

# School of Music's home grown grand opera

by Carolyn Hull

What was once only an idea in the minds of its librettists and composer is fast becoming reality as the School of Music produces *Napoleon*.

The libretto for *Napoleon* was written by Dean Tschetter, designer-in-residence, and Bill Wallis, a Centennial College fellow and visiting music professor. The two were excited about the possibilities of opera but wanted to synthesize it with all the advantages of good drama, according to Tschetter.

"Grand opera is a spectacle of

things to see and hear. Characters are larger than life with music serving many times to magnify emotions," Tschetter said.

"Opera is the most complete media in theatre, it combines good drama and music, which heightens the dramatic moments," Wallis said.

The medium seemed, to them, to fit the scope of Napoleon, a larger-than-life figure of history.

"He is simply one of the greatest leaders in history. He rebuilt European civilization. He personally dictated all the aspects of his government, down

to where each man was on the battlefield," Wallis said.

"While being an able general and politician, unique circumstances catapulted him to fame. He said himself that he was a product of the revolution," Tschetter said. After the French revolution three consulates presided over government affairs. Napoleon was appointed one of the three.

"After becoming first consulate, he took over the government in a bloodless coup and named himself emperor. Under his rule France really had some good years," Tschetter said.

The opera is designed to show some of the many aspects of Napoleon to the audience. Opening on a battlefield, which is always present, it moves through flashbacks including his coronation to a premonition of his defeat. The intent is to show how he could be so hated and so loved by his subjects.

Our primary concern became to show Napoleon, the man, and how his mind worked to cause all the different sides to his character, Wallis said.

"We tried to give the audience many facets of who the man was without giving our decision. We wanted it an open ended question that the audience would consider," Tschetter said.

Research Wallis and Tschetter has done brought out that even with all his pride and arrogance, Napoleon was a romantic person and loved by his subjects.

"The opera's vignettes lay out the character of Napoleon in pieces for the audience to see. Yet even when all the pieces are laid out, he is still a puzzle," Tschetter said.

The setting of the opera is the battlefield of Borodino just after the battle has ended. According to Wallis, they chose Borodino to show Napoleon under stress, as Napoleon realized that it was the turning point of his conquests.

"His defeat in Moscow followed Borodino and still the people welcomed him home as if he were a God," Wallis said.

"He was only beaten by others using his own tactics. Wellington defeated him by using the tactics Napoleon had used to counter the very attack he was making," Wallis said.

The two finished one libretto which they were not satisfied with and went on to revise and rewrite, finishing a libretto they were satisfied with earlier this year.

Next, music was needed to combine

with the libretto to bring the opera to completion. Wallis and Tschetter approached Bob Beadell about asking one of his students to compose. Bob Beadell, School of Music Professor, agreed to join them himself.

"We talked about the show, and I was impressed with the first drafts of the libretto I saw. They can be deadly, it can't be poetry and it can't be drama, as they are total in themselves. A good libretto has to be in a middle ground to show the extra dimension of music room," Beadell said.

Through a grant from the University Research Council, Beadell has been able to take leave to complete the score.

Beadell said that composing for an opera involves an intuitive sense of what will expand the drama, creativity, and a highly technical training.

In composing *Napoleon's* music, he said, it took around three months to come to a concept of the total sound, which he then writes the recitive and songs from.

"In the early part of the opera Napoleon's arias are strong, declamatory; as the opera progresses they become less angular and strident, reflecting his growing knowledge of his fate," Beadell said.

According to Beadell, some of the music is almost cinematic in its sound, moving from reality, back and forth in time and space.

"As the scene moves from a flashback to Borodino, the orchestra returns to a recognizable texture," Beadell said.

Reminders that one is always on a battlefield come from the music.

"In the far distance one can hear military trumpet and drum cadences faintly," said Beadell.

The collaborators are all involved in the present production. Tschetter is directing, Wallis cast as Duroc, Napoleon's aide and close friend, and Beadell is involved in orchestra and rewriting.

The tremendous scope of the production will involve more people than usual UNL operas. Faculty member John Zei will sing Napoleon, Emily McKnight, Josephine with Dale Ganz, Ray Miller, Jeanie Dietrich, and Wallis other faculty appearing in the show. The Men's Glee Club and Madrigal Singers are also in the show along with the Opera Workshop members.

