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## Opera Outreach

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# Opera (School) House

IWU students, faculty and alumni make opera come alive for a new generation — and learn that kids can be among the toughest and most appreciative audiences.

(From IWU Magazine, Summer 2016)

Story by **NANCY STEELE BROKAW '71**

Photos by **MARC FEATHERLY**

Children's opera: two words that just don't seem to belong together, except in an eat-your-spinach sort of way. But someone must have forgotten to tell that to hundreds of kids at Bloomington's Washington Elementary School now settling into a wiggly hush for the start of a performance they've anticipated all year.

Suddenly, stage manager Loreto Delgado '16 bursts out from behind the portable proscenium. "Welcome to Prairie Fire Theatre's production of *There's a Martian in the Opera House!*" announces the Illinois Wesleyan voice major, who graduated in May. The kids respond with a loud cheer.

Robert "Bob" Mangialardi, who directs IWU's opera theatre program, launched the children's opera project in 2002 as a way to bring classical music to kids who might not otherwise get to hear it. The operas are produced by Illinois Wesleyan-affiliated [Prairie Fire Theatre](#) (PFT), also founded by Mangialardi, which produces light opera and musical theatre productions performed at the University's Westbrook Auditorium.

The first children's opera was just Mangialardi and some other professional singers doing a couple of gigs. Soon it was Mangialardi and IWU voice students lugging set, costumes and



After each performance, Mangialardi (*above center*) and IWU student performers answer children's questions about the play.

props to some schools. Over its 14 years, the program has grown: this spring's production of *There's a Martian in the Opera House!* achieved a record 41 performances at local schools as well as public libraries and churches.

I've taken on the delightful task of writing the book and lyrics for PFT's last six children's operas. After coming up with an original story, I create original librettos (scripts) that I set to music chosen from classic operas. Each opera is under an hour, contains four singers (soprano, mezzo, baritone, tenor), a pianist, an easy-to-follow but high-stakes plot, 15 musical pieces plus spoken dialogue, audience participation and a riotous chase scene through the house.

Life lessons are embedded along the way, and we review them at the end. This year, in *Martian*, we learned to "Put Yourself in Someone Else's Shoes," to "Be Kind," and that "Fresh Air Is Awesome."

Watching your creations come to life on stage is a thrilling but nerve-wracking experience — and, no, it doesn't matter that these are "just kids." Anyone who has performed for young people know they can be a tough audience.

From my seat at Washington Elementary School, I feel my own excitement grow as the children, sitting cross-legged on the gym floor or up in the balcony, are told how they can participate in the performance: “We need you to lay down a beat for a rap; so whenever I hold up these signs, I want you to chant ‘*Boots and Cats*.” One half of the room does that, the other half learns a rap about stepping up. The children will loudly take part in the performance at strategic points throughout the show.



The kids can participate in the performance, including giving a “thumbs down” to the villain, played by Mangialardi.

“And one more thing. If a character says the name ‘*Maximilian Von Snaptrap*,’ we want you to put your thumbs down and make a buzzer sound. Can you do that? Okay, let’s start the show!”

From the back of the gym, a beeping space rover drives past the kids and into place on stage. Evil industrialist Maximilian Von Snaptrap (played by Mangialardi) snakes his way up the aisle of kids. What precious metals, he wonders, has his space rover brought back to him from Mars? It’s time to “Open the door,” he sings to the tune of Bizet’s “Toreador Song” from *Carmen*. He lifts back the hatch and out steps a stowaway: a down-on-her-luck Martian

named Oonda who communicates in a rhyming, rapping sort of way (she learned English by reading Dr. Suess’s *Hop on Pop* and listening to vintage hip hop). Von Snaptrap immediately plans to sell her to the highest bidder, whole or in parts. Oonda, via a funny chase, flees into the adjacent Big City Opera House. There she encounters both selfish soprano Starry Sing Sing and tenor Tommy Tenderheart.

Always-the-bad-guy Mangialardi, exiting up through the kids, vows gleefully, “I’ll get my Martian back — or my name isn’t *Maximilian Von Snaptrap!*”

With thumbs down, the kids do a buzzer sound that only grows more deafening as the show goes along. They’re hooked. You can feel it.

“The children’s opera is our favorite event,” says Linda Schmelzer, who teaches music at Stevenson Elementary. “The kids talk about it all year. The pace, the humor, it is all just so well done and clever.”

