



GROWING OPERA LOVERS

SCHMIDT OPERA OUTREACH PROGRAM
TAKES THE ART OF MUSICAL STORYTELLING
INTO SCHOOLS

By Robin Roenker / Photos by Jonathan Palmer

University of Kentucky Opera Theatre graduate Taylor Coriell, a Lexington native who now lives and performs in New York City, still gets a little teary eyed talking about her experiences traveling Kentucky as part of the college's Schmidt Opera Outreach Program (SOOP) in fall 2011.

Coriell was cast as Little Red Riding Hood in SOOP's production of *Little Red's Most Unusual Day*. And with the show's small cast, she crisscrossed the state to introduce opera to some of Kentucky's youngest audiences, performing in school gyms and multi-purpose rooms.

"There were teachers who came up to us after our performances to say, 'This is the first live musical performance our students have ever seen. And unless you come back, this will probably be the only one they will ever see,'" Coriell recalled. "I still get emotional thinking about it. It was such a personally moving, life-changing time for me. To be able to perform all across Kentucky, to be able to reach those kids, was such a joy."

In a performance of *Jack and the Beanstalk* at Harrison Elementary School, Phillip Bullock, right, plays Trouble Man, and Markel Reed plays Jack.



SOOP opera outreach coordinator Courtney Turay, right, talks with cast before a performance.

Opera Is Fun!

UK's Opera Outreach Program began in 2003, the brainchild of Everett McCorvey, Ph.D., director of UK Opera Theatre. In 2007, with new sponsorship from the William E. Schmidt Foundation, it was renamed the Schmidt Opera Outreach Program, or SOOP (pronounced "soup") for short.

Using fairy tales and other accessible stories set to famous opera music by the likes of Mozart, Rossini, and others, SOOP brings opera to a new, decidedly younger demographic (typically, it targets K to fifth-grade students) to open their eyes to the magic of the arts.

For McCorvey, the idea was simple: To build an arts fan base, he needed to take a page from the sports play book.

"I spent some time on UK's athletic board, and one of the things I felt we do very well in Kentucky is that we 'grow' our sports fans. Babies leave the hospital in UK basketball jerseys," McCorvey said. "And so I felt this would be a good model

“Thank you for making opera fun. My favorite part of the opera was the costumes because they looked reel. Opera was so fun, I like opera now.”

– Landon E., 1st grade

for the arts, as well. We have to 'grow' our arts lovers and arts participants. I want our kids, from the beginning of their lives, all the way to the end of their lives, to be infused with and engaged in the arts.”

The model seems to be working. Since 2003 SOOP has performed for 290,000 Kentucky children in 270 schools, theaters, and libraries across 77 counties.

Each year SOOP's opera presents not only a familiar tale, but also an import-

ant moral or theme. For *Little Red's Most Unusual Day*, the takeaway was “don't talk to strangers.” Last year's performance of *Jack and the Beanstalk* wove in a message of the Golden Rule, or treating others as you'd want to be treated. An earlier show based on the *Three Billy Goats Gruff* emphasized an anti-bullying message. And, *Get Stuffed* presented a guide for healthy eating.

“It's always such a delight to go out and travel with the shows and watch the kids and their reactions,” said Marc Schlackman, director of the SOOP program. “Their genuine enthusiasm and enjoyment are just marvelous.”

Markel Reed, a UK Opera Theatre graduate from Charlotte, N.C., who played Jack in last year's *Jack and the Beanstalk*, loved the thrill of introducing opera to kids — who for the most part either had never heard of opera or had the stereotypical view that it is stuffy and inaccessible, for adults only.

“We would either tell them before the show, ‘You're going to see an opera.’ And they would have no idea what to expect,” said Reed. “Or sometimes we'd tell them afterward, ‘you've just seen an opera.’ And the kids were like, ‘Oh, that's opera? It's great. It's fun and funny. We love opera!’ ”

Opening a Window to the Arts

When UK's Opera Outreach Program first started, current UK Opera Theatre students were sometimes used as performers, but as the program grew and became more popular, the grueling travel and performance schedule became too great to work around students' class schedules. Now, the program hires only professional performers. Some have come from as far as Mexico and Brazil. But in the past few years SOOP has been



Rebecca Farley entertains students during a performance at Anne Mason Elementary School in Georgetown.

“I thought their performance was a good performance. They did all of the things right, they didn’t mess up not even once and they were good actors and singers. I could tell they were giving it there all and doing there best. I wouldn’t be surprised if we saw them again after that good performance.”

– Brandon W., 6th grade

committed to hiring as many graduates of UK Opera Theatre’s program as possible.

(In the early years of the program, the season averaged just 40-60 shows. But SOOP has steadily grown, and since 2012 the performers have done 100 or more shows a season — sometimes as many as three in one day.)

