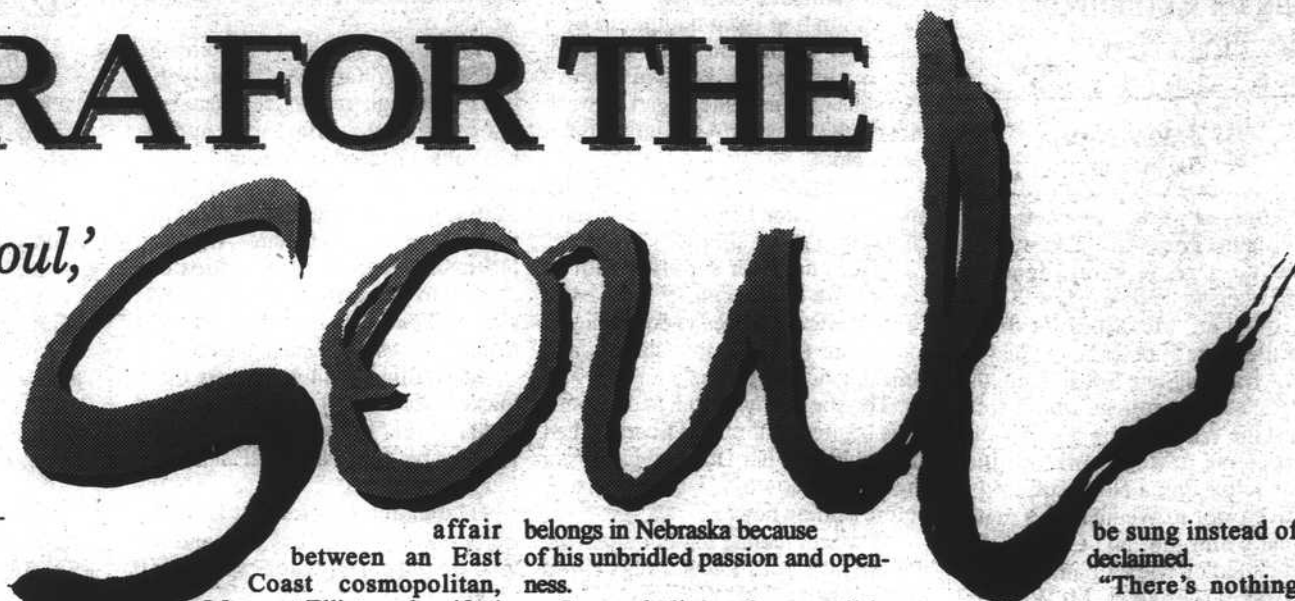


AN OPERA FOR THE

'Eric Hermannson's Soul,' based on Cather story, becomes Nebraska's first original opera



“People are connected to the land they live in. In Nebraska, you feel as if you can step through the sunset into heaven. That connection with the sky defines the people who live here.”

LIBBY LARSEN
“Eric Hermannson's Soul” composer

BY LIZA HOLTMEIER
Staff writer

Opera, an art form born of Florentine poets, now flows from a different fountain of inspiration.

The Great Plains state provides the backdrop for Opera Omaha's new production, “Eric Hermannson's Soul,” based on the Willa Cather story of the same name. Wednesday's premiere marks the first original opera conceived and based in Nebraska.

In an art form dominated by European cultures and languages, a Nebraskan opera transcends the realm of novelty performances to become a pioneering experiment in fine art.

“The doors don't open easily for us to tell our own stories on the operatic stage,” said Libby Larsen, the composer of “Eric Hermannson's Soul.” “We're always telling someone else's story.”

But Opera Omaha's new work trades worn-out European fodder such as “Marriage of Figaro” for the love story of a Norwegian immigrant and a New York aristocrat on the prairie.

The opera's plot centers on Cather's dramatic short story about the love

affair between an East Coast cosmopolitan, Margaret Elliot, and a gifted farmer, Eric Hermannson.

The two meet when Elliot visits her father's ranch in Nebraska as she searches for one final adventure before marrying her wealthy fiance. In Hermannson, she finds a passionate spirit struggling with his religious convictions and need for worldly pleasures. The two help each other discover the importance of being true to one's soul and the need for selfless love.

Like many of Cather's works, “Eric Hermannson's Soul” deals with the interactions between humans and their environment.

Cather, who moved to Nebraska with her family around the age of 10, first compared the state to a bare piece of sheet iron. However, she began to appreciate the openness and sense of infinity she felt on the plains.

Throughout her works, Cather connects vitality to the vastness of the plains and repression to the confines of the city.

