

Opera workshop students to stage production

The Oakland University Opera Workshop production of two operas, "Dido and Aeneas" and "The Wandering Scholar" will be given at 8 p.m. next Thursday and Friday in Varner Recital Hall on

the university campus near Rochester. Tickets, \$2.50 general admission, \$3 for students and senior citizens, are available at the door or in advance by calling 377-2000.

Story: KATHY PARRISH
Photos: DAVID FRANK

Mark Flint doesn't make excuses. So the Michigan Opera Theatre music director is tearing out seats, building costumes from scratch, and rehearsing college students like professional singers for his upcoming Oakland University production.

"We're working every hour of every day to get it all together," said Flint, who refuses to slough off O.U.'s Jan. 25 and 26 rendering of "Dido and Aeneas" and "The Wandering Scholar" as "just college shows."

"I'm not one to give excuses," explained the 25-year-old Detroit. "I go with what I have and do the best I can. I think that's just professional integrity."

What he had when he started the Opera Workshop last fall were 19 music majors from three different area universities — Oakland, Wayne State and University of Detroit.

Some had years of musical training, including work with the Detroit-based Michigan Opera Theatre. Others had never even seen an opera.

"Some could sing well but couldn't walk to save their souls," recalls Flint.

"But it was good because they learned from each other. It was more rewarding than if they'd all been at the same level."

OAKLAND'S FIRST formal opera workshop is a chance for students to become familiar with opera, which Flint says is the major outlet for voice now that recital work is limited.

The class also gives young people an opportunity to take part in an operatic production, sing major roles and "develop themselves."

"I've always learned the most from doing something," added the director, who believes it's crucial that students actually perform theater.

"There's only so much they can learn in a classroom. They can get the tools and foundation, but they must perform to discover what works and what doesn't."

A West Virginia native, Flint fell in love with opera at age 7 and sang with the Pittsburgh Opera as a child. When his voice changed from soprano to bass at 14 he switched to musical theater, but then returned to his favorite medium.

He puts in 20 weeks a year with the Michigan Opera Theatre where he strives to make opera more interesting to the general public. Seven weeks during the summer he is principal conductor of the Lake George Opera Festival.

ALTHOUGH ADMITTEDLY in a "constant state of jet lag," he enjoys working with young people and jumped at O.U.'s offer to become Director of Opera Workshops.

"Doing so much professional work is a learning experience, but I don't have



Mark Flint coaches Coleen Downey in her role as Alison, the wife in "The Wandering Scholar."

time to analyze or investigate a lot of things," says the director, whose sophistication makes him seem older than he is.

"It's nice to deal with people who aren't temperamental. And it's rewarding to give kids something they can benefit from."

Flint deliberately chose contrasting works which would give the students a wide range of experiences.

"Dido and Aeneas" is a 17th century English tragedy which takes place in ancient Carthage shortly after the Trojan War.

"The Wandering Scholar," written in 1929-1930, is a comedy poking fun at a fickle wife and "over exuberant man of the cloth."

Flint cast the roles in October before working with the students.

A two-week orientation in November guided them into stage movement, acting style and use of body with music.

"Opera is perhaps the most intricate form of theater," explained Flint. "Music tends to elongate the action. Things can be spoken more rapidly than they can be sung."

INSTRUCTING ACTRESS Coleen Downey to "provide with the bowl a little more labor of love," the director said he spends a lot of time on gestures.

"Gestures are a problem for all actors — but especially singers," the bass explained. "They tend to be too handsy. It distracts from what they're singing about."

Flint started intensive rehearsals this month. He has been rehearsing the

cast — which has grown to 30 with a chorus and some members of the Michigan Opera Theatre — just like he would a professional company.

"One problem with the university is that you spend four months on one opera. Then you get out and do one in two weeks — and have no discipline for that."

He has been very pleased with the student actors, who he says have been "just like sponges, absorbing everything."

"They are very dedicated — and that's half the lesson."

One problem is that O.U. doesn't have

an "accurate" theater for opera. So he had to tear out theater seats in Varner Recital Hall to make a pit where members of the Pontiac Oakland Symphony will play.

And there weren't costumes available, so they had to be built from scratch.

TURNING OUT an opera in only three weeks hasn't been easy for the student actors, either.

Although she's been singing with the Michigan Opera Theatre for five years, Oakland junior Downey said the rehearsal schedule has been rough.



Students from all over the metropolitan area are taking part in the Opera Workshop. Southfield resident Ann Marie Reeves (standing) plays Betulia in the tragedy "Dido and Aeneas." Marie Fiorillo (seated) of Birmingham portrays Dido.

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