

Opera-tunity came knocking

Syracuse and Tri-Cities operas collaborate in a production years in the making

BY ELLEN E. MINTZER

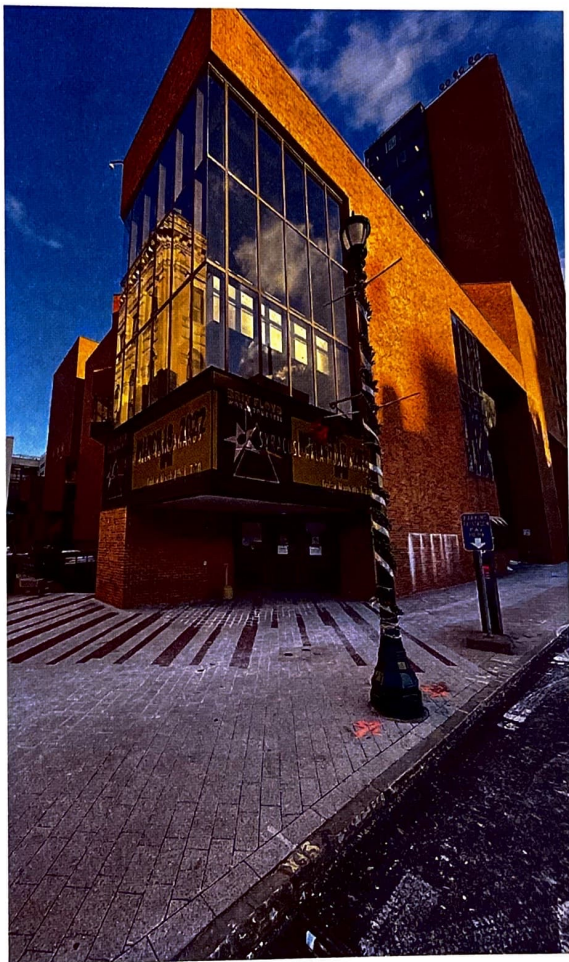
The Syracuse Opera stage at the Oncenter Crouse Hinds Theater looks out onto three tiers of red velvet seats. The overhead lights are a hexagon of shimmering white bulbs. Shout, and you'll hear your voice reverberate back to you through the stillness. Even weeks before rehearsals start for the company's next production, there's a frisson of excitement in the air. It's easy to imagine the seats filled with chattering audience members, the swoop of the rising curtains.

Meanwhile, 73 miles south at Tri-Cities Opera's production facility in Binghamton, there are rooms filled with bits and pieces of scenery, or racks of costumes in every color and from every era. A mid-century stove and refrigerator. A fuchsia skirt blossoming off its hanger.

The two small regional opera companies came together for a co-production years in the making: Rossini's classic opera "Cinderella," or "La Cenerentola" in the original Italian. Tri-Cities Opera staged the production in April, and Syracuse Opera presented it on May 1 with the same sets, the same costumes and the majority of the same cast.

John Rozzoni, general director of Tri-Cities Opera and executive management consultant with Syracuse Opera, said the Italian subtitle of the opera is "goodness triumphs," a message he feels everyone needs to hear right now. He and Christian Capocaccia, the general and artistic director of Syracuse Opera, had been discussing a potential partnership for nearly a decade.

The two men often finish each other's sentences and answer questions together, but without talking over each other. When Rozzoni talks about the synergy of their partnership, he knits his fingers together, tight like the laces of a corset, in an unconscious gesture.



Syracuse Opera, housed at the Oncenter Crouse Hinds Theater, opposite page and above, teams up with Tri-Cities Opera in Binghamton for a co-production of "Cinderella."

Although Rozzoni brings an administrative perspective and Capocaccia brings a more artistic one, the two men are not in conflict.

"I do a certain kind of fireworks, and he does a certain kind of his own fireworks, and so altogether, we compound each other," says Capocaccia, who conducted "Cinderella" in Syracuse. Each man is part dreamer and part realist, and both have musical backgrounds: Rozzoni was an opera singer, while Capocaccia was a violinist in his home country of Italy before getting a master's degree in conducting in the United States.

When the COVID-19 pandemic shut down arts organizations just over two years ago, Rozzoni had to fire everyone who worked for him; it was one of the worst days of his life. Fortunately, with the help of the Paycheck Protection Program, he was able to eventually bring everyone back. Tri-Cities Opera put out some virtual programming during its hiatus, but it was not financially viable.

