

## A Taste of Opera

Timeless music, drama earn some new fans

**W**HEN SHAWN ROY GRADUATED from UL Lafayette in 1980, he never dreamed he would someday return to the university to teach voice.

A talented bass baritone, he wanted nothing more than to sing professionally. He first toured the country with a



From left, Robin Gough, Shawn Roy and Michael Webb in Mozart's "Cosi Fan Tutte."

small opera. For the next 15 years, he performed extensively in the United States and abroad.

Roy was working in New York when he received a phone call in 1998 from an early mentor in Lafayette, vocal coach Pat Shelby. Would he consider applying for a faculty post at his alma mater?

By then, Roy was ready for a change. He applied and was hired as UL Lafayette's vocal instructor and director of opera and musical theater.

Roy is determined to keep opera alive on campus. It's probably the most challenging role of his entire career.

Last spring's triumphant performance of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's "The Magic Flute" by the UL Lafayette Opera

Theater and Acadiana Symphony Orchestra may have been a turning point. It was so successful that the university and symphony almost immediately decided to perform Gioacchino Rossini's "The Barber of Seville" in May 2007.

Lead roles for "The Magic Flute" had a UL Lafayette student cast, a professional cast and members of the community. Each cast was featured in two performances. The student cast also performed two shows for local school children, as well as all secondary roles. The opera was sung in English.

Roy is energized by students such as Corliss Smith, a UL Lafayette senior majoring in music education. "She walks around with the opera playing in her headphones all the time. She just loves it," he said.

Corliss had a supporting role in "The Magic Flute" and will perform in "The Barber of Seville." Her enthusiasm about opera is infectious.

She describes Mozart's "Magic Flute" as "awesome." And Rossini's "Barber of Seville"? It has "very flashy music," she observed. "It'll have a lot of little runs like..." She quickly trills a set of notes to illustrate her point. "It'll have a lot of little fast moving stuff like that."

Other students with parts in "The Barber of Seville" include: Nathan Abbott,

Stacy Broussard, Nicholas Manzo, Sasha Massey, Dana Donnell, Rafael Henry and Blake Duhon. It is the only scheduled opera performance in Lafayette in 2007.

Roy and Smith agree that performing an opera with professionals and a symphony is an invaluable experience for college students.

"It is especially a privilege to be able to do these operas as an undergrad. At larger schools, as an undergrad, you don't get to perform," Smith added.

Because an opera incorporates many art forms, its benefits extend beyond the Music Department. "The Magic Flute," for instance, was a



From left, Evan Melancon, Geraldine Hubbell, Birdie Koski, Christina Oliver, Brittan Blanchard and Joey Thibodeaux in "Cosi Fan Tutte" by Mozart.

production of the entire College of the Arts and the ASO. Students sang, danced, helped design and build sets, and assisted with lighting.

In the past few years, Roy has been



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first director. G. S. Beaman Griffin was the Guild's director from 1965 through 1985.

Operas such as Giacomo Puccini's "Tosca" and "La Boheme" once drew large audiences. More than 2,000 people saw Giuseppe Verdi's "Rigoletto" at the Lafayette Municipal Auditorium in 1962, for example. But opera's popularity had waned drastically by the time Roy began to teach.

"When I was a student

here, there was no symphony, there was no Performing Arts Society of Acadiana, no Broadway series. We had the Community Concert, with three events a year. USL's Opera Guild was the only one doing a show, a big opera or a big musical," he said. "One of our challenges now is attracting an audience because there are so many entertainment choices." The cost of mounting a full-scale opera has become an obstacle, as well.

But Roy plans to continue to introduce students to the beauty and power of a com-



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Performing in Mozart's "Magic Flute," were, from left: above, guest artist Andrew Funk; top right, Jennifer Mills and Corliss Smith; bottom left, Teri Anne Wyble, Kevin Lewis and Simone Sonnier; and bottom right, guest artist Matthew Edwards.

slowly rebuilding the opera program, collaborating with the Performing Arts Department and UL Lafayette Symphony Orchestra to offer contemporary musicals, such as "Les Miserables" and "Seussical the Musical." The Opera Theater and UL Lafayette Symphony Orchestra have performed operas every other year.

Collaboration with the ASO began when its music director, Mariusz Smolij, approached Roy about a possible partnership. Roy jumped at the chance. It would be the first large-scale operatic production on UL Lafayette's campus in many years.

Major productions such as last spring's "Magic Flute" were common at the university for about 25 years, thanks to the USL Opera Guild. The self-supporting organization was created in 1960 by Willis Ducrest, head of the School of Music from 1948 until 1977, and Bernard Erhart, the guild's



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plex art form that has been around since the late 1500s.

"It's a lot of work, but when you see students excited about it, about singing opera, it's worth it. It may be something they've never heard about. Then they get here, and by the end of the first year, they want to perform in one. And that's our job isn't it? As teachers?" ■