In “Eric Hermannson's Soul,” Elliot realizes that Hermannson

belongs in Nebraska because of his unbridled passion and openness.

Larsen believes these qualities apply to Nebraska and its people today. “People are connected to the land they live in. In Nebraska, you feel as if you can step through the sunset into heaven. That connection with the sky defines the people who live here,” Larsen said.

But though Cather's themes still resonate today, taking Cather's words from the page to the stage proved a daunting task.

Hal France, the opera's artistic director and principal conductor, said the task of assimilating Cather's words was compounded by the need to balance the story's intimacy with the magnitude of the landscape: The opera needed to feel grand yet familiar, he explained.

Chas Rader-Shieber, the opera's librettist and stage director, said he worked to write words that, because of their profundity, demanded to be sung but that continued in Cather's simple direct style.

Larsen said Rader-Shieber succeeded, creating verse that is meant to

be sung instead of declaimed.

“There's nothing contrived about this opera,”

Larsen said. “It's as organic as the land is here.”

The opera traces its roots back to a 1994 residency Larsen participated in at the three University of Nebraska campuses. During her 11-day project, the University of Nebraska-Omaha and Opera Omaha proposed the ideas of an opera based on Cather material.

Work on the production officially began in the fall of 1995 when the opera's artistic team held a series of workshops with Cather experts from the community.

Originally conceived as a 45-minute one-act, Opera Omaha decided to expand the opera after its initial workshop showing. Three years later, Opera Omaha prepares to open its 40th season with the world premiere of this American work.

“Eric Hermannson's Soul” runs Wednesday and Friday at 7:30 p.m. and Sunday at 2 p.m. at The Rose Blumkin Performing Arts Center, 2001 Farnam St. in Omaha. All three performances are sold out.

‘Waterboy’ reveals new side of Sandler

BY TODD MUNSON
Staff writer

Movie Review

Dustin Hoffman had “Rain Man,” Tom Hanks had “Forrest Gump,” and now Adam Sandler has “The Waterboy.”

Following the lead of these two Academy Award winners, Sandler comes off the bench in a late-season Oscar push with his gripping portrayal of Bobby Boucher, a deeply tormented man who finds the drive to conquer his mental disability and bring an end to his internal struggles.

In a teleconference last week, Sandler confided to the Daily Nebraskan that “the character of Bobby Boucher is a tribute to every kid who was ever beat up in gym class,” noting the departure from his traditional roles as a “normal” person.

Sandler proves that he is not a one-trick pony with his portrayal as Boucher. His mannerisms and mental fits add depth to his character, especially in the suspenseful moments before a flashback or during a violent rage on the football field. All said and done, Sandler's performance is indicative of someone conquering adversity and winning in the game of life.

Like a fine Persian rug, “The Waterboy” is intricately woven with a plethora of subplots and shocking flashbacks. Not pulling any punches, the film opens with Boucher facing the most difficult period of his life.

As the waterboy for a top college football team, Boucher is set to start another season of lowly servitude and abuse by the players. Just minutes into the first practice of the season, Coach

Red Beaulieu (Jerry Reed of “Smokey and the Bandit” fame) tired of his bumbling ways, gives Boucher the ax.