*Napoleon* will premier Feb. 2 at Kimball and run Feb. 2, 9 and 10.



Napoleon . . . The opera is designed to show how Napoleon could be so hated and so loved.

## Brecht's 'Circle'— audience alienation

Review by Leta Powell Drake

(Drake is a graduate student in speech.)

Bertold Brecht's play, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, currently on the boards at the University Theatre, is playing to full houses and with good reason. Directed by William Morgan, it is a play well worth seeing. The play is set in the fall of 1945, at the end of World War II in the mountains of Russia. But it actually doesn't matter where or when the play takes place at all, because the play is not what it seems. Brecht says one thing and means another.

Brecht was noted as the originator of the "alienation" effect—an attempt to drive a wedge between the actor and the audience. According to Brecht's theory, this alienation would give the audience sufficient objectivity to witness the action on the stage without getting emotionally involved. If one is emotionally involved in the drama, one is overcome by inertia and unable to do anything. Unfortunately with outstanding actors, such as Azdek the judge, the audience is lost in compassion and the concept of epic theater breaks down.

Brecht has given us the outline of a play revolving around a mother and child and the rights of kinship and the question of blood being thicker than water. However, the play is so much more than that. The play is about war, love, justice, reason, order, chaos and ownership. And Brecht has stereotyped character to portray these attitudes.

The kudos for the evening must go to the judge Azdek played by Brecht's spokesman Donovan Diez. His administration of justice is outrageous, but his conclusions are seemingly truly just. This lanky Jewish-looking young man would make a brilliant Shylock some day.

Helping the audience follow and interpret the action of the story is the poet-narrator, Mitch Tebo. There is always a commandingly mad, almost diabolical look to this perpetual Puck. But one watches this saturnine figure and one always listens when he speaks.

The young lovers are shadows of live people. Too good to be real. Grusha, played by Connie McCord, the young girl who has stolen the child and made it her own, is a fragile, lovely, delicate creature with a plaintive voice. One wonders if she actually could have had the courage to brave a savage Russian winter with the responsibility of an infant to care for. But we

are deeply moved when she makes her plea for the child in the chalk circle and refuses to tear apart the child for personal gain. She loves the child too much to do him any harm.

Notables in the supporting cast include the corporal soldier, portrayed by Bill Mrkvicka, who strikes the audience as a vulgar, cruel war monger; Steve Shelly as the quite healthy dying husband in a very funny wedding/funeral scene; Roxanne Perry as Natella Abashwilli, the "legitimate" mother who is too properly hateful and demanding; D. Chetley Kincaid as Granny Grusinia, the weebegone old lady who makes one think of a wounded whooping crane in flight.

An award of merit to the cast as a whole for their flexibility to be constantly on stage alternating in roles. Sometimes the cast was used as scenery, as a chorus, as a solid mass, or as a fascinating background noise of melting snow, or as citizens, or merely as observers. This economic move of doubling, tripling and quadrupling roles is utilitarian and at the same time an excellent training ground in educational theatre.

The stage setting was functional, almost stark. It consisted of barrels, wagons, spit and bailing wire. However, if it is not possible for the playwright to include a real river on the stage, or real snow, or real fire, then it certainly is impractical. Why not use symbolism when realism is not feasible? Morgan has done it most effectively by using brightly colored scarves, waving wildly and catching the light, to represent fire; barrels become walls and supporting beams for houses; rivers are created with aqua satin fabric laid in front of the observing eyes of the audience.

Brecht would have approved Morgan's fascinating use of connecting bodies to represent a bridge over a glacier that had to be crossed. Live pigs and goats in the lobby added a poignant, if not pungent, sense of reality to the setting. Dancers outside the theatre created a festive mood prior to the opening lines and musicians with percussion, flute, violin and balalaika added an additional dimension.

The "Caucasian Chalk Circle" is not Brecht at his best, however, Morgan's production, coupled with some outstanding acting talent will keep theatre live and well and living in Lincoln.

The play runs through Dec. 16.