

FRIDAY, JANUARY 24, 2003

# Weekend

**MOVIES**  
**PERFORMING ARTS**

The New York Times



Clockwise from far left: Robin Rubendunst and Paul C. Mueller in the Bronx Opera's "Bartered Bride"; bandits dressed as clowns in "The Forest's Voice," by the Henry Street Chamber Opera; Aram Tchobanian and Judith Barnes in "The Dwarf," by the Vertical Player Repertory in Brooklyn.

## Never Say Die In Indie Opera



By ANNE MIDGETTE

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Above, photographs by Kelly Guenther for The New York Times; top, Jack Vartoogian for The New York Times

# Never Say Die in Indie Opera, Where Small Can Be Grand

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Ask the man on the street to define opera and you're likely to get adjectives like grand, foreign, expensive. Ask a New York opera patron about opera beyond the Metropolitan and City Operas, and you might get a mention of the Amato Opera, the stalwart 107-seat theater on the Bowery that's been putting on tiny productions of classic operas since 1948. But none of these quite covers the broad spectrum of indie opera companies that produce fully staged opera around New York City in living rooms, church basements and city parks.

"Grand" hardly describes Ms. Barnes's Vertical Player Repertory, or Golden Fleece, a downtown outfit that has been presenting new opera on a shoestring for 30 years. But "small" doesn't really fit the New York Grand Opera, which plays Verdi in Central Park with a full-size orchestra. Or the Dicapo Opera, which has its own opera house (although with only 204 seats), a professional set and costume workshop, and an annual budget of \$1.2 million.

### Homemade to Professional

The range of opera companies in New York is astounding. The companies discussed here are only part of the picture. And that's not even counting troupes that present opera in concert: the Opera Orchestra of New York, Teatro Grattacielo, Pala Opera, New York Opera Forum and others.

The offerings run the gamut from the creatively homemade — like "The Dwarf" — to the crisply professional, like "Patience and Sarah" by Paula Kimper, a production by American Opera Projects that had a big success at the Lincoln Center Festival in 1998. Going to indie opera in New York can mean hearing the New York Grand Opera do Verdi in Central Park, embodying both opera's traditions and its stereotypes: bright, two-dimensional sets; elderly tenors in glossy wigs; big powerful music. It can mean sitting in a small space in the East Village for a sung one-woman version of Anne Frank's diary — attic hideout, iron bedstead and all — as conceived by Nancy Rhodes and the Encompass New Opera Theater. It can even mean taking in Beijing opera at the New Victory Theater, where the Qi Shu Fang Beijing Opera Company is presenting "The Women Generals" this weekend.

The only thing these groups really have in common is a devotion that keeps their directors working long hours for little or no pay year after year. In today's economy, it takes all the resources and energy they can muster just to stay afloat.

Why do it at all? "I wanted to maintain the freedom to satisfy my musical cravings," said Mimi Stern-Wolfe of the Downtown Chamber and Opera Players. Most directors echo her or Michael Capasso of the Dicapo Opera, who said succinctly, "A combination of passion and insanity."

### Unusual Repertory

One of the biggest reasons for starting an opera company is that it lets you do the art you want the way you want. Whether they're conductors, composers, stage directors or singers, most founders of New York's small companies created them because they found no other outlets to do what they wanted.

For some, that was new or unusual repertory; for others, it may have been simply conducting. Vincent La Selva of the New York Grand Opera, a talented Verdi conductor, has somehow failed to establish a strong foothold in international opera; but his company got on the map and into the Guinness Book of World Records by presenting all 28 Verdi operas in chronological order. (It took eight years.)

Companies that present traditional repertory also see themselves as a training ground for opera careers. "We are in a sense on the precipice of the professional field," said Michael Spierman, a conductor who founded the Bronx Opera in 1967. (Its latest offering, Smetana's "Bartered Bride," finished its run last weekend.)

Mr. Spierman auditions young singers, many with experience in regional companies, and rehearses them exhaustively, paying them a small fee. "Professionals in the field come and see the shows," he said, "and often people are hired a few days off a production. We'll get a call saying, 'Who was that masked man, that bass-baritone; can I have a phone number?'"

