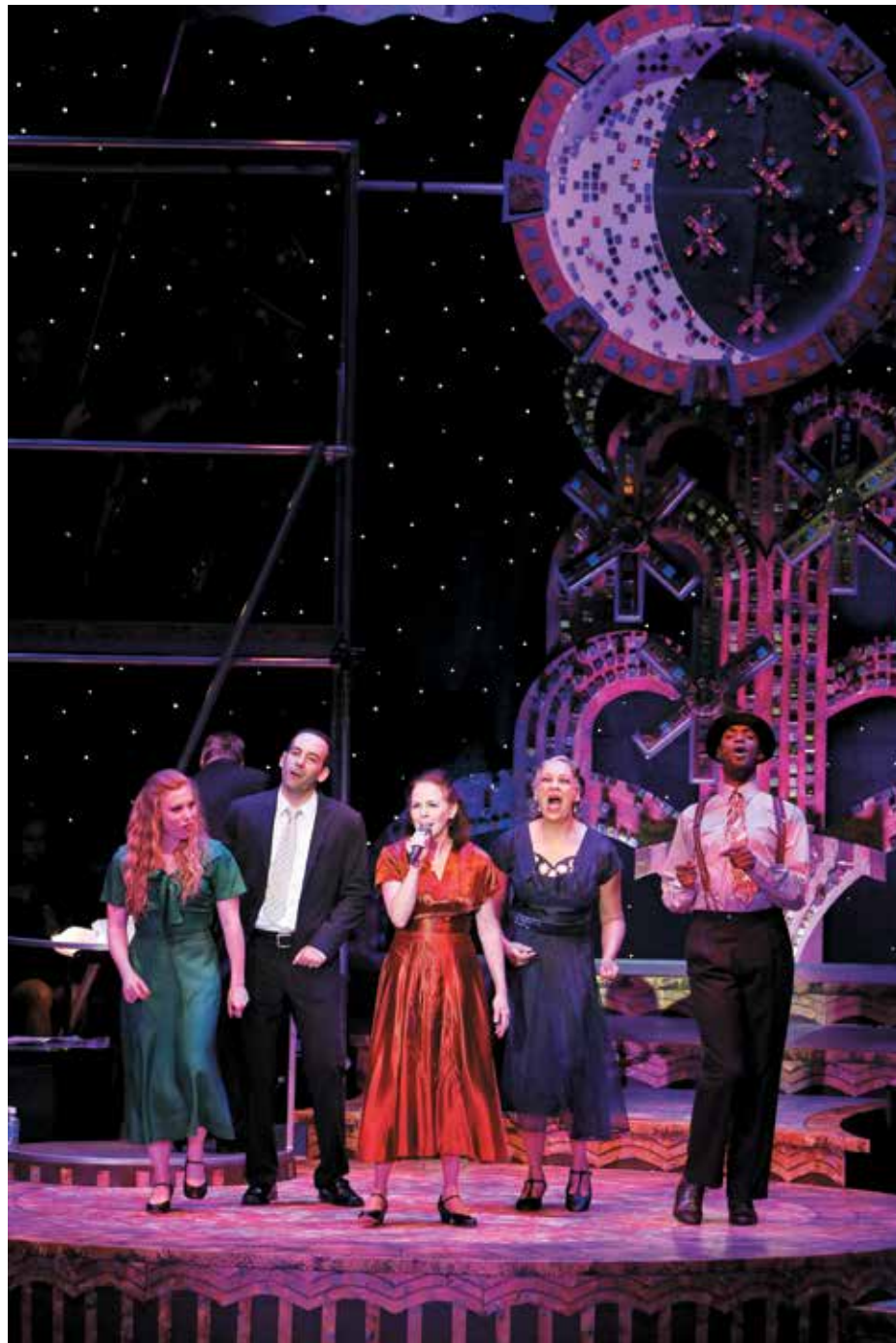




Broadway-caliber production numbers rouse the crowds at every *Grand Night* performance.



