

Opera **in the park**

CHANGING THE FACE OF AMERICAN CULTURE ONE ARIA AT A TIME

BY MONA DE CRINIS



Opera. The very word has been known to instill fear into the hearts of mall-trotting teenagers and beer-swigging boyfriends everywhere. “Opera is boring.” “You can’t understand what’s going on in opera.” “Opera is for old folks.” These are just a few of the misconceptions about opera that still abound across America, a country that sadly continues to be a bit behind the eight-ball when it comes to cultural IQ.

On a popular Opera-based website (opera.suite101.com) message board, one post in particular seems to sum up, in no uncertain terms, the perceived difference between us and the rest of civilized society: “In Europe, going to the opera is like going to a friggin’ tractor pull [here in the U.S.]!”

Ouch!

Although the wound may be only skin-deep,

full recovery requires some serious TLC. Thankfully there are people like Arlene Rosenthal and organizations like the Palm Springs Opera Guild willing to serve as caretakers of a genre that still struggles for mainstream acceptance in most states. But if Opera in the Park is any indication of a classic art form on the mend, the day will come when La Traviata trumps tractor pulls—every time.

In 1999 Coachella Valley resident Arlene Rosenthal, in conjunction with the Palm Springs Opera Guild (of which she is an active board member), produced Opera in the Park for the first time in an effort to introduce or re-introduce the general public to the splendor of opera. The event, held at Sunrise Park, drew about 1,000 people that inaugural year, making it quite apparent that the desert community could, in fact, appreciate opera.

This year, Opera in the Park promises to be bigger and better than ever. Kicking off at noon on April 15 at Sunrise Park in Palm Springs, the

afternoon will feature an intoxicating blend of opera, Italian love songs and Broadway classics. Food and drink are plentiful or you can supply your own. And as always, the event is free.

Bringing opera into the awareness of the American public is not an easy mission, and like any cultural revolution, the greatest bloom is promised when seeds are planted among the youth. Rosenthal and the Palm Springs Opera Guild have built it, now they must come. And come they do. Each year Opera in the Park presents the best and the brightest among young opera singers, most of whom are culled from the organization’s various outreach programs.

Up and coming soprano Karen Vuong and versatile baritone Apollo Wong (winner of the 2006 Palm Springs Opera Guild’s Vocal Competition) are among 10 stellar young performers who will be taking the stage on Sunday. Both singers are products of UCLA’s reputable music program and both share Asian roots, although Wong is a native of Hong Kong and Vuong, a born and bred Los Angeleno.

IF YOU GO

OPERA IN THE PARK 2007

Presented by the Palm Springs Opera Guild

Sunday, April 15, 12:00-4:30 pm

Sunrise Park, Palm Springs — Free to the public

Art, crafts & specialty vendors, food & community informational tables

Pels Face painting & fun-zone for the kids

Six free shuttle vans to and from the park

760.325.6107 for information



Together, Karen and Apollo serve as ideal ambassadors for opera's next act as they help set the stage for an exciting new era that is young, vibrant and gutsy.

Here's what each had to say about the passion that fuels their lives.

THE BOTTOMLINE: WHEN DID YOU KNOW YOU WANTED TO STUDY OPERA?

KAREN VUONG: In junior high, my choir teacher played an opera recording for the class. I started mimicking the sounds that I heard just for fun and found out that I could produce sounds that actually sounded somewhat "operatic!" From then on I became more interested in learning about opera.

APOLLO WONG: I never really knew that I was going to study

opera, only because I came to UCLA and started my first private voice lesson five years ago and then I began to have more exposure to opera. Before I transferred to UCLA, I was at one point a business management major in junior college.

WAS THERE ANY ONE INFLUENCE OR INCIDENT THAT INSPIRED YOU TO PURSUE THIS FIELD, AND IF SO WHO OR WHAT WAS IT?

KAREN: When I was in high school studying music was my favorite elective. I loved music but, like many kids, I thought that I'd end up becoming a doctor or lawyer or something. One day a few music teachers called my parents and me into a meeting, and they explained that I had a good chance of making a living in music. Up until then it never seriously occurred to me that I could pursue it.

