Ciesca and is excited to get feedback on her technique and performance from the program's faculty and coaches.

Bryce Genovese, who plays Rinuccio, is a singer from Chicago who performs improv with the famous Second City comedy theater, which includes notable alums like Chris Farley and Tina Fey.

Glassman, Genovese's private teacher from college at the Chicago College of Performing Arts at Roosevelt University, initially told him about the program.

Because it is a one act opera, the characters are on stage the whole time, forcing the singers to focus on their stamina.

"Rinuccio is a very heavy, big sing role," Genovese said.

Kristina Terwilliger, a recent physics graduate from the University of Washington, plays the roles of Lauretta and Nella and shares them with Huber.

She enjoys the program's intense workshop schedule.

"I've just been going downstairs and rehearsing on my own over and over and over again so it's like you do something and you can soak it in and you can go practice," she said.

Terwilliger is also a baton twirling champion, competing at UW and soon at the World Championships this summer in Paris.

Intimate space

Festival Artistic Director Keith Clark said, "in a smaller opera house, typical of Europe or the PAC, you're this close to somebody, you can see their faces, you can see all the emotion. It's exciting."

Looking toward 2020, Clark said the festival plans to stage the Oregon premiere of Richard Wagner's "Das Rheingold," one of the composer's ring cycle operas. **CW**