In its early years the musical revue *It's a Grand Night for Singing!* was a mostly static choral performance, complete with singers dressed in evening gowns and tuxedos and standing on risers. It took the introduction of the first full-scale production number — the snappy George and Ira Gershwin standard “I Got Rhythm” — to jump-start the show into becoming the dazzling Broadway-style extravaganza it is today.

“Up until then we had only some small-scale dancing, but Broadway musicals have song-and-dance numbers, not choral singing,” said Peggy Stamps, stage director for the

From left, Susanna Lee White, Ryan Traub, Marilyn Robie, Alicia Helm McCorvey, and Ron Wilbur sing “Operator.”

show. “We got the performers down off the risers and into a tap dance rendition of ‘I Got Rhythm’ that gave the audience an exciting visual as well as vocal experience.”

That first full-cast dance number proved to be a turning point.

Now in its 22nd year, *It's a Grand Night for Singing!* delights audiences with its superb singing and brilliant choreography, costumes, sets, and lighting. Drawing mainly from Broadway and Hollywood, *Grand Night* has featured show-stopping numbers from such hits as *The Music Man*, *West Side Story*, *Les Miserables*, and *Singin' in the Rain*, among many others.

Harry Clarke was director of the University of Kentucky School of Music when *Grand Night* was being conceived, and he played an important role in helping get it off the ground. He's attended every performance except for the year he was campaigning for his first term on the Lexington-Fayette Urban County Council.

“The beginning was fantastic, but that 1993 performance was a relatively simple production and pales in comparison with what *Grand Night* has become,” he said. “Every year surpasses the one before, in production, staging, dancing, solo voices, and ensemble singing.”

Produced by the UK College of Fine Arts, UK Opera Theatre, and OperaLex, *Grand Night* is staged in six performances before packed houses over two weekends in June at UK's 1,500-seat Singletary Center for the Arts. It is Lexington's longest-running musical spectacular and has become the signature event kicking off the city's summer music season.

In recent years the cast has numbered more than 70, including a children's chorus of over 20. Conceived as a true town-and-gown event, *Grand Night* continues to rely on

many talented community members in addition to UK students, faculty, and staff. The performers are backed by a full orchestra.

A vision fulfilled

All of this is a long way from the show's relatively modest origins.

Everett McCorvey, executive producer and musical director of *Grand Night* and director and executive producer of the UK Opera Theatre program, said he thinks the show has more than fulfilled its original vision. The idea was to provide UK opera students with a different performance opportunity while offering Lexington

audiences a unique event on the musical calendar and the chance to take part in the show.

McCorvey arrived at UK in 1991 as a classically trained tenor opera singer with a wealth of performance experience that also included musical theater, movies, voice instruction, studio work, and even commercials when he lived in New York City. He has performed with the Metropolitan Opera, at the Kennedy Center, Radio City Music Hall, and Italy's Teatro Comunale, among other prestigious venues.

“I thought of myself not exclusively as an opera singer but as a



Everett McCorvey rehearses with *Grand Night*'s children's cast.

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summer spectacular



performing artist,” he said. “I used all of the skills I had in order to make a living.”

When McCorvey sat down with Clarke and former director of the UK theatre department Jim Rodgers to create *It's a Grand Night for Singing!*, he had those real-world career factors in mind. He knew many students focused on an opera career, but he also wanted them to think of alternatives to make them more marketable in a very competitive music business.

“When our students graduate, I want them to understand that it's a big world out there with lots of opportunities where their operatic training and voice can also serve them in other capacities that would allow them to make a living in music,” he said.