The shows are meant to be intimate, typically requiring only three or four singers, an accompanist, and a set director/stage designer. Following each show, the performers do a Q&A with the students — and are often impressed by the types of questions they get, Reed said.

“They’ll ask a lot of questions about our

singing. ‘How do you sing so high and so loud?’ — that kind of thing,” said Reed. “But lots of times the Q&A will open up a discussion of all the types of jobs there are in the arts. If you don’t want to be a singer, then you could be someone who writes the script or composes the music or works as the stage director.”

Opening kids’ eyes to all the possibilities in the arts is one of SOOP’s key goals, said Schlackman. “We know it opens doors to them and opens their eyes to what the world, in a small way, might have to offer them,” he said.

Emily Balsam, a teacher at Lexington’s Providence Montessori, says SOOP is always a huge hit with her students when the performers come. “Everyone loves them — the children, the teachers, from toddlers up through our sixth-year students, everyone is just entranced with the program,” Balsam said. “Everything is done so well, from the singing to their rapport with the children. It’s just a magical experience.”

While designed for easy put-together and tear-down in any space available — whether gym, cafeteria, or library — SOOP’s productions are nothing short of professional quality. In many cases they are the same shows done in outreach programs by professional operas such as Virginia Opera or Opera Carolina, said Courtney

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The SOOP van takes performers to schools throughout Kentucky.

Turay, SOOP's opera outreach coordinator.

UK's SOOP is the only opera outreach program Turay is aware of that's run by a university, and it depends on individual donations and performance fees to operate. The cost for one show is \$600, while the fee to book two shows at the same school is \$950. (SOOP prefers that schools break their audience into groups of less than 500 students to keep the intimate feel it's after.)

Often, donors will pay to fund shows in their particular county, or others will send in funds to support a show in a county that has never had a SOOP performance before. Turay works to coordinate the group's bookings across its performance season, which this year runs Sept. 15 through Nov. 26.

"I think all four of you have the best voices I've ever heard in my 10 years of lifetime."

— Chyna S., 5th grade

On tap for this fall is *The Adventures of Alice in Operaland*, based, of course, on *Alice in Wonderland*. But in this tale, instead of meeting the Mad Hatter or the Cheshire Cat, Alice runs into operatic characters such as Carmen from Bizet's famed opera, who teach her different opera terms such as "diction" and "maestro" and how to sing in an operatic style.

Before each show, teachers are provided with an extensive study guide for the performance — with topics like What to Look & Listen



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A rapt audience enjoys *Jack and the Beanstalk*.

For, The 5 Ws of Opera, and Post-Show Activities, including having students write a review of the show for their local newspapers — which helps teachers integrate the performance into their writing and reading curriculum, both before and after the show.

Recently, SOOP has been looking for avenues to branch out beyond its school shows, doing special performances at Lexington's Barnes & Noble, at the UK Medical Center, and even at Lexington's Parks and Recreation's annual Halloween Little Goblins Galore event. SOOP also has established a close partnership with UK's Agriculture Extension Offices in each county, many of which work to schedule shows in their areas.

Last year was Owsley County Elementary School's first time seeing a SOOP performance, but it won't be the last, said Natasha Lucas, county extension agent for family and consumer sciences, who headed the fundraising and grant writing effort to collect the \$950 to

schedule two shows there.

Lucas' office also successfully sought out grant money to buy several different copies of the Jack and the Beanstalk story — appropriate for the various reading levels, ages K-5 — to supply to the elementary school library. And, for added impact, her office creatively tied in an anti-drug and positive nutrition message to the show by handing out packs of "magic" beans to the school kids with cards that read "Fee, Fi, Fo, Fum, Life on Drugs Is no Fun" on one side, and touted the nutritional value of beans in a healthy diet on the other.

"Working with the SOOP program has been so incredibly rewarding for everyone on our staff," said Turay. "Unless you have a program like ours that is willing to

For More Information

To schedule a performance of SOOP's fall 2014 program, *The Adventures of Alice in Operaland*, contact Courtney Turay at uksoop@gmail.com. To sponsor a show, contact Turay or donate through OperaLex (operalex.org), which helps promote UK's Schmidt Opera Outreach Program and its mission.

For more information about The Schmidt Opera Outreach Program, UK Opera Theatre, or UK Opera's additional outreach programs, the Academy for Creative Excellence (ACE) and Broadway Bound, go to www.ukoperatheatre.org.



Markel Reed plays the part of Jack.

out to these smaller communities, the kids there are just not going to get that exposure to the performing arts," she said.

And the feedback from the students themselves makes all the travel and the work worthwhile.

"We get these letters from the kids that are just fantastic. One of my favorites was from a girl who said, 'I have always wanted to sing. And I've always wanted to act, and this fit perfectly,'" Turay said. "It was like this light-bulb moment for her, where she realized, there is an art form that I can participate in, where I can do both." **KM**