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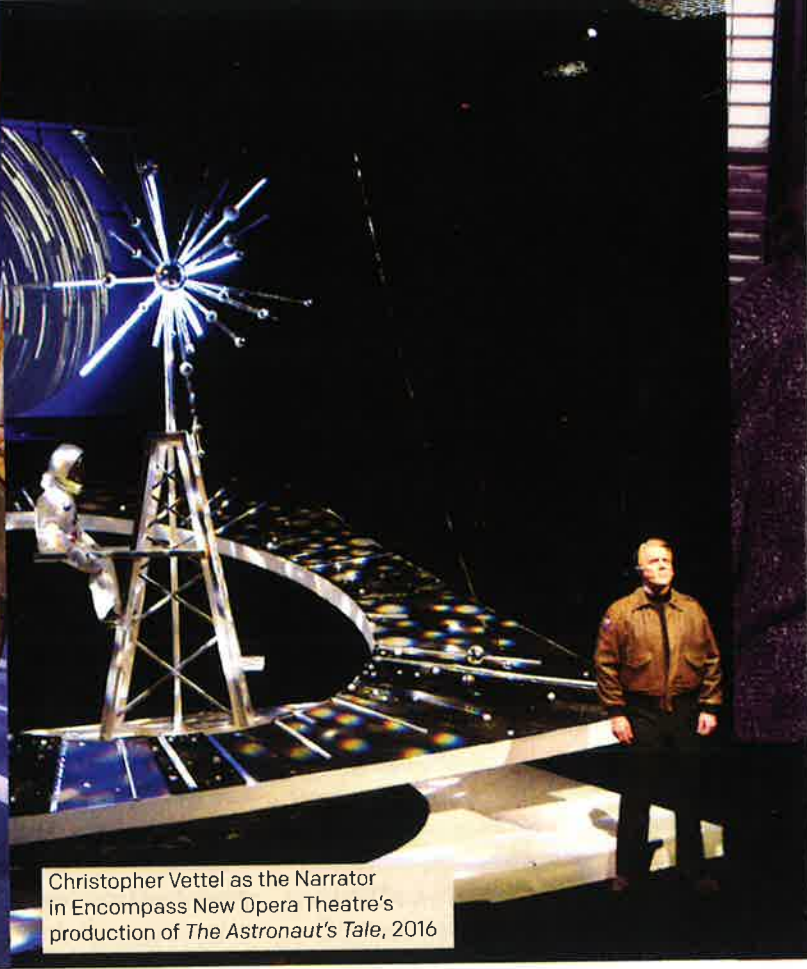
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Joy Hermalyn and Marie Anello as Marcella Sorella and Ambrosia in Encompass New Opera Theatre's production of *A Wake or A Wedding*, 2014



Christopher Vettel as the Narrator in Encompass New Opera Theatre's production of *The Astronaut's Tale*, 2016

All-Encompassing Legacy 40 Years of Music Theatre

BY MARK WATSON

New York City's Encompass New Opera Theatre has been championing new works and singers for over four decades. Read their remarkable story in this interview with the company's Artistic Director Nancy Rhodes.

Being the director of an opera company that solely presents new American works is a herculean task. But you wouldn't know it when talking with Nancy Rhodes, artistic director of the Encompass New Opera Theatre. She makes it look easy with her boundless enthusiasm and infectious laughter. Our interview in her quirky Manhattan apartment, located in the center of the theater district, was interrupted several times by strange animal sounds emanating from a kitchen clock as it marked the passing of time.

Celebrating their 40th anniversary of "creative music theatre," Rhodes is going strong. In October 2016 she presented a star-studded benefit at the National Arts Club in New York to honor Terrence McNally and the team of Lynn Ahrens and Stephen Flaherty.

The guest list was a who's who of musical theatre royalty. Tyne Daly, Sheldon Harnick, Zoe Caldwell, and Nathan Lane gave beautiful spoken tributes to the honorees, and there were performances by Brian Stokes Mitchell, Karen Ziemba, LaChanze, Christiane Noll, Liz Callaway, and many, many more.

Originally called Encompass Music Theatre, they have produced over 62 full-scaled productions with orchestra, many of them world premieres, as well as over 160 workshops and readings of new musicals and opera. Many of these productions moved to other theaters. "We helped establish Ricky Ian Gordon by producing *Only Heaven*. We have also done pieces by Michael John LaChiusa and Adam Guettel and some early music of *Floyd Collins*, which Adam played on his guitar at one of our events. He hosted some of our workshops. We're always seeking to discover and present new composers," says Rhodes.

Trained in the theater, Rhodes has had a successful career directing in Europe and Asia. She also studied



Nancy Rhodes and Virgil Thomson

Photo by Rachel Watson

piano for 14 years and enjoys working with singers. For 12 years she taught acting for opera singers at Manhattan School of Music. And that's where we began our conversation.

Tell me about your work with college students.

I just took my theater training and worked out my way to present it to classically trained singers. And I can tell you that they ate it up. They loved it. They wanted to do much more. I had them doing spoken monologues, scene work. I had people from other countries sing in their own language. We always try to promote the artists themselves whether it is the writer, the composer, the lyricist, the musician, or the singer. We try to engage them in the *whole* process.

Many of the singers we have worked with over the years were trained at Juilliard, Manhattan School of Music,

Mannes, Eastman, Curtis Institute, Indiana—so we have been a bridge for young singers coming from the conservatory to being engaged professionally. I also think that classically trained singers, with a little extra training, could become great classical actors. They have language, poetry. They know a lot about the history of cultures, which is really important for good classical theatre.

So how did Encompass New Opera Theatre begin?