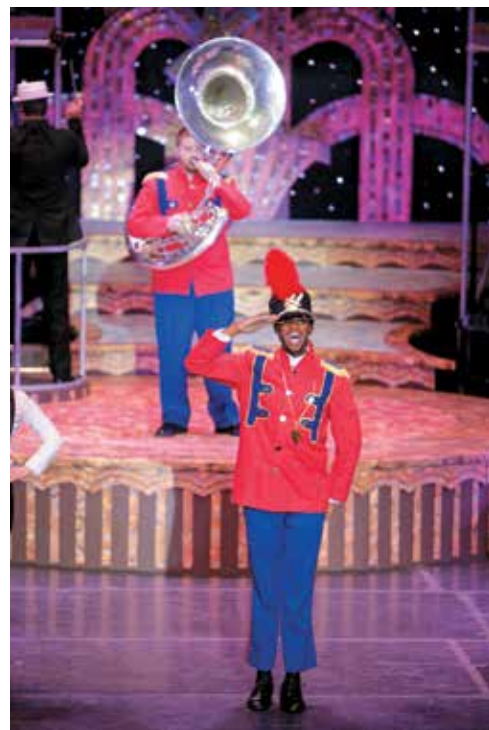
To that end, *Grand Night* features an engaging variety of songs drawn mainly from



Broadway musicals but also from movies and popular music. The 2014 show, for example, included “Tradition” and “Matchmaker” from *Fiddler on the Roof*, “Do You Want to Build a Snowman?” and “Let it Go” from the Disney animated film *Frozen*, and popular songs such as Smokey Robinson's gospel-flavored rock hit “Operator.”

“There's literally something for everybody,” McCorvey said. “We think of it as from ‘Billboard to Broadway.’”

Each year's program is built from the ground up and is based on what the creative team is hearing and seeing in auditions. A certain voice may lead to the selection of a particular song while dancing ability can stimulate



Clockwise from top left, the entire company performs “Tradition” from *Fiddler on the Roof*; Ron Wilbur conducts the opening brass from “Come Follow the Band”; young cast members show their talent.

choreography decisions.

“In the early years each program had a theme, such as Lerner and Loewe or Rodgers and Hammerstein,” said Joan Rue, program coordinator for UK Opera Theatre. “Those were wonderful shows, but there was a certain limiting quality in that approach. Now we're open to a great variety of material, from Broadway to Hollywood, from pop/rock to country.”

The experiences gleaned from this potpourri of singing and dancing numbers can help the students in their operatic performances, McCorvey said.

“When students sing in *Grand Night* and come back that fall for our opera season, they are

summer spectacular



Tedrin Blair Lindsay's solo arrangement at the start of the second act is always a crowd-pleaser.

better performers," McCorvey said. "In *Grand Night*, you have to learn how to sell a song, often even while dancing. When you bring some of those qualities back to your opera performance, it can take you to a higher level."

The orchestra for *Grand Night* has grown over the years and works hand-in-glove with the vocal directors and choreographers to provide the same kind of live performance ambience found in Broadway shows. It is a "full" orchestra in the sense that every instrumental family — strings, woodwinds, brass, and percussion — is represented. There were 26 instruments in the 2014 show.

Tedrin Blair Lindsay, arranger and associate musical director for *Grand Night* and vocal coach and musical director of UK Opera Theatre, is one of two pianists in the orchestra. He has become a crowd favorite over the 15 years he's been part of the event because of the special place he occupies in the show. In addition to his playing throughout the evening, he has a solo at the beginning of the second act that is intended to get the audience revved up for the rest of the show.

"I almost always make the ending of my solo big and bombastic, not soft and pretty," he said. "It needs to be a leap into the energy for the opening

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GRAND NIGHT VETERANS OFTEN LAND OTHER ROLES

Over the years a number of former *It's a Grand Night for Singing!* performers have gone on to land impressive roles in other productions, from regional opera and theater all the way to Broadway.

The variety of experiences offered by *Grand Night* is excellent preparation for young singers and dancers. Solo vocal parts include popular styles as well as musical theater selections that, in some cases, come very close to true operatic singing. Dancers may be asked to front an ensemble or take part in large, highly disciplined group numbers.

The most recent example of making it on the national stage is Brooklyn Shuck, who currently performs the lead role of Matilda in the Broadway production of *Matilda The Musical*, playing

at the Shubert Theater. Her favorite role in *Grand Night* came in 2012 when she sang a solo in "Castle on a Cloud" from *Les Miserables*. She also participated in UK's Academy for Creative Excellence.

