



BETWEEN THE LINES



Operatic communication is giving Nancy Hermiston insight on how music has the power to tackle societal issues in unconventional ways



Photos > Tim Matheson

Nancy Hermiston, Director of the UBC Opera Ensemble and University Marshall, knows a thing or two about the power of alternative forms of communication. After more than three decades as a professional opera singer that included an operatic debut at New York's Carnegie Hall and a permanent engagement with the prestigious Nürnberg Opera in Germany, she has personally observed the transformative effect of opera on its audience:

"There's something particular about opera that communicates on a different level from all other art forms. I'm not sure whether it's the sound and power of the human voice or the voice coupled with the marriage between the text, music, acting and orchestra but somehow it puts people in touch with their emotions and can truly move them. It's an impressive asset to society."

Hermiston readily points to *The Dream Healer*, UBC Opera Ensemble's newest production that made its world premiere in March 2008 at UBC's Chan Centre for the Performing Arts, as an example of an opera that does more than showcase the extraordinary performance abilities of its cast. Based on Timothy Findley's best-selling novel *Pilgrim*, the production paints a complex picture of the disintegration of the human psyche through the medium of opera, while at the same time, directly and openly tackles society's stigmas about mental illness. As a means to further encourage public dialogue about the questions raised in *The Dream Healer*, UBC's Department of Psychiatry and the UBC Institute of Mental Health hosted a series of symposiums that addressed key issues surrounding mental health and wellness.

"In *The Dream Healer*, we have put a spotlight on the plight of people suffering from various forms of mental illness in our society through the art form of opera. This collaboration between the UBC Department of Psychiatry, the UBC Institute of Mental Health and the UBC Opera Ensemble is an opportunity to bring two very different areas of research together at UBC," says Hermiston. "Because each of these departments has their own 'audience,' so to speak, we were able to bring these different constituents together in the hope that it will spark discussion and provoke thought surrounding one of the most important issues that society faces today: the mental health of our citizens, their care and treatment and the recognition of and solutions for the stigma of mental illness in the workplace and in society at large. Opera has frequently, in its history, been an agent for change and we hope that this project can continue that tradition."

Inspired by the collaborative success of *The Dream Healer*, Hermiston is hoping to begin collaboration with other university researchers on the effects of music in society, in particular, music

cognition, music therapy, music education and the learning disabled. Currently, she is in the process of investigating how opera singers multi-task and communicate to each other and to the audience on multiple levels when performing.

Hermiston explains: "Operatic performance is very different than theatrical performance because we have to balance a dynamic that includes singing, speaking and acting in our native language as well as many others. Most opera singers now need to have a working knowledge of French, Italian, German, Russian and Czech. I suspect there is something like a kind of simultaneous translation when we are acting and reacting on the stage. We must then couple that with moving, dancing, listening to the orchestra, interacting with large casts of soloists, leads and dancers, all while following the conductor. I would venture to say that opera is probably the most complicated art form."

According to Hermiston, the multi-tasking aspect of opera has also demonstrated potential links to improved learning development, which is offering ample opportunity for further inquiry. For example, she has repeatedly observed through her teaching how opera students suffering from dyslexia and attention-deficit have seen their disabilities eventually diminish after intensive work on the operatic stage, an improvement that she believes could be attributed to the

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multi-tasking aspect of opera. By documenting the multi-tasking process involved in operatic performance and the effects of this process on the individual, Hermiston believes this research could greatly benefit learning-challenged students by helping them better understand their learning needs and in turn, help them develop their skills in ways that are natural to them.

Hermiston is part of a team of researchers who are currently in the early stages of applying for a Canada Foundation for Innovation (CFI) grant that she hopes will soon translate to an interdisciplinary collaboration that will stimulate research into such topics as cognitive behaviour, memory, brain function, physical coordination, perception, information processing, and expression in the performing arts. In the meantime, she is content to proudly advocate the far-reaching benefits of an art form that is rarely appreciated for more than its entertainment value. ■