

# Opera season opens with two successes

By JEFF RANDALL  
Opera Critic

They had the talent, they had the instruction and they had the dedication. They just didn't have the words or music.

But now, opera is back at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln's School of Music, and the double-cast twin productions of "The Medium" and "Down in the Valley" are the reason.

Last year's performances of "The Tender Land" and "A Room With a View" may have failed to fulfill the high expectations of many of Lincoln's opera enthusiasts. But this year's season has started off with a leap ahead.

"The Medium" and "Down in the Valley" premiered Tuesday night at Kimball Recital Hall. But the usual auditorium seating arrangement was forsaken for a more intimate setup of bleachers on the main stage, literally inches from the performers.

While this setup seriously cuts into crowd size, it also makes a huge difference in the effectiveness of both pieces.

With "Down in the Valley," Kurt Weill's attempt at integrating traditional opera themes with equally traditional American folk music, the close setting becomes an opportunity for the audience to blend with the joyous dancing and bright choral voices. This tale of love and romance in a picturesque American small town is subsequently able to sweep audiences into its world.

But the real advantage of the close audience setting is best exploited in "The Medium," Gian Carlo Menotti's story of a scam artist and her encounters with spirits from the beyond.

Madame Flora (played in both casts by Rebecca Kouma Shane), the scam artist in question, makes a living by convincing mothers and fathers that she can contact their deceased children's spirits.

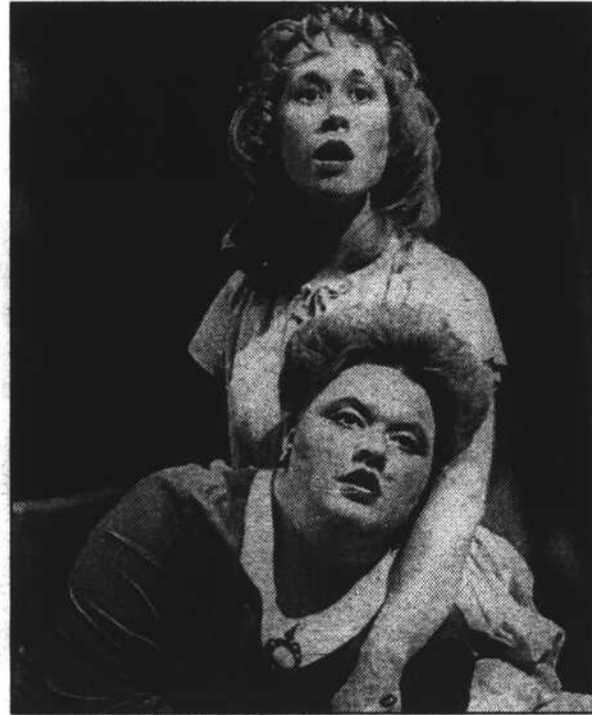
But Madame Flora soon discovers, much to her horror, that she might not be faking her contact with ghosts. As the scenes progress, her inner struggle with her own beliefs causes her to lose her sanity.

The audience setting comes into play when the voices from beyond the grave echo behind the crowd and the desperation of Madame Flora is revealed face-to-face with the audience — at close range.

Shane does a magnificent job portraying her character's loss of control and the emotions involved with it. The other actors carry their roles equally well, the accompaniment by Michael Cotton glows and the set designs are simple but effective, proving that — given the right material to work with — opera director William Shomos and UNL's School of Music can produce a top-notch opera any time it wants.

# HIGHS & LOWS

Photos by  
Scott Bruhn



**THE TWO OPERAS** "The Medium" and "Down in the Valley," performed this week at the Lied Center, feature two sets of performers who serve as dual casts for the production. Above, Rebecca Kouma Shane, left, stars as Madame Flora and Chanty Stovall plays Toby the Mute in "The Medium." At left, Shane also shares the stage with Dawn Doverspike, who plays Madame Flora's daughter, Monica.

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