

# Thomas-Opera elitism dying

by Carolyn Hull

Rain and friends greeting him, Jess Thomas, featured artist in Tuesday's Performing Artist Series, said he is glad to be back in the Midwest and that his home base, California, has been soggy all winter, so he feels right at home.

Thomas, a South Dakota native and UNL alumni, considered singing a hobby, an attitude he attributed to "the practical turn of mind Midwesterners have." In his spare time, while working on Ph.D. studies at Stanford University, Thomas sang in the college glee club.

"There my voice teacher asked me what I was doing in psychology and convinced me to try a professional singing career," he said.

"I thought I'd give it a year and see what happened. After that year, my voice teacher said with two more years of study I'd be ready," Thomas said.

Thomas won the San Francisco Opera auditions in 1957, sang there, learned enough German to go through auditions in Europe and received an engagement at the Baden State Theatre in Karlsruhe, Germany. He now alternates performing at the San Francisco Opera, the New York Metropolitan Opera and various European stages.

"A performing artist lives with unbelievable nerve strain. I was told once that performing is a combination of 10 per cent talent, 10 per cent hard work, 10 per cent luck and 70 per cent good nerves. Stepping onstage places a performing artist only one step away from sports or the circus, there is a lot of competition and the performer is only as good as his last ball game," Thomas said.

"A friend once showed me through a laryngoscope, what my vocal cords looked like. It was a little frightening to see that my whole existence depended on two things that looked like rubber bands and were expected to project a sound that could be heard over a whole orchestra," Thomas said.

The two rubber bands have taken Thomas around the world to the extent "that the

mere word 'travel' throws me into fits. I like to travel but not to the extent that I do now."

Traveling brings Thomas into contact with a variety of people—from fans familiar with his work to others only just becoming acquainted with opera and the fine arts, he said.

Despite financial threats, Thomas is optimistic about the future of opera and theatre in general, feeling that the strong European opera tradition is spreading in the United States.

"In America there is an unbelievable core of young opera fanatics and when you consider the cost of attending with tickets, transportation, dressing up, dinner and babysitting costs for a young couple, it's quite a commitment for them" Thomas said.

"Opera tradition in Europe isn't elitist and shouldn't be here. Once while doing opera in Europe, I had a 4 p.m. curtain time which I found was to enable the midnight shift of coal workers to change clothes and still be on time to work," he said.

"The awe of performing, singing Wagner's works for example, means an artist stretches in every direction possible, calling on every one of his resources in his commitment and if he does that, the performance will speak to someone who may have no background in opera, giving him something to appreciate," Thomas said.

Thomas' career has become identified with Richard Wagner's operas. Tuesday night's program will include songs by Wagner and other composers of the period, some who influenced Wagner and others that Wagner influenced.

"It's an unabashed romantic program, the stress point being a cycle of songs by Wagner that his grandson, Wieland Wagner, suggested I do," Thomas said.

"Franz Liszt is also included in the program. Liszt helped Wagner stage some of his operas. Thomas also plans songs by composers Wolf and Marx who were strongly influenced by Wagner.



Jess Thomas

## blurbs

Fellini's *Juliet of the Spirits* is this week's foreign film at 7 and 9 p.m. Tuesday at the Stuart Theater. \* \* \*

Tenor Jess Thomas, will give the next concert in the Performing Artist Series at Kimball Recital Hall at 8 p.m. Tuesday. \* \* \*

Lincoln moviegoers will find four new theaters Thursday

when the new Cooper/Plaza opens its doors. \* \* \*

Rod Stewart and Faces, with backup group Jo Jo Gunne, will be at Pershing Auditorium Saturday. \* \* \*

Concerts within hitching or driving distance: Monday finds *It's A Beautiful Day* and *Bloodrock* in St. Paul. Les McCann will be at *Marvelous Mary's* in Denver through Saturday.

The heavy rock/classical New York Rock Ensemble will be at Tulagi's in Boulder Tuesday through Sunday. Also on Tuesday, *It's A Beautiful Day* and the Doobie Brothers will be in Des Moines and Yes at Kiel Auditorium in St. Louis.

Wednesday the J. Geils Band will be at the War Memorial Auditorium in Kansas City, Kan. and Eric Justin Kaz will be at the Quiet Knight in Chicago through Sunday.

The Steve Miller Band will be at the Kinetic Playground in Chicago Saturday. Sunday finds the Spinners at Kiel Auditorium in St. Louis. King Crimson will be at the Cowtown Ballroom in Kansas City, Mo. and the New Cactus Band will be at the Royal Terrace Ballroom in Omaha.

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