

Taking the Reins



GARNETT BRUCE LEADS OPERA OMAHA IN NEW DIRECTIONS Cover Story by Patricia Sindelar Photography by Dale Heise

It's a dark and gloomy October Tuesday. Wind howls outside the old Renze building — an empty, warehouse-type space with hunkering, industrial-sized heaters roaring like jet engines — near 20th and Harney. The cinderblock walls are bare, the uneven cement floor is cold, electrical outlets hang like nooses from the ceiling. It's a setting more appropriate for a *Saw* movie than what's really happening here: opera rehearsals.

Folding chairs, a piano, a couple tables and a few props (trunks, pitchforks, shovels and tin cups) are scattered across the room. Tape on the cold, cement floor marks space on the “real stage,” or what it will look like when rehearsals move to the Orpheum in two days. But without the cast, it's just a mostly-empty warehouse.

Like the old Renze building waits to be filled with a chorus' Italian lyrics, the city of Omaha waits for the premiere of its 2009-2010 opera season with Ruggero Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci*.

One thing that makes this season so special is that it's the first full year of opera under Garnett Bruce — Opera Omaha's Artistic Adviser and Principal Stage Director. What makes Bruce's first season so special is his extraordinary enthusiasm for his job.

When I first met Bruce in August at a coffee shop downtown, he had just come from Film Streams where he spent a sunny Saturday afternoon watching a broadcast of the Metropolitan Opera in HD. He rattled off the names of the director and conductor so quickly, and with such a proficient French accent, I simply smiled and nodded, then commented that the new Coppola flick was at Film Streams, too. He politely kept his opinion about my level of intelligence to himself.

At our second meeting, this brisk October Tuesday night, Bruce was again upbeat, cheerful and ever in love with the opera. He has been assigned the arduous task of getting Omaha to go to the

opera. But he's not without a plan, and he's not alone.

"John coming into the company with me, and now with the board, we are enlarging our community profile," Bruce said, "and creating more portals for people to learn about what this company can do."

He's speaking of Opera Omaha's General Director, John Wehrle, who arrived a year before Bruce in the fall of 2007, and of a roughly five-year plan the two have concocted that will not only help Opera Omaha weather tough economic times, but also rebound from the great loss of 2004 — Hal France.

Pagliacci's conductor, Richard Buckley, knows how hard it is for an organization to take its next step after losing a great leader. He may not be as outwardly friendly as Bruce, but he is just as staunch of a supporter of the arts. His experience as an international symphony and opera guest conductor gave him perspective to speak about France.

"Hal was everything and he was very, very successful in the community and artistically, but let's not personalize it," he said bluntly. "When someone who has long been in an organization, and has been very successful, and the board is comfortable and the community is comfortable, and they step away, it creates a vacuum. The thing is, no one is ever really ready or set up to necessarily figure out where they're gonna go next. Depending on the process, depending on the involvement of many different levels of the community, oftentimes the next decision is not necessarily the best one for the longevity. This is a philosophical point of view. This is not a nay saying of any one individual."

Of course, the truth in Buckley's words can be seen in almost any organization where leadership has changed (think post-Tom Osborne Husker football). And if Buckley seems to implicate the artistic director to follow France, one should keep in mind the accomplishments of Stewart Robertson.

Opera Omaha won accolades for the world premier of *Wakonda's Dream*, staged very solid performances of *Tosca* and *Barber of Seville*, and put together a breathtaking production of *Aida*, under Robertson's three years of leadership, all while Robertson still worked with the Florida Grand Opera.

Wehrle agreed that there was no failure on Robertson's part, just not a long-term solution for Opera Omaha.

"He's a consummate conductor," Wehrle said of Robertson. "He is well-known for new repertory. But part of the reason he moved on was that, when he came here, he was in the midst of beginning to rethink his career. He also left the Florida Grand Opera, and he told me when he left that he hoped to focus on different kinds of music. It ended up being an amicable departure. He just left when his contract was up."

Pagliacci is the story of five actors/clowns who have to put on a comedy show, even though their real lives are a hot mess. It's a two-act opera with a small cast that makes it a very economical production, even though it still packs all the murder, betrayal and suspense of any other opera. Despite the low cost on the season opener, Buckley points out that Opera Omaha has not suffered as severe a financial crisis as the national arts scene.

"This company is in a far better situation than many, many others," he said, "and I think that this city and the organization and the board should be proud to be at the point they are at versus where many other community organizations are."

The buoyancy of Opera Omaha can be attributed to a few factors.