APOLLO: If I must pick an incident, it would be one that happened about six and a half years ago, when I was walking past a music building and ran into a friend who knew that I loved music and sang in school choirs for a number of years. She dragged me into a voice class that she was going to. The teacher asked me to sight read some music because I was new to the class. After she heard me sing, she was silent for about a minute, then she asked me, "Is there any way that you can drop whatever you are majoring now and start going into singing as soon as possible?" I went back to think and discuss this with my family through long-distance calls. Surprisingly, everybody in my family supported me going into music, and I remember what my parents said to me. "Since you were three years [old], you would hear your sister's piano lessons and play whatever melody your sister plays in lesson without even learning how to play the piano...." The following week, I started to take all the music requirement courses and voice classes until I transferred to UCLA the following year.

WHAT IS YOUR FAVORITE ROLE TO PLAY AND WHY?

KAREN: So far, my favorite role to play was Despina, in UCLA's production of *Così fan Tutte*. Robin Guarino was our director, and she really encouraged us to be organic. That character has so much life, intelligence, imagination and spunk!

APOLLO: Until now, my favorite role I have ever played on stage is Bottom in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, music by Benjamin Britten. Although the music is no ordinary 'bel-canto' singing nor with rhythmic and melodic struc-

tures, it's a great challenge for us bel-canto trained singers. And the role, Bottom, is a comic role with immense subtlety, which is the kind that I personally love to play most.



Apollo Wong and Karen Vuong. Photo by James R. Butchart

WHAT IS YOUR FANTASY ROLE AND WHY?

KAREN: My fantasy role is to play Violetta in *La Traviata*. It is such an intense role, both physically and emotionally, it would be a victory to perform it successfully.

APOLLO: My fantasy role is the kind like Mephistopheles—a dramatic bass role with a touch of seriousness; comic, slippery and sweet. I know this is a character with a fairly broad spectrum of personalities. I love this kind of role because I can not only act with my appearance, but also my voice by adding various sorts of colors to the words and rhythms.

THERE SEEMS TO BE A TREND TOWARD MORE YOUNG PEOPLE GETTING INTO OPERA. WHY DO YOU THINK THIS IS?

KAREN: I think that young people today are beginning to realize how beautiful opera sounds. In a way, because opera wasn't very popular with younger people in recent years, opera has become

a refreshing sound in comparison to modern music. I also think they're finding that the stories that were told in operas a few hundred years ago aren't all that different from their own. A lot of characters in opera are young adults, and I think the younger crowd can identify with these characters. That's partly why I love it so much!

APOLLO: I think the reason is that we simply have more people in the world. There are probably more people going into every field, this is likely only one of them. Another reason, opera is more widely promoted among the public than maybe thirty years ago. More people have seen them, more of them get interested, and more people want to go into this field. This is solely my personal guess.

IF NOT AN OPERA SINGER, WHAT? WHAT OTHER CAREERS MIGHT YOU HAVE CONSIDERED?

KAREN: I seriously considered becoming a veterinarian! When it came time to look for colleges I was certain I'd either go to UC Davis or UCLA to major in biology.

APOLLO: Since day one, I wanted to be an orchestral conductor, even before I started my management courses in junior college. I am still working towards a similar goal, an opera conductor.

WHAT STEREOTYPE SURROUNDING OPERA WOULD YOU MOST LIKE TO SEE ERADICATED AND WHY?

KAREN: That it's only "park and bark," meaning standing in a pretty dress in one spot and singing loudly. Opera is so much more dynamic and interesting! It's almost always about one or more of the following topics: sex, politics, love, war, or fantasy. Nowadays, people often interact on stage, and the sets are always visually stunning. The operatic experience is one that appeals to all the senses.

APOLLO: That operas are only sung by old, fat Caucasians. There are also incredible voices in other ethnicities that can bring new tastes to the opera stages.

IF YOU HAD TO "SELL" THE IDEA OF OPERA TO SOMEONE WITH ABSOLUTELY NO PRIOR KNOWLEDGE OF IT, HOW WOULD YOU DESCRIBE IT?

APOLLO: Opera consists of one of the most complete art forms.

KAREN: Imagine your best, funniest, or worst day, times a hundred, set to beautiful music, and that's opera.