I was working at the Roundabout Theatre when I was hired to direct Virgil Thomson's *The Mother of Us All* at a summer festival. My friend Phil Campanella (the music director there) said, "You should go talk to Thomson. He lives at the Chelsea Hotel." I called him up, and he said, "Well, come on over!" I was in my bohemian days and I must have looked like Alice

FROM THE EDITOR

In a city as full of opera companies as the industry is full of sopranos and baritones, New York City-based Encompass New Opera Theatre could have been lost among the masses. But the company will soon celebrate 40 years of music making under the direction of Nancy Rhodes (p. 40).

How did the company find their niche? By championing new works by living composers. It all began with Rhodes' fortuitous collaboration with composer Virgil Thomson and continued on over four decades gaining the attention of such notables as Aaron Copeland, Beverly Sills, Tony Randall, and more.

Our voice type and our gender are all part of the package we are given, and they can create challenges and obstacles in our path. They do not, however, ultimately determine whether or not we will succeed. Varga, Belcher, and Rhodes found answers in new music. We, too, can find opportunity by focusing on the bigger picture and the things we can control.

Sara Thomas

“What I have observed over the years is that Nancy [Rhodes] chooses pieces that are dramatically viable with credible dramatic thrust and continuity. The other important element is that the piece is written in a way that is grateful for the singer to sing and for the audience to listen to. Many contemporary composers don’t understand that the voice has limitations which need to be taken into consideration to make an opera.”
—Mara Waldman, music director at Encompass New Opera Theatre

B. Toklas. He swung open the door, he looked at me and I looked at him, and we broke into laughter. We really hit it off. Pretty soon he ran over to the piano and he started to play and sing and he said, “Tell me some of your ideas.” I did, and he said, “Yes! Yes!” And we were off to the races.

I was about 22 and he was about 82, and he was the most interesting person that I had ever met. There in his apartment were these sculptures and Matisse paintings. I sat on his velvet settee and he offered me some sherry. He would invite me to the El Quijote restaurant and say, “Oh, you have to try this flan.” I had never heard of it. He would tell me about Paris, and Gertrude (Stein) and Alice, and the times between the wars, and Aaron Copland, and Paul Bowles, and George Antheil, and all these American composers. Virgil opened up a whole new world to me.

We had a big success with *The Mother of Us All*. From that point on I think I fell in love with American composers. Virgil explained the challenges for American composers for this sort of genre: American Lyric Theatre/American Opera. He told me how difficult it was for composers from this country to get their works done in the major opera houses. So over about a three-year period, Encompass transitioned into focusing on American Opera and New Music Theatre. There seemed to be a whole raft of material that nobody was touching. Marc Blitzstein’s *Regina* was our first hit.

Do you find yourself moving closer to theatre or to opera?

We think of it as *music* theatre. This is not to say that we couldn’t develop something that might be on Broadway. We almost did that with *Elizabeth and Essex* by Michael Stewart, Doug Katsaros, and Richard Engquist. Estelle Parsons played Queen Elizabeth. We probably aren’t going to do pop/rock because we really work more with legitimate singers or Broadway singers. Someone said that we fall between the cracks of the piano keys in the sense of what we do.

So, what are the next projects for ENOT?

One of the productions we are hoping to do is Virgil Thomson's third opera, *Lord Byron*—it has never been done in a major opera house. We have been designated by the Virgil Thomson Foundation to do it, but it is a big work with 22 performers. The Met had commissioned it way back when. Jack Larson, who played Jimmy Olsen in the original Superman series, wrote the libretto. Jack also wrote the libretto for *The Astronaut's Tale*, which we premiered at the Brooklyn Academy of Music, BAM Fisher. Charles Fussell wrote the music. We had a big hit with that. We have developed an audience.

Another piece we have planned for the next season is John David Earnest's *The Theory of Everything*, a piece that explores multiple dimensions and alternative universes. I wrote the libretto.

We are looking for more partnerships with other companies. We might collaborate with another company on a work or we might host them or they might host us. We would be very interested to make associations with colleges where they could rehearse it and present it at their school and then bring the

production to New York with most or some of the cast, perhaps using some guest artists from New York.

It would be fantastic exposure for the singers. It would promote the singers, give prestige to the opera department, and give singers a chance to do more than one or two performances. I have always thought it was unfair to compare singers—who only have a chance to sing three or four performances total—with an actor who may have played a role countless times, especially in comedy.

Oh, I am so glad you brought that up. Sometimes with modern opera pieces, opening night is also closing night. When we had our own space, our shows played six weeks, and singers really experienced what it is to be a performer. For seven years we were located at 168 West 48th Street. We were up above a peep show and underneath a karate studio. People like Aaron Copland, Beverly Sills, Tony Randall, Robert Ward, Lukas Foss, and Lehman Engel came to see what we were doing. We once lost a computer repairman—he went to the peep show and didn't make it up for a while. We had some good stories!

I would give anything to have our own theater again. We were able to do so much more. We were able to do five productions a year and we had workshops in between. Now we have to have the funding in place and we have to book the theater a year and a half in advance. It makes it so much more difficult.

We don't always get the top billing because in NYC there's the Met and the big institutions—but we're still here.

Mark Watson has performed roles with Opera Orchestra of New York, the Baltimore Opera, Michigan Opera Theatre, the Connecticut Opera, and other regional companies. In 2015, Watson sang the American premiere of Karl Jenkins' cantata The Healer at Carnegie Hall—his fourth solo appearance there. Other engagements that year included concerts in the Bahamas for the Nassau Music Society and in Pescara, Italy, as well as the title role in Stravinsky's "The Soldier's Tale." In 2014, Watson was presented as Artist of the Year at Detroit's Max M. Fisher Music Center (Orchestra Hall), where he premiered David DiCibiera's "A Letter to Sarah." Watson completed his studies on full scholarship in the post-graduate opera program at the Juilliard School. ©