"Generally, that the peaks and valleys are deeper on the east coast and west coast is entirely true," Wehrle said. "The Midwest is less affected by big economic swings. Also, Omaha has a huge number of wealthy, generous people, and that's part of why we are, in general, doing better. We also, as a company, saw the writing on the wall in January 2008. We began making plans for a difficult economy. Part of that was reducing budgets from the 2008-09 Season to the current year. Our budget is \$260,000 lower, and that's a big part of the reason we're not sucking wind."

One of Opera Omaha's biggest corporate sponsors is Omaha Steaks, and the company's Senior Vice President, Todd Simon, understands why a fine arts scene is critical to a city.

"Supporting the opera is in line with Omaha Steaks' decades-long support of the arts in Omaha," he said via email. "We have always held that a vibrant cultural arts scene is one of the key factors to making our community a world class place to live and work. The kind of creative people we want in our city and our company are attracted to the arts. That's why we have and continue to support Opera Omaha, The Omaha Symphony, Omaha Performing Arts, the Joslyn, Bemis Center, the Bluebarn Theatre, and numerous other organizations, large and small."

With the finances under control, leadership was the only question mark Opera Omaha needed to answer. Luckily, Bruce couldn't come with higher recommendations. As soon as Wehrle arrived, he needed to bring in an artistic adviser, so he called up a former colleague from his time in Chattanooga.

"The first person I reached out to who didn't have a conflict was Garnett," Wehrle said. "... And he was the first person I reached out to at all, not just the first person who didn't have a date to the dance. I really liked his work and I didn't know if he had considered taking on an artistic advisorship. It was very fortunate he hadn't been snatched up by someone else."

Two of *Pagliacci*'s principals — Kelly Kaduce (who will be Nedda) and Tonio DiPaolo (Canio) — both of whom have worked with Bruce in productions for other companies — gave their director glowing reviews after the third rehearsal.

"He's so wonderful," Kaduce said with a genuine smile. "He really gets you to contemplate your character, but in a hands-off way that makes it feel like it was your own idea. It's impossible not to trust him."

“I’ve known him for over 20 years,” DiPaolo added. “He knows opera inside and out. If you want to do something else on stage, he’ll think about it and go with it as long as it’s the right thing for the character. His ego is so healthy he can make changes like that. I have the utmost respect for him.”

For his part, Bruce has respect for the challenge he’s been presented at Opera Omaha and will draw on previous experience to get him through.

“I have been involved in ‘change of leadership’ in a couple of companies — most notably Washington Opera in the mid 1990s and Opera Colorado in the late 1990s. When Opera Colorado’s founding general director Nat Merrill retired, I was living in Denver at the time and was working with interim management on their productions of *(Madame) Butterfly*, *Zauberflote* and then directed my first *Tosca* there in 2002. But none of these transitions were trying to do the scope of what we are doing in Omaha — which is to vastly increase access to our art form with education and community programs and diversification of repertoire. We’ll know if we are successful when we start to see the community step up not only as ticket buyers but also as philanthropists to support our vision for the organization,” he said.

Sitting in a small, wood-floored room directly off the large, unfriendly, warehouse rehearsal space, I couldn’t help but feel that Opera Omaha would once again achieve the height of its art as it did with the Hal France/Jun Kaneko collaboration for 2006’s *Madame Butterfly*.

Wehrle refers to opera as “an intensely collaborative process” and a “unique laboratory” for the arts. Simon agrees that this aspect of the performance is something special.

“The recent operas designed by Jun Kaneko and Catherine Ferguson were my recent favorites as I appreciate the intersection and collaboration between these accomplished visual artists and the opera art form,” he said. “I know that many opera goers really like the classics by Verdi and Puccini and Mozart, etcetera. I think the opera has done a good job mixing up the repertoire in order to please their core audience and attract new audiences.”

But there’s another collaboration on which the opera depends — that between the audience and performers. The more austere Buckley talks about the grand philosophy of opera — how “the arts are something that give us all, ‘all’ being the big, broader base of the population, an ability to express and experience emotions in a way that they aren’t able to be experienced in any other way.”

As if completing Buckley’s thoughts, Bruce talks about how to make those ideals a reality in the community.

“We’re looking to cultivate a level of philanthropy and engagement with the community that maybe hasn’t happened before,” he said.

Part of the five-year plan Bruce and Wehrle developed includes a solid framework for each season. Opera Omaha will put on three major productions — an opening “blockbuster, blood and guts” opera, a second “immersion piece,” and a season closer that celebrates American musical theater or American opera called the American Genius series.