FOR THE LOVE OF OPERA

An interview with ARLENE ROSENTHAL

BY PJ MAYTAG

Opera in the Park may have been founded nine years ago, but the mustard seed this event grew from was planted much earlier when Arlene Rosenthal was just a girl, playing arias on vinyl 78's at her Hungarian-born grandmother's house. In fact, for the woman responsible for bringing opera to the people of Coachella Valley, you can say opera is in her genes.

"My grandmother had the opportunity to sing opera when she was in New York and study [it], it was not a small thing..." Arlene proudly told me the other day when I had the chance to sit down and discuss this year's Opera in the Park with her. She has an easy smile, boundless energy and a passion for music that is downright palpable. She's the antithesis of that all too stodgy misconceived stereotype so many people have about opera lovers.

Arlene is a champion for music's ability to change lives. It's why she throws herself wholeheartedly into the task of exposing our community to the magic of opera through the Opera in the Park program. Arlene's involvement with the Palm Springs Opera Guild began in 1992 after moving here from the Bay area. She readily admits she's a "Culture Vulture," having enjoyed season tickets to the San Francisco theater, symphony and of course, opera while living up there. "Of course it didn't cost what it costs now, but it was still a stretch. I was a teacher and my partner a social worker." So it was a natural that she would get involved immediately with the struggling (at the time) Palm Springs Opera Guild. In 1994 she became the chair for the Opera Guilds Vocal competition and through her dedicated effort and determination she's turned it into the successes it is today—showcasing national opera talent. She's



been doing it ever since.

So who are the rising stars at this year's Opera in the Park? "Apollo Wong, baritone, he won first place this past December (in the Palm Springs Opera Guilds Vocal Competition). Karen Vuong, she won Operalia and she's in the Placido Domingo young singers and *up and coming*," Arlene heavily emphasized before continuing, "Opera in the Park is about equality among the singers because we don't highlight anyone of them but, hah, [what a] voice. Katherine Giaquinto, came in number two (at the vocal competition) wonderful voice. Brian Cali, also in the Placido Domingo Young Artist Program."

What's the most satisfying thing about Opera in the Park for her? "I'm just really happy I can be a part of making magic, and it is. People come and nobody knows how rich or how poor you are, nobody knows what you have, what your politics, your religion, nobody knows anything about you. It's a place where you can be and just enjoy the pleasure. And it's a place where

we get a sense of community and of family no matter what your orientation, nothing. And we don't have that much in America right now."

Arlene then went on to describe the kids' fun zone where they can play and perhaps pick up the beauty of opera through osmosis. This year there will be 18 vendor, artists and organization booths spread around Sunrise Park and no less than 11 food vendors.

She strives to make this an all inclusive event and part of a greater community outreach—exposing members of our diverse Coachella Valley population to the joys of music that might not otherwise be available to them. As she puts it, "We're bringing in a bus of migrant workers and their kids, about 50 people—as a new experience. And they can be in their own area if they want, or they can sit wherever they want. We're giving each one a token like we do each year for the volunteer kids from the area high schools and they can get [free] food."

Arlene's vision for this event is inspiring. "Opera in the Park is a microcosm of what society could be, if somebody wasn't always right. If we could use music as our language we probably would never have wars." Her good-natured giggle as she made her point was infectious. The Palm Springs Opera Guild's Outreach Program continues to grow. This year, more than 2,000 children from Thermal, Coachella, Indio and the rest of the cities in our valley will get the chance to experience the magic of opera first hand.

I asked Arlene what keeps her coming back year after year. "The pleasure of seeing so many people so happy. I look at their faces and I just see how much they get from it and it's a gift to be able to give something like that." Her wistful smile confirmed her words. Arlene has a true conviction and love for her work with the Opera Guild. Arlene Rosenthal's favorite opera, *Il Trovatore* by Giuseppe Verdi, is perhaps an appropriate metaphor for her tireless efforts. 'Trovatore' is the Italian word for troubadour, a medieval musician that traveled near and far to spread their music and singing. Arlene has the heart of a troubadour—spreading the joy of opera and singing to so many people in the Coachella Valley.