Principal Scott Myers of Hudson Elementary, who has brought PFT children’s opera to his school for the past 14 years, says, “When I was a kid, we got our classical music from *Bugs Bunny*.” It’s true: for many baby boomers, hearing Elmur Fudd sing “Kiw the wwwwabbit!” was their first exposure to opera. For children at his school, the PFT productions offer the same lighthearted engagement to serious music.

Puccini didn’t mean for “Quando me’n vo,” his glorious aria from *La bohème*, to be sung by diva Starry as “Me, only me, if you’re not me then uh-oh.” But as the kids lean intently forward to absorb every note, you see the timeless magic of his melody at work. Mozart’s charming duets from *The Magic Flute* are more than up to the task of being sung by a wacky Martian and a shy tenor.

“The kids are drawn in by the clever and cute story and are hooked by the gorgeous opera duets and arias from a variety of composers and eras,” says Jacklyn Klimczak ’15, a children’s opera alumna now enrolled in the NYU Steinhardt graduate music program. “There is nothing more rewarding than seeing the excitement on the faces of our young audiences listening to truly beautiful music for the first time.

“Opera is a medium that I didn’t get introduced to until high school,” Klimczak adds. “The children’s opera brings it in a way that is really accessible, and the kids love it. I think they will remember the performances for years to come.”

Joe Lewis ’14, a children’s opera alumnus who is now an elementary school music teacher, agrees: “Theatre brings stories to life for kids, and the cultural exposure is invaluable.”

At Hammitt Elementary — a school in Normal that helps kids who don’t flourish in a regular school setting — teachers are impressed by the full attention their students give to our performances. “A public setting would provide too much stimuli” for students on the autism and ADD spectrum, says Hammitt administrator Barb Wochholz. “But this group [PFT] meets us where we are.”

The Jerome Mirza Foundation and other funding sources have supported the program to maintain its quality and improve its outreach. Among the costs is compensation for student performers — for most, it’s their first paid singing job, but also a labor of love.

Jonathan Green, IWU provost and dean of the faculty, counts these children’s operas among “the premier, most effective outreaches for the University.” As a choral director and prolific composer and music scholar, Green appreciates how children’s

opera bridges the perception gap that can prevent people from discovering great music. “Classical music is often thought of as elite, and a lot of people have done a lot to make it seem that way, when in fact it was always meant to be fun and engaging like this,” says Green.

## Introducing a new world

Rhys Lovell ’87, artistic director of Heartland Theatre Company, has directed several children’s operas for PFT. Fortunately, Lovell likes the challenge of working with new material, because we do a lot of tweaking and late-night collaboration to get the show ready in just one week of rehearsal, timed between Illinois Wesleyan’s finals and the start of May Term.

Lovell’s biggest joy is seeing children’s imaginations being engaged. “Movies show everything, but theatre is different,” he observes. “Kids see through the actors’ eyes; whole worlds materialize. Oonda *really* is a Martian. The giant Magnatron *really does* work. It all becomes so real to them — when in fact it’s just a proscenium and a few props.

“The kids’ willing suspension of disbelief is so great,” Lovell continues. “When Bob chases the heroine, he always pauses in the middle of the kids and says, ‘Where’d she go, that way?’ He’ll point in various directions, including up at the ceiling, and the kids will shout out and frantically gesture that she went the opposite direction of where she went.”

Pianist/music director Charlie Berggren ’10, who’s an accompanist for IWU’s Music Theatre Department, watches the children’s faces from behind the piano. “My favorite thing is how the kids always have the best interest of the good characters at heart,” he says.

And they do remember those characters. Berggren and his wife, Amanda (LaRocca) ’10, live near a school in Normal where the Prairie Fire operas are performed regularly. Several months after the 2014 performance of *Who Stole B-Flat?*, a neighbor kid recognized Charlie from the opera and then asked him, “Hey, do you know Prince Forte?” — a reference to one of the show’s characters.



Nancy Brokaw chats with Berggren before a performance at Washington Elementary in Bloomington. She has written the last six Prairie Fire children’s operas.