Singers who appear with these companies hope that a Bronx or Amato Opera performance will be a step on the way to a promising career. The precedents are there: Mignon Dunn and Jon Frederic Weston sang with the Amato Opera; the



Kelly Guenther for The New York Times

The Vertical Player Repertory in a dress rehearsal for its current production, "The Dwarf" by Yoav Gal.

Bronx Opera presented the tenor Neil Rosenshein and the conductor George Manahan, now the music director of the New York City Opera. And the Regina Opera in Bensonhurst had Dolora Zajick in "Cavalleria Rusticana" in 1980 and Mark Delavan in "The Merry Widow" in 1992. "They wouldn't have sung with us," said Fran Garber-Cohen, chairman of the Regina's board, if the troupe had not met a certain standard.

But these are exceptions. Very few people go on from these companies to truly big success. And there's certainly no guarantee of a review. If critics come at all, it tends to be for unusual repertory. So when Mr. Spierman takes the Bronx Opera to Manhattan, it's with the lesser known of his season's two operas. At Dicapo, too, it's the more uncommon fare that (sometimes) gets media attention.

With audiences, it's just the reverse. "Our subscriber base is very conservative," Mr. Capasso said. Many who subscribe to all four of the season's operas turn in their tickets for the one less known (or contemporary) work. (This ends up being to Dicapo's advantage, since it can resell the tickets to single-ticket buyers.) Even in Ms. Barnes's eclectic surroundings, which one might expect would draw venturesome souls, "Cavalleria Rusticana" brought in a larger audience.

Among the more traditional companies, one senses a certain jockeying for position: they're competing for singers, for reviews, for audiences for their own "Bohème." But among the companies devoted to contemporary work, the audience's conservatism helps create a sense of solidarity. "The more, the merrier," Ms. Rhodes said.

"These various companies are not competitive," said Richard Marshall, founder of the Center for Contemporary Opera. "They are willing to help each other, through sharing mailing lists or sharing promotion. We're trying to create a climate where people see these newer things all the time, so they aren't strange anymore."

To help foster this climate and a dialogue about creating new work, Opera America, the national service organization, is bringing together producers, patrons and artists in New York this March for four days of discussion and seeing new opera in the hope of encouraging new projects. Encompass, the Center for Contemporary Opera and American Opera Projects will all be involved. "Smaller companies are sometimes great laboratories for new works," said Mark Scorca, president of Opera America. "They're not bound by pressure to produce a subscription series, so they can give creative artists all the time they need."

Because major American compa-

nies have started producing more American opera, some smaller companies have changed their initial emphasis. Ms. Rhodes, for example, took up the banner of American opera with encouragement from Virgil Thomson. Encompass's first production, in 1975, was of his opera "The Mother of Us All." "He said, 'Nancy, I leave to you the mantle of American opera,'" Ms. Rhodes recalled.

Today, however, rather than producing extant American operas, she is concentrating on developing new work, which includes writing a libretto for a new opera with the composer Lior Navok.

### Dreaming of Donations

Ms. Rhodes dreams of a more significant place for her company, starting with a home of its own. "If someone wrote me a check for \$10 million, I know exactly how my theater would look," she said.

In the absence of such a donation, performance space is a problem. "The space ballet changes all the time in New York," said Lou Rodgers, founder of the Golden Fleece. Once a venue is discovered, pieces rise, which put the Angel Orensanz Center for the Arts on the Lower East Side, where American Opera Projects used to perform, out of the company's reach.

And since the company book only one or two nights at a time, rather

than a more lucrative long run, "theaters hate to get back to us," said Charles Jarden, the group's executive director, who had to scramble to find a theater for his new production, Deborah Drattell's "Marina: A Captive Spirit," which will be staged in May at the DR2 Theater in Union Square.

On the other hand, it was a performance space that inspired the founding of the Henry Street Chamber Opera (soon to be known as the Gotham Chamber Players). On seeing the Harry De Jur Playhouse, "our mission was clear," said Neal Goren, the company's music director: "To present distinguished productions of rarely heard intimate operatic masterpieces that were composed for spaces such as this."

