



## Omaha-friend of the arts

Review by Bill Wallis

Lincoln has reason to envy Omaha. Omaha's opera company is a growing, vital concern. The arts seem to matter in Omaha. Omaha society supports the arts while the Lincoln Community Concert Series can barely put together a salable program for 1972-73.

Although the Omaha company's latest offering of Offenbach's *Tales of Hoffmann* was successful, the Omaha Opera as a whole is having its growing pains.

One problem is of a more general nature: how to maintain standards of excellence while showing full appreciation to the guest artist talent and Omaha's own fine chorus? When a second-rate singer-actor like Eric Townsend is coupled with a first-rate singer-actress (though the singer had a bad first act) like Karen Armstrong, and a largely unbelievable presentation is given as a result, what does one do?

First one prays for competent critics. Second, one does not give a standing ovation to a mediocre performance of a great work of art. Thirdly, one does not invite back unpolished singers with out-moded acting techniques like Townsend or Sergi. Fourthly, one does invite back the first-rate talent one has been able to collect. In the last year: Louis Quilico (one of the world's great dramatic baritones and singer-actors), Gail Robinson, Joshua Hecht, Arnold Voketaitus, Enrico Di Giuseppe and (although he did not perform especially well here in *Rigoletto*) Barry Morrell.

Too often smaller opera companies find themselves with name singers past their prime (Mary Curtis-Verna) or young artists sometimes on the way up (Townsend). This pays off occasionally; for example, in the case of Gail Robinson, one of the finest young singers alive. But generally one winds up with a heavily compromised piece of musical drama. Omaha is admirably avoiding such productions.

This certainly was the case with *Hoffmann* (as it certainly was not with *Aida*), partially because of the marvelous performance of Armstrong and Hecht, the vigor and competence of the Omaha chorus and the actors who filled the smaller roles (outstanding among these, William Koli).

The second and more specific problem is that of coordinating (producing) and directing a mass of talent into a work of art in a week or 10 days. Few people would envy director James De Blasis his job, but his operas suffer from old-school acting and dramatic convention that make his productions—in a word—stilted far too often, many times at crucial points in the production.

What "conventional" elements undermine the productions? 1) broad, unmotivated staging movement; 2) choreographing naturalistic (a toast for example) chorus movement to music—opera choruses are groups of human beings, not mannikins 3) giving a singer so much stage movement that he or she cannot sing—this is what happened to Karan Armstrong in her first act aria; 4) encouraging melodramatic acting in performers; 5) traditional handling of large numbers as "set pieces" in which everything abruptly stops while music is made.

Saturday night there was a very questionable use of technical elements. The entire portrait sequence in Act III (besides being hidden to one-fourth of the audience) was heavy-handed; and when the spotlight fluttered as Antonia's pulse, it was simply laughable. One felt sympathy for Hecht, who had to carry the drama during and after that moment. He did it admirably.

On the other hand, De Blasis does have good ideas and usually handles the elements well, all things considered. John Naccarato's sets are generally good, his *Hoffman* set is the best of his work, certainly better than his *Rigoletto* earlier this year. His sets are very conventional and generally rather bare in execution, if not in design.

The program does not mention who handles the invaluable dramatic constituent of lighting, but it does improve with time, despite occasional problems in evidence last Saturday night.

Omaha opera is successful. Omaha is and should be proud of the fruits of its efforts. But the Opera Guild should be constantly looking for means to attain their end: more excellent and entertaining productions.

## Larry Kubert entertainment

Neil Diamond is a master showman. . . Friday night at Pershing Auditorium, he had the audience all but eating out of his hand.

There's a skill and technique that Diamond possesses that made the audience his before he even opened his mouth to sing.

Singing most of hits, "Scolaimon," "Solitary Man," "Cherry Cherry," "Sweet Caroline," "Holly, Holy," "Cracklin' Rosie," "I am . . . I Said," "Brother Love's Traveling Salvation Show" (his list seemed endless, as does mine), he also did a little country-western and a few of his lesser known songs.

Without a doubt, Diamond is an extremely talented performer, but it was his showmanship which sold the crowd. Joking with his band members and chatting with the audience, he developed an intimacy that made the cavernous auditorium seem like a nightclub. And that ain't no easy job.

The show's opening act was comedian Albert Brooks. Brooks' act, although very short (about half an hour), started out very successfully, but it slipped slowly downhill until at the end of it, he was becoming boring, if not disappointing.

Howell Theatre's final production of the year, *The Tempest*, by William Shakespeare, directed by Tice Miller, will open Friday and run through May 13.

*The Tempest* is one of Shakespeare's last plays and is considered one of his best poetic comedies, containing adventure, romance, comedy and intrigue. Tickets are now on sale. Curtain is at 8 p.m.

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Concert-wise, Peter Yarrow, of the defunct Peter, Paul and Mary, will be at the Omaha Civic Auditorium Sunday.

Creedence Clearwater Revival is coming to Pershing Auditorium May 19. Creedence is now a three-man group (Doug Clifford, Stu Cook and John Fogerty) since Tom Fogerty split with the group a little over a year ago. Appearing



Creedence Clearwater Revival

with Creedence will be Tony Joe White who has been described as "a rangy cajun with a perpetual sun squint."

Who says politics isn't entertaining? Andy Williams with Henry Mancini and his Orchestra has been scheduled into Pershing Auditorium 7:30 p.m. May 8. The show is being sponsored by Concerts for McGovern, presidential candidate Sen. George McGovern, that is. Sounds like a show you don't want to miss.

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There's quite a few good movies in town this week that you should try to see if you have a chance. Foremost is *The Godfather* at the Cooper/Lincoln. If you haven't seen this masterpiece yet . . . hurry. Winning Academy Awards for best picture and best actor *The French Connection* is on a return engagement at the Nebraska. Not to be left out, the Cinema I has the *The Last Picture Show*, which earned Academy Awards for best screenplay, best supporting actress and best supporting actor. *Fiddler On The Roof* is currently drawing in crowds at the Cinema II and *The Concert for Bangladesh* is showing at the Varsity.

The Union Weekend Film folks have the Nebraska Union small auditorium tied up most of this week. On Monday they have *I Love You, Alice B. Toklas* booked in, *Viva Max* on Wednesday and *Paint Your Wagon* on Thursday, with each film costing only 25 cents.

Tuesday there will be a free showing of *Llanito*, a movie by Danny Lyon, at the Sheldon Gallery at 8 p.m. Lyon will be there to speak after the film.