

By David Morrison

One hundred and thirty-six years ago, the now standard Johann Strauss II (1825-1899) operetta, *Die Fledermaus* (The Bat), was staged for the very first time. In the wake of countless performances around the world since that historic premiere at Theater an der Wien in Vienna, Austria, the Vancouver Island Opera (VIO) presents Strauss Jr.'s third operatic work at the Qualicum Beach Civic Centre on Saturday October 16 (7:30pm) and Sunday October 17 (2:30pm). (See ticket details below.)

From a local perspective, this particular production bears its own historical significance. The VIO this year celebrates a decade of bringing opera to Oceanside, coming full circle by once again staging the comedy operetta that originally launched the company. This time, however, it will be very different, on a far grander scale, marking one chapter of the VIO ending and the next beginning.

I spoke recently with the VIO's beguiling founder, producer and Artistic Director, retired opera singer, Tatiana Vasilieva. She explained the reason for revisiting a work already presented was simply a case of unfinished business.

"When we started we were doing scenes from operas, but my aim was always to perform a whole opera. The first one was *Die Fledermaus*, but it was only accompanied by piano. We did not have money for an orchestra, as it is so expensive. Now we have an orchestra of professional musicians."

Indeed, the VIO now boasts a 26-piece orchestra comprised of young talent from the Vancouver, Victoria and Mid-Island Symphony Orchestras, to be conducted at these performances by noted Vancouver Opera tenor, John Arsenault.

At the point of such an important anniversary for the VIO, it seems pertinent to recap how this much-loved company came into being. Delightfully, it turns out that the beauty and peace of the region as a retirement zone was the inadvertent catalyst.

VANCOUVER ISLAND OPERA

TEN YEARS OF ARIAS

Madam Butterfly

"It's the usual story!" laughs Tatiana. "So many people come here to retire; well, the same happened to my husband and I, and we moved to Qualicum Beach. But after a short time here I realized I was bored, because I had always been so busy all my life. People heard that I was here, and not doing anything with opera after such a long and distinguished career, so they phoned me and came to see me. Then I had a meeting in my kitchen with about 40 people! I was amazed at how many people were interested in it! This was the beginning. I didn't really expect so many people wanted to perform. I have a main core of singers in the chorus that are with me now since the beginning, and I am so proud of them because sometimes they are better than the professionals! They are so integrated, so together."

Originally founded as the Oceanside Lyric Ensemble, the name was changed to Vancouver Island Opera in 2005. Sandwiched between the piano-accompanied *Die Fledermaus* and the forthcoming full orchestra production, there have been seasons of regular recitals and five other full-length operas: Rossini's *The Barber of Seville*, Bizet's *Carmen*, Verdi's *La Traviata* and two Puccini masterpieces, *La Bohème* and *Madama Butterfly*.

Looking at this list of VIO presentations to date it seems evident that the company is, at least currently, intent on staging the more 'mainstream' operas. I asked Tatiana if this was a deliberate plan, and whether thoughts of producing some of the more challenging

contemporary operas, such as Stravinsky's *The Rake's Progress*, Berg's *Wozzeck* or Adams' *Nixon in China* had been ever been entertained as ideas for the future.

"I am purposely choosing the traditional operas," she said, "because for people who are not exposed so much to opera I could not give them some of the modern operas. Telling the truth I do not like some of them myself! Some are lots of fun for performers, but not so melodious and nice to listen to. This is why I am choosing material that is traditional." This said, Tatiana is not ruling out the possibility of tackling a modern opera or two in the future. It's all about the audience, she says, feeling they need a greater understanding of the 20th century works and the evolution of opera in general in order to appreciate the tougher material.

Another aspect she wrestles with to an extent is whether VIO productions should be presented as originally written, or catered to English-speaking audiences.

"Yes, there is the big dilemma in doing operas in the original language, or with translation. I am one that believes the original language should go with the opera, but in the case of *Die Fledermaus* we are doing it in English."

I tend to agree with Tatiana that operas should be shown in their purest form but then, as in the case of the controversial UK primetime 'reality' TV show, *Popstar to Operastar* (sic), maybe any device available to attract the uninitiated to the many joys of



submitted photo

opera is not such a bad thing? It's certainly a debatable point, but as 99.99 percent of opera recordings on CD or vinyl are in the original language, it may be best to leave it to those, like Tatiana, who know what's best for the audiences of live performances.

And this is certainly a lady who, after a lifetime in the world of opera, can speak with authority on such matters. A former member of the Canadian Opera Company, Tatiana once studied under the legendary Italian tenor, Beniamino Gigli (1890-1957), and was described by *Opera Canada* magazine as having a "voice of exceptional brilliance, style and vocal control."

Of her experiences with Gigli, she says: "He said to me, 'You have a lot of potential, Tatiana, but,' as he said it, 'you have to lavoro, lavoro, lavoro!' Work, work, work!' And I remember to this day that without work, *nothing* can happen in opera. It is very demanding mentally and physically. It's like a sport and you have to be in good condition to be able to perform well vocally, as well as emotionally."

Tatiana continues to seek people prepared to unreservedly offer this kind of ethic to join the VIO for their ongoing adventures in opera, having a whole lot of fun in the process. Interested? Get in touch!

"We are inviting chorus members, especially men – we don't have enough men! – to come and join us, because we don't audition chorus," she says. "So all people who love singing should come; loving to sing is the important thing!"

So, as the singing continues to ring loud and clear while the VIO prepares to celebrate this big birthday, what hopes does its esteemed founder hold for the next ten years?

"I hope to produce all the operas I have in mind," she states. "I am praying that God will give me strength and energy and health to be able to do all these operas I have envisioned in my mind for the next few years."

For this I can only hope for the very same, applaud and loudly cheer: Brava, Tatiana! Brava! ~

Tickets for the VIO's 10th Anniversary production of Die Fledermaus are available from: Chocolates Plus, Qualicum Beach (144 2nd Ave); Skylite Motel, Parksville (459 East Island Hwy); Cranky Dog Music, Parksville (154 Morison Ave); Tom Lee Music, Nanaimo (10-6894 Island Hwy North). For further information, contact VIO secretary-treasurer Lucille Thompson at (250) 248 7296 or luthompson@shaw.ca.

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