Bruce is clearly enamored with the immersion series lined up for the next few years — it’s obvious when he speaks about the lofty ideals of the program, which revolves around a Mozart Curriculum, springing from *Marriage of Figaro* in February and lasting through *Zauberflote* in 2013. The “immersion” factor refers to all of the community outreach and education Opera Omaha will offer each year when it presents a Mozart opera. The goal is to show the audience what the social and political climate was like at the time Mozart and his librettist, Lorenzo Da Ponte, were drinking bottles of wine and writing music.

“Now we’re immersing ourselves in the Mozart/Da Ponte age of enlightenment. Hopefully, the audience is linking it back to French ideas that were part of the roots of our country — liberté, égalité, fraternité — lest we forget that we had French roots. Jefferson and Franklin were over there discussing democracy and brought it over. They left General George here to deal with the British problem while they were off trying to create the philosophical framework. The great American experiment was what everybody in Vienna was talking about. Would we survive without a monarchy?”

Just like a fledgling country changed its course in history, Opera Omaha is breaking new ground, under the guidance of two inspired, arts-loving men eager to make the organization succeed.

In Bruce’s words, “If you want to go in a different direction, you change captains.”

Clown Jewel

One of Bruce’s contributions to the five-year plan involves, in his words, “giving a chance for younger artists to do some firsts.” Enter soprano Kelly Kaduce, in her debut with Opera Omaha and as Nedda in *Pagliacci*.

“It’s going all right,” she said with a relaxed, confident smile after a weeknight rehearsal. “I knew it well enough before I came here. I had a performance in Portland that finished right before rehearsals started here. So I had to fly and then start staging. I had to know it before I came here.”

Kaduce can always take cues from her fellow cast if she needs. Her husband, Lee Gregory, is Silvio in this production (the couple brought their white, fluffy Bichon, Lulu). She also plays opposite Tonio DiPaolo’s Canio. The tenor not only performed *Pagliacci* twice this year already, but has done the production around 30 times in his career and has taken on all four of the lead male roles at various times.

His preparations were not nearly as stressful as Kaduce’s.

“Well, I live in the Quad Cities so I had to get my garden done,” he said with a hearty laugh. “It’s supposed to snow there, so I had to make sure that was taken care of.”

DiPaolo also has a couple of his favorite things close by, keeping with the Italian opera and his heritage.

“I brought my own olive oil and mozzarella. Sometimes you just want a few comforts from home.”

One of the most interesting aspects of *Pagliacci* is that it’s a story of a comedy troupe (“pagliacci” is Italian for “players” or “clowns”) who has to go on with the show even though the actors’ reality is crumbling. It’s a play within an opera, and eventually the actors (who are human, after all) succumb to their emotional weaknesses.

“Canio breaks that barrier,” DiPaolo said of his character. “He really breaks down that wall. It’s so similar to real life. If you find out your mate is having an affair, you have to know now. You have to know. Who is it?”

Film Streams

Foresight kept Opera Omaha afloat when the economy tanked, and it led to an unlikely yet logical partnership with Film Streams when the theater announced it would play the live broadcasts of the Metropolitan Opera in high definition.

“When Met announced they would be doing live HD broadcasts, some people in the opera industry were crying foul,” said Opera Omaha General Director John Wehrle. “They thought it would destroy their audience. We thought it was the best thing ever.”

Wehrle, a sensible businessman who calls Opera Omaha a “cultural service organization,” and refers to the opera itself as “the main stage product,” looked at the broadcasts from a numbers point of view.

“It’s more product we don’t have to pay for. People who truly deeply love the product can get more,” he said.

Film Streams joined in for the second season of Met opera when it opened in July 2007 and continued for the third. The Met: Live in HD won two awards earlier this year, a Peabody award and a special Emmy for advancing technology through ongoing, live, global transmission of high-definition programming to movie theaters.

Now in its fourth season, the series is stronger than ever and Opera Omaha has lent its full support for 2009-2010. Opera Omaha leaders and other local opera aficionados staff will be on hand for “prelude” talks before all broadcasts. Wehrle, his Artistic Director Garnett Bruce, and his Resident Music Director J. Gawf will participate, as will former Artistic Director Hal France.

Always thinking about business, Wehrle looks at the series as a way to diversify the opera season without having to leave Omaha.

“It still expands the repertory,” he said. “All the people who whined and moaned are silly. Yeah, there may be a time the Met is broadcasting *La Bohème* at noon and your company is performing it at 8 [p.m.], but with enough notice, you can make anything work.”

Pagliacci, *October 16 at 7:30 p.m., and October 18 at 2 p.m., at the Orpheum Theater, 409 S. 16th St., Omaha. Tickets are \$19-\$99, available by calling 345.0606. For more information, visit operaomaha.org.*

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