



DAWN DIETRICH/DN
JOHN DAVID DEHAAN,
a frustrated composer in the opera "Divine Madness," tries to write a play for a group of singers. The opera, composed by UNL professor Randall Snyder, ran on Oct. 30 and Nov. 1.

Applauding opera

Opera popularity crosses to younger audience

BY LIZA HOLTMEIER
Staff writer

Traditionally, opera has been the reputed art form of the middle-aged, highly educated and elitist upper-middle class.

Only eight years ago, the faces of teens and 20-somethings rarely appeared at performances by major opera companies, including Opera Omaha.

But since 1992, the younger generation has been filling the seats faster than any other segment of the population.

Liesl Jeffrey, Opera Omaha's marketing coordinator, said the increase is a result of the company's promotion of opera to audiences under 25.

And according to a survey by the National Endowment for the Arts, the increase is also a part of a nationwide trend.

Across the country, opera companies have initiated education and outreach programs geared toward creating new opera-lovers, particularly those in high school and college.

The NEA survey, released in September, shows the attempt is working.

The survey, titled "1997 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts," indicates that opera enjoys the fastest-growing audience of any of the fine and performing arts in the United States.

From 1992 to 1997, total opera attendance increased from 10.4 million to 16.5 million. Opera's percentage of the total arts audience grew by 12.5 percent — a larger growth rate than that of any other arts activity.

The results coincide with an earlier NEA survey revealing an 18 percent increase in the number of 18- to 24-year-olds attending opera performances in the United States between 1982 and 1992. Even more remarkable is that this number contrasts with a 16 percent decline in the population of that age category over the same period.

Ignorance at school

But in the present state of opera renewal nationwide, the state of Nebraska pales next to the rosy national complexion.

True, Opera Omaha has witnessed an increase in the total number of ticket sales since 1992, and the fastest-growing percentage of audience members are the ones ages 18 to 35.

But the University of Nebraska-Lincoln School of Music has seen a persistent decline in audience attendance for its operas over the last 25 years.

The experience of the two entities highlights the challenges facing traditional art forms as the next century approaches.

Randall Snyder, UNL professor of music, said he believes the lower audience turnout is part of a general decline in interest of musical forms other than rock 'n' roll.

"Popular music has become more complex and interesting," Snyder said. "Back in the '50s and '60s, there was less of that, so there was more interest in classical music."

Now, only 1 percent of the population attends performances of classical music, Snyder said. When that pie is divided up among the various forms of classical music, it leaves an even smaller number who attend opera.

Snyder added that rampant anti-intellectualism in the United States compounds the problem. Students, many of whom were not raised with the art form, no longer recognize a need to become familiar with classical literature, poetry, art or music.

"As you soon as you say the word 'opera,' it triggers a knee-jerk reaction," Snyder said. "But Mozart's operas have truths that are just as relevant today as they were in 1790."

In order to combat these problems, opera companies are rethinking the ways in which they present their art.

Education has become one of the most important facets of any professional company, Jeffrey said.

Reaching out

In order to build new audiences, Opera Omaha has instituted a variety of outreach programs in Omaha as well as surrounding states.

During the last two seasons, Opera Omaha and KGDE-FM (101.9) "The Edge," now "The Fox," held a promotion called "Black Tie and Tennis Shoes." The promotion offered balcony seats to students at half price for "La Bohème" in 1995-96 and

"Madame Butterfly" in 1996-97. Opera Omaha sold out each time the promotion was offered.

Opera Omaha also offers a 10 percent discount to university students for all performances.

Three years ago, Opera Omaha started a partnership with Omaha South High School with the hopes of concentrating its attention on a group of students. Students have become involved onstage, backstage, in shadow projects and during internships.

Opera Omaha also has produced two works at South High: "Trial of Carmen" and "Daughter of the Regiment."

Since the partnership began five years ago, more than 2,000 South High students have participated. Several of them have gone on to work professionally for Opera Omaha, either as performers or in administration.

"The kids have grown tremendously in terms of self-esteem," said Jim Eisenhardt, director of theater arts at Omaha South High School. "It's also introduced them to a world beyond rock 'n' roll."

Eisenhardt said the students have grown to love opera, and many have convinced their parents to begin attending with them.

Opera Omaha also has established a traveling company: the Heartland Opera Theater. The

company tours throughout Nebraska, Iowa and South Dakota, performing at public schools. "Opera Goes West" has been the unifying theme of the Heartland Opera Theater's performances during the past year. Its work highlights the performing arts as a part of western heritage.