By putting its whole budget into a single production, the company can attract more established performers, like the mezzo-soprano Beth Clayton, who will take the title role in the next production, "Die Schwarze Spinne," or "The Black Widow" by Heinrich Sutermeister, a Swiss composer. The company had a critical success in November with its last production, a double bill of one-act operas, "The Forest's Voice" and "The Knife's Tears," by Bohuslav Martinu.

### Renting Out Space

And for Dicapo, performance space is a significant source of revenue. Having created its theater in a church basement in 1995, the company now makes good money renting it out. Dicapo, of course, has both lights and piano; but there's one piece of equipment a traditional opera company doesn't need. "They come in and ask, 'Where's your sound system?'" Mr. Capasso said. "And we say, 'We don't have one.'"

In the matter of resources, today's weak economy isn't helping anyone. Heavily dependent on government support, particularly the New York State Council on the Arts and the city's Department of Cultural Affairs, many opera companies are waiting nervously to hear the details of next year's budget cuts. "The wonderful thing about being somewhat small is that we don't have too many people we have to lay off," said Jonathan Levi, co-founder of the Nine Circles Chamber Theater, whose "Art of the Fugitive" was given last week at the 92d Street Y.

Mr. Levi, at least, has a day job; he's the director of the Fisher Center at Bard College, a performing-arts complex that will open this spring in Annandale-on-Hudson, N.Y. Not ev-

eryone is in such a privileged financial position.

"It's a piece of the puzzle," Mr. Jarden said of his salary from American Opera Projects. That is the core of the income he assembles, as most freelancers do, from several sources: sitting on grant panels, for example. Some company directors — Ms. Rhodes, Mr. Spierman, Mr. La Selva and others — have teaching jobs. Some are married to people with more regular incomes. And some have recently lost their day jobs, like Jay Meetze, the founder of the Opera Company of Brooklyn: budget cuts eliminated his post as a music teacher in a New York City school.

### Financial Risks

Mr. Meetze, a conductor, knows all about the financial travails of producing opera. When he founded his company in 2000, his mandate was to perform fully staged, high-quality opera productions. Within two seasons he had a \$40,000 deficit.

Mr. Meetze contacted all the singers he knew, asking if any of them were preparing roles for out-of-town engagements that they'd like to try out in public (for no fee) first. "So many people responded," he said, "that I ended up with nine operas."

This season he's presenting two performances of each, in concert, with piano accompaniment — one for a paying public, one in a city school — around New York. He has also set up a mentoring program, matching eight singers to eight students at the Young Women's Leadership School. This summer those students will form the chorus when Mr. Meetze produces all nine of the season's operas, this time with chamber orchestra, as the New York City Summer Opera Festival.

Meanwhile, Mr. Meetze beefed up his board to nine members, and they're embarking on a \$500,000 capital campaign. Next season he plans to offer staged opera again: 10 productions culminating in a second summer festival.

For most people who found small opera companies, the company turns out to be an end in itself. But the size of the company doesn't reflect the size of the dreams — whether you've been at it three years, like Mr. Meetze, or almost 30, like Ms. Rhodes. "Jimmy is loosening his reins up there because of his many responsibilities," Mr. Meetze said of James Levine and the Metropolitan Opera. "Down the road, when I have more experience, I wouldn't mind taking that over."

## A Labor of Love That's Its Own Reward

A sampling of New York City's smaller opera companies. Other notable troupes include the Gilbert and Sullivan Players ([www.nygasp.org](http://www.nygasp.org)), L'Opéra Français (212 349-7009) and Operaworks ([www.operaworks.org](http://www.operaworks.org)).