Putting up the portable proscenium at Washington School was just one task at each one of a record 41 stops during this year's Prairie Fire production of *There's a Martian in the Opera House!*

Most recognizable to the children is Mangialardi. No one is better at getting kids wound up, and he's famous for comically looping in the teachers, too. "Bob puts his all in every performance," Myers says. "He knows when to be silly and when to be scary, but it's all just fun and every kid knows it. They remember Bob and they love him."

During a question-and-answer session after each show, kids often reference past PFT children's operas they've seen. In each session, Mangialardi makes a point to praise them for being a good audience and explains what that means to the people who worked to put the show together. Teaching children to be polite, attentive viewers is a valuable skill just by itself, says Washington Elementary Principal Jeff Lockenvitz. It's true, we expect a respectful audience and we get one — encouraging kids to applaud and interact, but also to quiet down

to hear what's coming next. Mangialardi also lets the kids know that the performers they just enjoyed were all Illinois Wesleyan students. He tells them that whether they like to sing, play an instrument, write, paint or build things, there are places where they can explore those interests, leading all the way to college and beyond.

For many of IWU students who participate in the operas, the experience becomes one of their favorite college memories.

Becky Buechel '15, now a graduate music student at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, performed in the children's opera for three years. She says, "It's awesome getting to bond with such a small cast." And there's nothing like loading, unloading and performing three or four times a day to develop a team.

"I love how much joy this brings," Delgado says, "even though lugging everything around is a pain. It's worth it."

As Lovell puts it, "It's all hands on deck. If you want to build a real ensemble, everybody helps with the heavy lifting." And it's amazing to discover what you fix on the road with just safety pins, duct tape and a hot glue gun.

Even when the Illinois Wesleyan ensemble is done with its May tour across Central Illinois, the show isn't over yet.

For the past five years, operas have gotten a second life at the University of California, Merced (UCM), where 3,500 schoolchildren are bussed to campus for the fresh version of the show performed by UCM theatre students. Katie Steele Brokaw '02 — my daughter and an assistant English professor at UCM — co-produces and often directs the shows.

“Our opera is a field trip,” Katie says. “Our kids, many from rural areas of the Central Valley that are as poor as Appalachia, travel to a college campus, often for the first time, and sit in an auditorium, also often for the first time. We do it in order to give children memorable and positive experiences both about the arts and higher education.”

In reading the many thank-you messages from children, “we’re amazed at how carefully they have observed everything,” Katie adds. “We love it when they laugh and scream and cheer, but what really touches us is how rapt and still they are when the music is beautiful, and how much they care about what happens to the characters.”

A UCM dean or chancellor introduces each show. For a recent production of *W.O.O.S.H!* (*Web of Opera Super Heroes!*), the dean of natural sciences spoke about how superheroes wore capes and fought bad

guys — but in his world the heroes often wore lab coats and fought disease and climate change.

Of course, the opera superheroes *did* wear capes, sent with costumes, props and scripts to UCM after the Illinois tour of *W.O.O.S.H!* was done. “We couldn’t afford to do it without that donation,” Katie says.

Plans are already set for *There’s a Martian in the Opera House!* to travel west next year and for a new show to tour in Central Illinois. We all marvel at how Mangialardi’s seed of an idea has grown over the last 14 years. We have more hopes and dreams we’d like to implement, depending on the funding we can get. We might like an instrument or two for musical accompaniment, in addition to the piano. It would be great to be able to lease a truck or trailer instead of being limited by what we can stuff into the Mangialardi minivan. Most of all, in this era of squeezed school budgets, we desire the financial means to reach as many kids as possible in order to show them a world of theatre and music that many never before knew existed.

And when we have a blast doing it, all the better.

**About the author:** *Nancy Steele Brokaw '71 has written many shows for Prairie Fire Theatre. She also wrote book and lyrics, collaborating with composer David Vayo, for the original opera, Fertile Ground, showcased at the 2014 Fort Worth Opera Frontiers. Her dramatic works have been performed at the Illinois Shakespeare Festival and other venues. For 14 years, she has been resident playwright for shows for Holiday Spectacular, Inc. A longtime contributor to the Pantagraph and IWU Magazine, Brokaw is also the author of the award-winning, young-readers novel Leaving Emma (Clarion/Houghton Mifflin).*

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**Read more about the [IWU School of Theatre Arts](#).**



When PFT’s tour is done, props and costumes go to the University of California, Merced, where Katie Steele Brokaw ’02 (second from right) is a professor and co-produces shows seen by 3,500 children.