"There was no money in it, to be frank," says Rozzoni. "We did stuff to be artistically relevant and keep people excited, but it was all at a loss."

Despite the undeniable challenges caused by the COVID shutdowns, they also offered an opportunity to reset. Rozzoni believes that the opera industry model for the past 20 or so years has been unsustainable; operas are extremely expensive to produce, and smaller companies don't have the resources to reimagine the classics in extravagant ways that will intrigue modern audiences.

"[The shutdown] gave us a chance to reassess," says Capocaccia. "And we probably would not be here today as a team."

"What's cool about working together," Rozzoni adds, "is that we can explore these new stories and these new projects. But also, the resources of the companies and the efficiency that we can create by collaborating allows us to tell even the old stories in big, exciting ways that neither company could really afford."

While the opera "Cinderella" is more than 200 years old, it's still an accessible and familiar story. Rozzoni emphasized that it's a timeless tale of love and he wants the production values to feel updated. The co-production, as conceived by director David Lefkowitz (who directed Rozzoni as a student at Ithaca College in his first opera), will be set in the 1950s and will have the comedic flair of a sitcom alongside the swooning romanticism of the story. Lefkowitz was not available for comment, but Rozzoni described the director's vision as "a 'Cinderella' once upon a time, but not so far in the distance." Cinderella's ball gown was inspired by an Audrey Hepburn frock, with a sprinkle of Marilyn Monroe.

The production found its Cinderella in mezzo-soprano Camille Sherman. On a Saturday afternoon in early March, she was in Pensacola, Florida, in rehearsals for a "Barber of Seville" that was using sets built by Tri-Cities Opera. (The company's produc-



tion facility rents out the sets it builds around the country.) With her wavy brown hair loose around her shoulders and honeyed rays of sunlight filtering through a window behind her, Sherman was effervescent in her delight at taking on the role. "I grew up watching Disney movies, so if I had told my 5-year-old self that I was going to play Cinderella someday, I would have had an absolute meltdown of excitement," she laughs.

Sherman profoundly missed performing live during the COVID shutdowns. "When it all comes together, and the performers are doing their thing and the audience is with you, the energy in that theater is irreplaceable," she says. While Sherman acknowledged that a career as a professional opera singer is far from easy, she simply can't imagine doing anything else.

Singing the part of Don Ramiro opposite Sherman in Binghamton was 23-year-old tenor Aaron Crouch. (He had another contract during the Syracuse run.) Crouch is a rising star in the



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Christian Capocaccia, the general and artistic director of Syracuse Opera



Left, Annapolis Opera rehearses “Cinderella,” a shared production traveling throughout the Northeast using the same sets, costumes and in some cases, performers. Above, John Rozzoni, general director of Tri-Cities Opera and executive management consultant with Syracuse Opera, and Christian Capocaccia, general and artistic director of Syracuse Opera, have been discussing a potential partnership for nearly a decade.

opera world; he originated the role of The Son in Jeanine Tesori’s opera “Blue” at Cooperstown’s Glimmerglass Festival in 2019. He echoed Sherman’s sentiments about the experience of performing for a live audience. “The exchange of energy that happens in a performance is unlike anything else,” he says.

Capocaccia spoke to that same sensation from a conductor’s perspective. He says he soaks in the audience’s reactions, changing the tempo or dynamics based on what he receives.

Like the relationship between artist and audience, Rozzoni and Capocaccia feel that Syracuse Opera and Tri-Cities Opera are enriched by their relationship with one another. Collaboration necessarily requires compromise, but neither man views that as a negative. After discussions with the boards of each company, they decided on a model where each company retains its autonomy but makes plans together and shares staff and performers.

The duo has high hopes for the future of opera in Central New York. While their ambitions come with no small degree of pressure, Rozzoni and Capocaccia are nevertheless facing the process with a determination to take it one step at a time and a readiness to adjust and adapt when necessary. “I feel like this is where I’m supposed to be,” says Rozzoni. He pauses, contemplative. “Life can be good and hard at the same time.”

Rozzoni thinks that the fear of the unknown presents a challenge with this or any new venture, but he and Capocaccia are careful about how they tell the story of the collaboration.

“It’s very hard sometimes to make people understand that by sharing, they don’t lose themselves,” Capocaccia says. “They get more of themselves than they were before.”

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