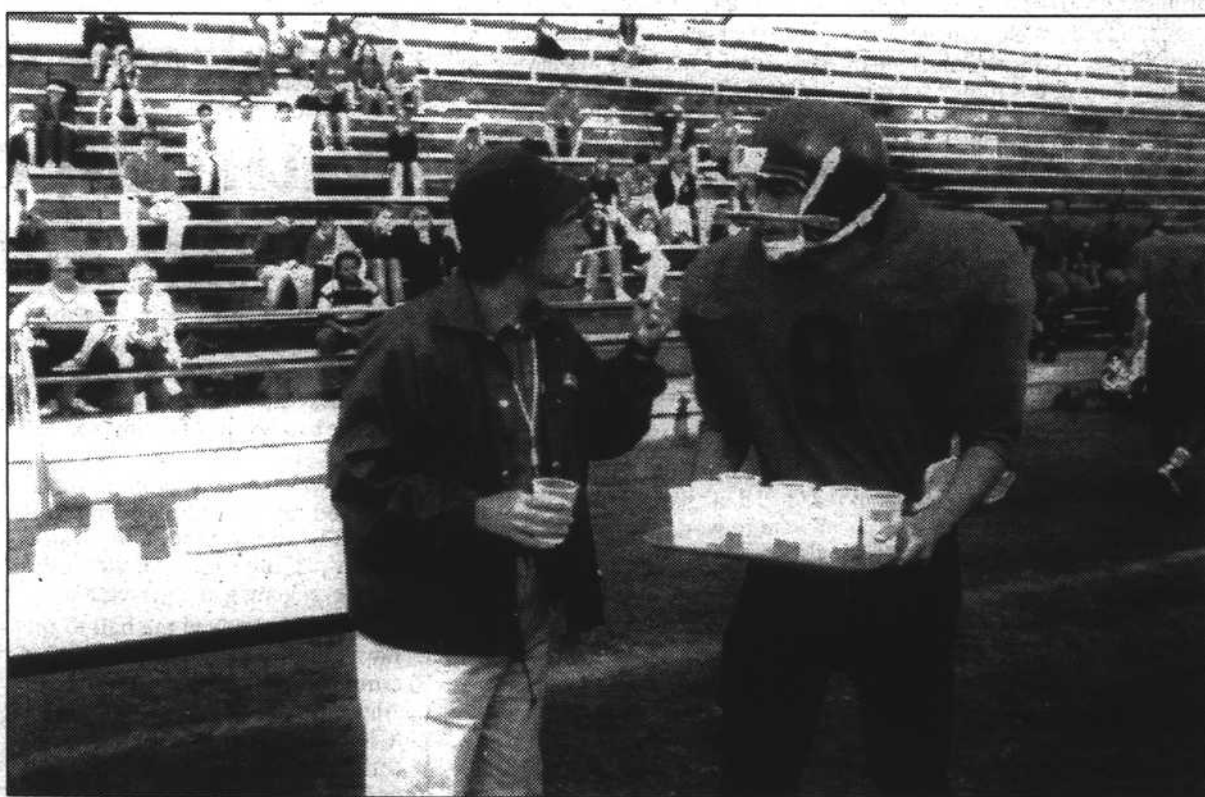
Wrought with disbelief and the feeling of being washed up, Boucher sulks back to his banal existence in a swamp deep in the heart of Louisiana bayou country. In these scenes of his tumultuous home life, viewers understand that being the waterboy provided an escape from the preaching of his overbearing mother (Kathy Bates).

In her portrayal as Mama Boucher, Bates is much the same character that won her an Oscar for “Misery.” Now, instead of wielding a sledge hammer, her weapon is her tongue when she delivers her lines with a surprisingly good dialect and down-home intensity.

However, Boucher proves he is full of intestinal fortitude when he arrives at the door of Coach Klein (Henry “The Fonz” Winkler) and offers his services to the town's other college football team. On the first day, Boucher finds out that although the team is different, the players' torment of him is not. But he's not in anguish for long as Coach Klein encourages Boucher to fight back. Instantly, Bobby is transformed into a relentlessly sadistic tackling machine fueled by the haunting memories of his troubled past.

As Coach Klein, Winkler's portrayal lacks any indication that he was once the Fonz, which is good because it adds more depth to Klein, although much is over the top.

Despite his lengthy screen absence,



SHY, SOCIALLY INEPT Louisiana bayou native Bobby Boucher (Adam Sandler) is a college football team waterboy who, after being fired from the team, is hired by the rival coach (Henry Winkler). There he proves to be a waterboy with a talent for tackling in “The Waterboy.”

Reed, the rival coach, adds a bit of legitimacy to the film as he's the only star actually from the South. In a flashback shared with Winkler, Reed gives his best screen moment since his days as the snowman.

Ultimately, Boucher enrolls in college, painfully learns that mama's home schooling wasn't the best, learns about love and leads his team to a Bourbon Bowl match up against its cross-town rival and his former employer.

Tying this all together is the direction by Frank Coraci, Sandler's old roommate in college. From the beginning he sets the stage on which Sandler shines. The funniest moments of the

film occur during football games when Coraci truly captures the violent emotional release of a pent-up psychopath.

Despite the collective effort, “The Waterboy” may fall a bit short with Sandler's vast college audience. Gone are many of the grotesquely humorous gags of “Billy Madison” and “Happy Gilmore.” Instead, there are many moments which may only seem funny to an 8-year-old, which according to Sandler, is the point.

“It's more of a family picture than the others, but still not the kind my mother would be in line for,” he said from his Manhattan apartment last Tuesday night.

The Facts

Title: “The Waterboy”
Stars: Adam Sandler, Kathy Bates, Henry Winkler, Jerry Reed
Director: Frank Coraci
Rating: PG-13
Grade: B
Five Words: Try not to wet yourself

Even if Mom won't go, you could actually take your little brother to this and both revel in the comic genius that is Adam Sandler.