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Fairbanks performing arts groups join forces for 'Verdi and the Bard'

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Sierra Trinchet, left, and Nikki Carvajal, right, toss Paul Addsiak in a laundry bag during a scene from the "Verdi and the Bard" production. The scene was performed on Wednesday, Oct. 9, 2013, at the Davis Concert Hall. This production is the combined efforts of Opera Fairbanks, Fairbanks Shakespeare Theatre and Choir of the North.

Sam Harrel/News-Miner

FAIRBANKS — In a first for the Fairbanks theater scene, four groups of performers are merging their talents to put a powerhouse of creativity on stage, all for the sake of Giuseppe Verdi and William Shakespeare.

“Verdi and the Bard” is bringing together Opera Fairbanks and Fairbanks Shakespeare Theatre, backed by the Choir of the North and the Opera Fairbanks orchestra, for two nights of theater celebrating the noted composer’s 200 birthday and the three operas Verdi wrote based on Shakespeare’s plays — “Macbeth,” “Othello” and “The Merry Wives of Windsor,” which Verdi renamed “Falstaff.” It’s a theatrical performance of massive undertaking, one that includes a cast and crew of more than 70 performers, musicians, singers, behind-the-scenes technicians, designers and directors.

“When we started to put all the pieces together in the fall, we realized how large it is,” said UAF theater professor Carrie Baker, who is stage directing the performance for Opera Fairbanks. “It’s a really big undertaking, and it’s really exciting to see it all come together and jell. It’s been a huge challenge but very rewarding.”

During the performance, members of Opera Fairbanks and the UAF Opera Workshop will perform selections from the three operas while Fairbanks Shakespeare Theatre actors will fill out the stories from the plays. While Baker is handling the opera staging, Shakespeare theater directors Tom Robenolt and Rebecca George are directing the staging involving the spoken word. On the musical side, UAF music professor John Hopkins is leading the orchestra and Choir of the North, both of whom will share the stage with the actors.

At rehearsal this week, all the pieces came together for the first time when opera, theater, orchestra and choir joined for the first time on stage for the initial run through. The result was a visual and aural stunner as Shakespearean actors introduced the opening scenes of “Othello” and were joined in song by members of the opera.

Early in the planning process, the decision was made to put the orchestra and choir on stage, allowing members of the opera and theater troupe to perform upstage, thereby giving all four performing groups stage time for this collaborative first.

“It’s been a unique thing and has just mushroomed,” Hopkins, the music director, said. “In the initial planning, when we were selecting music, we had so much music we had to cut back and see what fit with the singing and the crowd.”

Hopkins decided to do sort of the “biggest hits” of the three operas, focusing on the most noted arias and scenes from “Othello,” “Macbeth” and “Falstaff.” The performance also includes lighting and visual effects, especially during the storm scene in “Othello,” which adds another element to the

stage.

“Those are always fun to do,” Hopkins said of the effects.

Musically, the performance has been a huge undertaking for Hopkins and his crew of singers and musicians, but it’s one that has paid off for all the groups involved.

“There is lots of coordination musically, and we’re getting involved with other groups we know,” Hopkins said. “It’s a huge production. It’s a whole new level working with all these groups.”

While the performance has been huge — creating costumes, hours of rehearsal, working on lighting, set and technical aspects — it’s one the groups involved hope opens the door to more joint performances.

“This as been great fun but on a much larger scale,” Baker said. “We’re hoping this is the beginning of more collaborations across companies in Fairbanks.”

IF YOU GO

What: Verdi and the Bard

When: 7:30 p.m. Saturday, Oct. 12, and 4 p.m. Sunday, Oct. 13. These are the only two performances.

Where: Davis Concert Hall, UAF campus

Tickets: Available online at www.operafairbanks.org. Tickets are \$45 for preferred seating (in the front middle section); \$35 for general seating; and \$20 for military, students and children.

FYI: The operatic portions of “Verdi and the Bard” are performed in Italian with English supertitles.

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