

Opera San Jose's David Rohrbaugh says goodbye

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David Rohrbaugh has been sorting through file cabinets, feeling wistful, looking at old newspaper and magazine clippings about his decades on stage. There's one about a 1977 opera workshop production at San Jose State -- "five scenes with piano in a glorified classroom (budget \$635)," the article recounts.

"It's been a helluva ride," said Rohrbaugh, who, with his friend Irene Dalis, transformed that bare-bones workshop into Opera San Jose, where he has conducted more than 600 performances of 70-odd full-blown productions since its founding in 1984. Saturday through March 2 at the California Theatre, he once again will pick up the baton, this time to lead Puccini's "Madama Butterfly," his final production as the company's music director.

"It's like watching my father go away," said soprano Sandra Rubalcava-Bengochea, who has worked with Rohrbaugh since 1995. "I've known 'Doc' such a long time."

"Doc" Rohrbaugh -- a seasoned baritone with a doctorate in musical arts, hence the nickname -- has conducted "Butterfly" many times but still loves it to death. On the cusp of retirement (he turns 70 this summer), his zest for performance is unabated. Reflecting on the long arc of his career, he exclaims, "Who gets to do this? Who else gets to go from 'Butterfly' to 'Trovatore' to 'Carmen,' and every single time I pick any of them up, it's like, 'Oh, wow!'"

In his dressing room at the California before a rehearsal, he teared up, thinking about the plight of Butterfly, the Japanese teen in Puccini's opera. Abandoned by a U.S. naval officer who married her for sexual convenience, she keeps hoping he will return to her and their little boy. The moment she finally recognizes that "he's not coming back," Rohrbaugh said, "there's an eighth note in the orchestra that is just a stab -- that realization that she has. 'He's not coming back?' The power of that stuff."

Rohrbaugh is tall and robust, with a thatch of hair that's gone white. That head of hair -- or at least the back of it -- is arguably a more familiar sight to South Bay opera audiences than the faces of the dozens of singers who have come and gone during his tenure. Rohrbaugh doubled as voice instructor for many of them; his first career had been as a singer, performing with the Cleveland Orchestra, San Francisco Opera and elsewhere.

With Dalis -- the San Jose native and former Metropolitan Opera star -- he selected repertoire for Opera San Jose and auditioned singers. "And we used to agree all the time, without any discussion," said Dalis. "We'd hear the auditions, and we'd have our lists" of likes and dislikes, "and there they were, identical.

"A better partner I never could have," she said. "I seem to get all the accolades about the company, but he was really my partner, and we worked together on building this company. It was always together."

And now there's to be a changing of the guard, brought on by the years. Dalis, 88, will retire after this season. Larry Hancock, the company's general manager, is to replace her.

Rohrbaugh grew up in and around Cleveland. His father was a Congregational minister and a cellist. His mother was a music teacher in the public schools, a pianist and choir director of her husband's church.

(Now 93, she led a choir until a year ago.) Of their five children, three became professional musicians: Rohrbaugh and his sisters Barbara, a violinist, and Martha, a cellist.

Singing in his mother's choir, studying piano and bassoon and attending concerts by the Cleveland Orchestra, Rohrbaugh's life was music-rich. He did his first conducting while in middle school. His resonant voice won him a scholarship to Heidelberg College in Tiffin, Ohio, and then to the New England Conservatory of Music in Boston, where, when not in class, he often could be found at nearby Symphony Hall. One recital he heard there was by baritone John McCollum, whose power and composure made a profound impression on Rohrbaugh.

At the University of Michigan, Rohrbaugh would study for his doctorate under McCollum, whose insistence on specifics -- the clarity of every vowel and consonant, the focus of one's vibrato -- later became a model for his own teaching. Be clear. Be expressive. Tell a story. These became his watchwords when he founded his own opera workshop at the University of Akron in 1971, and later when he connected with Dalis at the San Jose State University Opera Workshop in 1977.

After seven years, that led to Opera San Jose, where Rohrbaugh fashioned a first-rate orchestra. He also applied his knack for guiding singers into their comfort zones: getting them past those "obsessively self-critical" moments where a singer gets stuck, said Rubalcava-Bengochea. "I would kind of just stand there and look at the note. And Doc was, 'Come on, you've got to go, come with me!' He's like Buddha: Let it go, trust yourself."

Joseph Marcheso, who has guest-conducted with Opera San Jose with some regularity, will take over as music director after Rohrbaugh conducts "Butterfly."

And then what?

He has offered to do an occasional guest-conducting spot with the company, and maybe some vocal coaching; details are up in the air. He will continue to teach voice privately at his home in Palo Alto, where he and wife Jennifer Sullivan will have more time together. She recently retired as executive director of the Morgan Autism Center in San Jose.

"My wife," he noted, "has a joke: 'I have an old truck, I have an old boat, and I have a relatively new table saw. What else could I want out of life?' "

The joke describes Rohrbaugh, who grew up working construction in Ohio with his grandfather and uncles, who were contractors. While building Opera San Jose with Dalis, he renovated a summer place for himself and Sullivan on Lake Erie. He put a second floor on their house in Palo Alto, where the couple raised their two children.

"My wife will say, 'You know, it might be good if you took out that wall.' And it could happen."

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Opera San Jose

Presenting Puccini's 'Madama Butterfly'; David Rohrbaugh, conductor; Brad Dalton, stage director

When: Feb. 15-March 2

Where: California Theatre, 345 S. First St., San Jose

Tickets: \$51-\$111; 408-437-4450, www.operasj.org