Even at the tender age of 11, Shuck can look back on her *Grand Night* experiences and realize how valuable they were to her budding career.

"I saw how hard you had to work to get ready for a big show," she said. "I learned about stage management and how

a company works together to make a great performance. Appearing in *Grand Night* made me realize that I wanted to do this for the rest of my life."



TIMOTHY COLLINS

Grand Night served as a springboard for Brooklyn Shuck, center.



Gregory Turay, left, a former Metropolitan Opera star and UKOT graduate, and Everett McCorvey give it their all in one of the show's final numbers.

vocal number of the second half. It's my job to make the audience come alive for the beginning of act two."

Lindsay draws heavily on pop and rock numbers for his solo. In 2014 Lindsay did a medley tribute to the late pop star Whitney Houston. One year he did a tribute to Wayne Newton in the style of Liberace, complete with sparkling costume, and another year it was "Come Sail Away" by Styx.

The opportunity to perform

UK students, child performers, and community members all appreciate the opportunity *Grand Night* offers them to perform on a big stage and hone their singing and dancing skills.

Ashley Jackson, a UK graduate and UK master of music student, with both degrees in vocal performance, has appeared in *Grand Night* for six years. In 2014 her songs included "Will I Ever Tell You?" as Lida Rose from *The Music Man* and "Love Never Dies" from the musical of the same name.

"*Grand Night* is all about creating a very inviting atmosphere for the audience," Jackson said. "We try to bring that same quality into our operas at UK as well. It's something I want to achieve in all aspects of my performance, whether it's opera or musical theater."

Jamie Bradley, 14, is already a veteran of five *Grand Night* shows. In 2014 she sang a solo from *Frozen* and an ensemble piece from *Matilda The Musical*.

Although she aspires to be an opera singer, she, echoing McCorvey's philosophy, is not hung up on the technical distinctions between true operatic singing and the somewhat less exacting style of musical theater. She is preparing herself for all possibilities, having performed in musical theater in Cincinnati, opera with both the UK and the Kentucky opera theatre programs, and even some country music in Nashville.

"It's all music," she said. "And you're always singing for the same reasons

summer spectacular



Stage director Peggy Stamps helped transition the show to a Broadway-style extravaganza.

— you're telling a story and portraying an emotion."

Besides students, community members have always been an important part of *Grand Night*. Sandra Chambers-Reed, a former Lexington hospital administrator and now a consultant, has performed in the show since 2006 when she had a solo part in the Donna Summers disco number "Last Dance." Last year she was an ensemble singer in "How Do You Solve a Problem Like Maria?" from *The Sound of Music*.

"I love music, and *Grand Night* is such a great opportunity," she said. "Performing with the UK students and the children brings such life to the production. When the community members and students are together, we learn from one another."

Appreciative audiences

The 22 years of hard work that have gone into making *Grand Night* a stel-



Alicia Helm McCorvey is a *Grand Night* mainstay.



Production stage manager Marc Schlackman works with young cast members.

lar attraction have engendered a loyal and appreciative audience. Many have attended for years, some for every performance in *Grand Night*'s history.

A patron from the very first performance in 1993 until today, Carolyn Williams Wiggins of Winchester would not dream of missing a *Grand Night*. She even loves to be right up front.

"Fortunately, the last two or three years I've gotten to sit in the first or second row," she said.

"Some people wouldn't like that, but I love all the action. Being that close to the performers makes it very dramatic."

And that's a very welcome testimonial for McCorvey, who says people such as Wiggins are always uppermost in mind when each year's show is being created.

"The audience has a seat at the table when our creative team is selecting the numbers for our program," he said. "I think the arts have to be a participatory experience. It's important to me that everything we do is for our community, for the people. I want them to feel a sense of ownership with *Grand Night*."

And his favorite thing about *Grand Night* is based on that community perspective. "What I enjoy most about *Grand Night* every year is that over 6,000 people—cast, crew, staff and audience members — participate in the experience. That is extremely satisfying." **KM**

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