### Center for Contemporary Opera

FOUNDED: 1982 (by Richard Marshall)  
YEARLY PRODUCTIONS: Usually two a season  
ANNUAL BUDGET: About \$230,000  
TICKETS: \$20 to \$40  
THEATER: Often the Kaye Playhouse in Manhattan. The next show, a cabaret-style piece, will be at the Thalia (Symphony Space), 2537 Broadway, at 95th Street; (212) 758-2757, [www.conopera.org](http://www.conopera.org).  
SINGER FEES: Unavailable  
ACCOMPANIMENT: Varies widely, 4 to 32  
STAFF: Two to three

### Amato Opera

FOUNDED: 1948 (by Anthony Amato)  
YEARLY PRODUCTIONS: Six this season; generally five or six. Each production receives 12 performances.  
ANNUAL BUDGET: \$225,000



YEARLY PRODUCTIONS: This year, 9 concert versions; next year, 10 (staged)  
ANNUAL BUDGET: This year total costs are \$10,000; next year, projected \$400,000  
TICKETS: \$15 (this season)  
THEATER: Varies (there are concert performances at CAMI Hall, 165 West 57th Street, Manhattan); (212) 567-3283, [brooklyn@aol.com](mailto:brooklyn@aol.com)  
SEATS: Varies  
SINGER FEES: None; possibly an honorarium in the future  
ACCOMPANIMENT: Currently piano; company plans a 24-member chamber orchestra this summer  
STAFF: One  
NEXT PERFORMANCES: Rossini's "Barbieri di Siviglia," Feb. 17 at CAMI Hall

### Qi Shu Fang Beijing Opera Company

FOUNDED: 1988  
YEARLY PRODUCTIONS: Varies  
ANNUAL BUDGET: About \$100,000 for current production  
TICKETS: \$25 to \$75  
THEATER: Often Kaye Playhouse in Manhattan; this weekend, the New Victory Theater, 209 West 42nd Street, Manhattan; tickets: Telecharge.com; (212) 239-6200.  
SINGER FEES: Not available  
ACCOMPANIMENT: 8- to 10-piece ensemble  
STAFF: Two volunteers  
CURRENT PRODUCTION: "The Women Generals," a Chinese folk tale, tonight and tomorrow at 7:30 p.m. at the New Victory Theater

### Regina Opera

FOUNDED: 1970  
YEARLY PRODUCTIONS: Three  
ANNUAL BUDGET: \$50,000 to \$60,000  
TICKETS: \$15 general admission; \$10 for 60+ and students; free, under 12; TDF vouchers  
THEATER: Regina Hall, 12th Avenue and 65th Street, Bensonhurst, Brooklyn; (718) 232-3555, [www.reginaopera.org](http://www.reginaopera.org)  
SEATS: 350 to 400  
SINGER FEES: None  
ACCOMPANIMENT: 35 to 40 pieces  
STAFF: A corps of volunteers  
NEXT PRODUCTION: Puccini's "Madama Butterfly," March 15 to 23

### Vertical Player Repertory

FOUNDED: 1998 (by Judith Barnes)  
YEARLY PRODUCTIONS: Two or three  
ANNUAL BUDGET: About \$4,000 per show  
TICKETS: Suggested admission: \$20  
THEATER: Vertical Player Repertory, 219 Court Street, Cobble Hill, Brooklyn; (212) 539-2696  
SEATS: Up to 60  
SINGER FEES: \$200 honorarium  
ACCOMPANIMENT: Piano to five-piece ensemble  
STAFF: One  
CURRENT PRODUCTION: "The Dwarf" by Yoav Gal, tonight and tomorrow at 8 p.m., Sunday at 4 p.m.

### Opera Company Of Brooklyn

FOUNDED: 2000 (by Jay Meetze)

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STAFF: A core of 5 to 10, some modestly salaried  
NEXT PRODUCTION: Lehar's "Merry Widow," May 9 and 10 in the Bronx, May 16 and 17 on Long Island

Fourth Street, East Village; [www.encompassopera.org](http://www.encompassopera.org); (212) 206-1515  
SEATS: 140  
SINGER FEES: Up to about \$3,500 for a run  
ACCOMPANIMENT: 5 to 22

SEATS: 350  
SINGER FEES: Union scale  
ACCOMPANIMENT: As specified by the composer  
STAFF: General manager