

## The Big Voice: Opera Quad Cities Celebrates Its Fifth Season with "Carmen"

Written by Mike Schulz

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I was talking to someone, and she hadn't ever *seen* an opera," recalls Stacy Eckert, who performs the title role in Opera Quad Cities' new production of *Carmen*

. "And I was trying to explain *Carmen*

, and I said, 'Well, I bet you know more tunes from the show than you think you do.' And she said, 'Aw, no, I don't know *any* of them.'

"So I started humming a few. She goes, 'Oh, I know *that* one! Oh, that was in *The Bad News Bears*,  
/ the *origina*  
Oh, I know one!

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*that*

one, too!" And I said, 'See? You know a ton of them!'"

"I think, in general, people know more opera than they think they do," adds Opera Quad Cities Marketing Director Erin Lounsberry, who also portrays Mercedes in *Carmen*. "Just by its use in pop culture. Commercials, and soundtracks ... ."

And Bugs Bunny, of course.

"And Bugs Bunny!" she laughs. "But I think people get intimidated by it because they're not exposed to it and they think, '*Opera?* Ooo ... ooo, that's for music snobs.'"

Considering the frequent laughter of the group gathered to discuss *Carmen*, though, "music snobs" is hardly the phrase that springs to mind.

Opera Quad Cities is starting its fifth season of performances with a production of Georges Bizet's *Carmen*, a dramatic tale of obsession and desire. But what is most apparent from my conversation with several of the group's performers is what a fine time they're having with this stage tragedy, and how convinced they are that audiences will, too, regardless of one's previous exposure to opera.

"It is the most collaborative, by definition, of all art forms," says *Carmen* stage manager Matt Bean, "because it's not

*just*

singing, and it's not

*just*

acting, and it's not

*just*

movement. It's all of those put together. And when they synergize and combine, then the total result is better than anything else."

From the start, says Lounsberry, the mission of the not-for-profit organization (formerly titled

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City Opera Company of the Quad Cities) was a simple one: "We wanted local people to stop going *away* to do opera because there were no opportunities for them here."

And with full-length productions of such classics as *The Magic Flute* and *La Boheme*, the group's annual Vocal Valentine fundraising event (the next to be held at the Abbey Station on February 11), outreach performances, and occasional experiments such as 2005's "Opera Highlights" concert, the group has succeeded in not only keeping local operatic talents in the area, but in securing talents from

*outside*

the area.

Eckert, who is making her first appearance with Opera Quad Cities, is an acclaimed mezzo soprano based in Chicago, and has performed with the Lyric Opera of Chicago and with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra at Carnegie Hall. She learned of the Quad Cities organization through her *Carmen* co-star - and fellow Chicagoan - Eric Ashcraft, an Opera Quad Cities veteran who performed the role of Rodolfo in *La Boheme* in 2005, and who has played Don José to Eckert's *Carmen* several times previously. "Stacy's one of my faves," he says of Eckert.

But in addition to securing professional talent, Opera Quad Cities has devoted itself to the discovery of *new* talent. In the spring of 2002, Opera Quad Cities hosted its first Young Artist's Competition, which gave 60 area vocalists, aged 17 to 30, the opportunity to stretch their vocal muscles and surround themselves with like-minded singers devoted to opera. The event has become an annual one, and one that *Carmen* cast member Sarah Burke - a Young Artist's Competition winner in 2004 - is grateful for.

Opera Quad Cities, Burke says, "is supporting local talent in a climate today where opera companies need to make money, and they're not as likely to take the chance on the young singer who *isn't* a 'finished product' yet and ready for a grant."

She continues: "That's what's really wonderful about the Young Artist's Competition that they're doing, and even the scene recitals and mainstage shows, that they [Opera Quad Cities] *do* continue to support people from the local area and the states of Iowa and Illinois. They're giving us - the young singer - the tools to go forward."

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Burke says that her adoration of opera came about primarily because "it's a challenge, intellectually *and* vocally," and the sentiment is strongly echoed among her *Carmen* co-stars.



"I *never* thought about singing opera," says Ashcraft. (He reveals, "I mean, when I was growing up, you know, Rod Stewart and Elton *John* were the ones ... ," and his comment is interrupted by the laughter of the others.) "It was through taking voice lessons and being challenged that I found it. It was just through striving to be better and better personally. ... I mean, opera is the *pinnacle* of vocal music. You can't find anything more difficult to do."

Like Ashcraft - who admits to having "great fun ... a helluva time" in musical theatre early in his career - Eckert didn't originally intend to pursue opera professionally.

"I actually started out as kind of a Broadway baby," she says, "and it became so easy I got bored. I mean, how many songs in [the musical rhyme scheme] A-B-B-A can one possibly *do*? So I challenged myself in opera, and it's just kind of where I wound up."

For some *Carmen* performers, though, opera was less a challenge than an inevitability. "I was always that kid in choir who had 'The Big Voice,'" admits Lounsberry. "In fact, I went to Augustana and auditioned for the Augie choir, and I didn't get in, and I was crushed. I'm like, 'What's wrong with me? I *suck!*' And then [choir director] Don Morrison came over to me after my *second* time trying out, and he's like, 'I just want you to understand *why* I'm not putting you in. It's not that you're not good; it's because you don't have that little light sound that blends, and that's what I'm looking for.'"

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Lounsberry pauses, then reveals Morrison's suggestion: "Would you like to try opera workshop?" She and the others laugh. "And I found my *niche!*"

Yet despite the performers' enthusiasm for their craft, they are aware that getting local audiences on-board with opera can be tricky business.

Ashcraft believes that "there's not really a preconceived attitude or idea of what opera is" in the area. "It's just that most people don't really *know* what it is. They haven't been exposed to it. That's been a big struggle, and so you want to try to do a certain amount of education," which Opera Quad Cities has attempted to do by staging some of the musical genre's most accessible - and recognizable - works.

"When we first started out," he continues, "some of the things we ventured to do were a little bit obscure. But people have *heard* of *Carmen*, they've *heard* of *La Boheme*, they've *heard* of *The Barber of Seville* ... . You know, you stick to a few of those [familiar] composers and you won't have a problem. Like Puccini or Verdi. Or Mr. Rossini.

"Or *Bizet*," he adds to the laughter of the group.

Yet Lounsberry admits that the biggest stumbling block among potential audiences is a fear that, with the performers singing in a foreign language, "they're not gonna *understand* it.

"But what we want to convey," she continues, "is that even if you don't understand what they're *saying* , opera, at its core, is about all the same, basic emotions that you and I feel." (She adds that Opera Quad Cities' production of *Carmen* , performed in French, will feature English super-titles screened above the stage.) "It's about jealousy ... ."

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"Love," says Ashcroft.

"Betrayal," says Eckert.

"Loneliness," says Lounsberry. "All sorts of things. People *understand* emotions, and that's what you get a *lot* of in opera. Trust me, if you watch Stacy [in *Carmen*], you will *understand* what's going on."

"And there's a *lot* that's going on," says Eckert, whose explanation of *Carmen's* action increases in tempo - almost musically - as she delivers it. "The chorus comes on, and then all of a sudden there's just a couple of people, and then there's a chorus again, and then there's a *knife fight*, and then there's ... !" She and the others laugh. "It just keeps jumping to the next thing!"

*Carmen will be performed at Davenport's Adler Theatre on Friday, January 12, at 7:30 p.m., and on Sunday, January 14, at 2 p.m. Tickets are available at the Adler box office or by calling (563) 326-1111.*