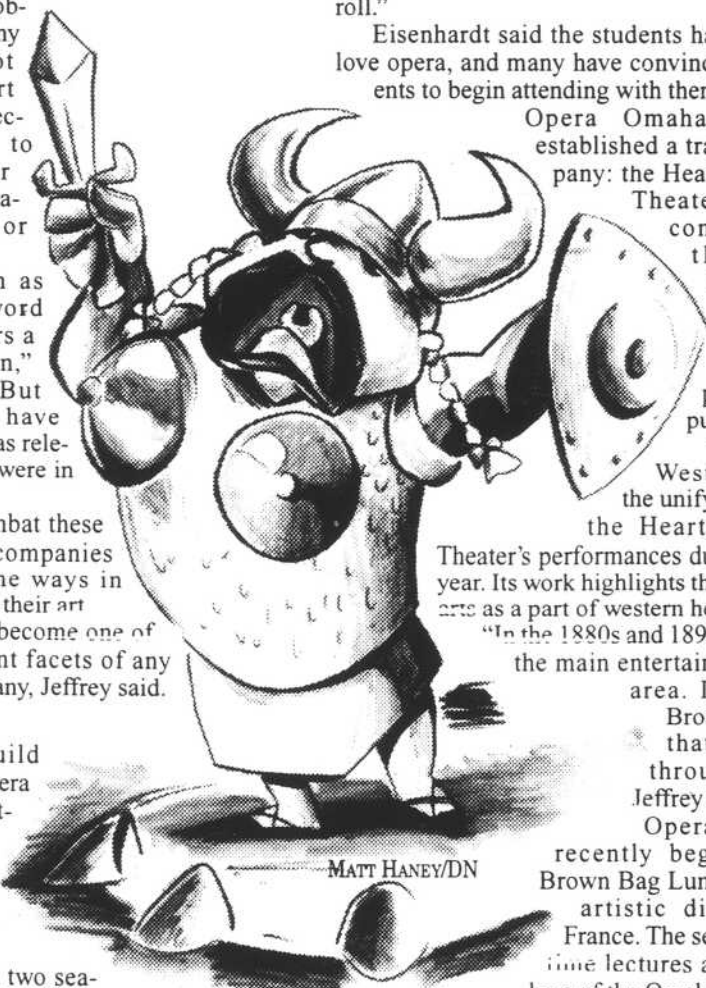
"In the 1880s and 1890s, opera was the main entertainment in this area. It's like our Broadway shows that come through now," Jeffrey said.

Opera Omaha recently began hosting Brown Bag Lunches with its artistic director, Hal France. The series of noon-time lectures allows members of the Omaha community

to hear France and other artists informally discuss their work.

"We're trying to break down the barriers and give them something they relate to on a very basic level."

LIESL JEFFREY
Opera Omaha marketing coordinator



Concert Preview

Brass band season will showcase style mixes

BY JASON HARDY
Senior staff writer

The 1998-99 season for the Nebraska Brass kicks off Thursday with a collection of old friends and new favorites.

The first concert, titled "Mozart, Gershwin & All That Jazz," is set to please with a combination of classics such as Gershwin's "Summertime" and Mozart's "Eine Kleine Nachtmusik," contrasted with more modern Dixieland and jazz pieces.

Dean Haist, trumpet player and executive director of the Nebraska Brass, said the group wanted to start the season out with a strong variety.

"We do try and bring some variety to the program while challenging ourselves," Haist said. "It's kind of a potpourri as far as mixing styles. The first half is a little more classical in nature, and the rest is sort of popular stuff."

As an added bonus, local percussionist and University of Nebraska-Lincoln graduate John Scofield will perform on three pieces with the Nebraska Brass. Haist said Scofield was very talented and a welcome addition to the group.

"He really adds a lot to the music we perform with him," Haist said. "He's just a very versatile musician."

All in all, Haist said the program was a good way to kick off their ninth season.

"It's really challenged us musically, but I think it's going to be a really good show."

"Mozart, Gershwin & All that Jazz" starts at 7:30 p.m. on Thursday and is being held at the Westminster Presbyterian Church, 2110 Sheridan Blvd. Tickets are \$5 for students, \$7 for senior citizens and \$10 for adults. For more information, call (402) 477-7899.