



INTRODUCING
BAY AREA NEWS APPS
Download Bay Area News
for your iPad and iPhone

WWW.MERCURYNEWS.COM/LIFESTYLE » READ YOUR FAVORITE COLUMNS AND FIND LIFESTYLE TIPS

111 SECTION D



PATRICK TEHAN/STAFF

Soprano Rebecca Davis belts out a song during rehearsal of Opera San Jose's production of Mozart's "Idomeneo," which opens the new season Saturday.

Country music shaped soprano

Rebecca Davis enjoys smooth transition to opera; 'I love the stories'

By Richard Scheinin
rscheinin@mercurynews.com

During her college days, Rebecca Davis imagined she would be a country singer — especially after spending six months on the road with her aunt, Grammy-winning country performer Suzy Bogguss, singing backup on tunes like "Drive South."

Davis remembers part of the chorus: *We can go south with a smile on, Ain't going to pack my nylons! Just leave these legs showin', It gets hot down where we're goin'.*

The soprano's impromptu performance, during an interview at the offices of Opera San Jose, doesn't exactly conform to stereotypes of opera singers. But Davis, getting ready for a leading role in the company's opening-night cast of Mozart's "Idomeneo" at the California Theatre, could not care less.

She doesn't even see that much of a leap from country to opera: "I liked singing country songs, because of the stories they tell. And I think that's why I transitioned so well to opera. Because I love the stories."

Among the finest singers to pass through the company during the past decade, Davis, 35, has built a devoted fan base with her innate stage presence and gleaming voice. Super-refined, it registers as entirely natural. Audiences and critics also have been impressed at San Francisco Opera's prestigious Merola program, in whose productions she sang a year ago, and at Festival Opera in Walnut Creek, where she starred over the summer

See **DAVIS**, Page 4

OPERA SAN JOSE

Presenting Mozart's "Idomeneo," conducted by George Cleve, directed by Brad Dalton and choreographed by Dennis Nahat, with two casts in rotation

When: Saturday through Sept. 29

Where: California Theatre, 345 S. First St., San Jose

Tickets: \$51-\$101, 408-437-4450, www.operasj.org

RITA MORENO AS HERSELF



ARIC CRABB/STAFF

'THIS IS WHAT I LOVE TO DO. I WAS MADE FOR IT. THAT'S HOW I AM WIRED.'

NOW: Rita Moreno has found an onstage home at Berkeley Repertory Theatre.

Feisty and still fabulous as she nears 80, stage legend explores her life and loves in new show at Berkeley Rep

By Karen D'Souza
kdsouza@mercurynews.com

Rita Moreno first twirled into the limelight when she was 5. Now approaching 80, the legendary diva is still kicking up her heels.

At an age when many are content to rest on their laurels, Moreno's career still has great legs. On her days off from playing Fran Drescher's feisty mother on TV Land's "Happily Divorced," the showbiz icon is getting ready to strut her stuff in the world premiere of "Life Without Makeup," her highly anticipated memoir of her life and loves at Berkeley Repertory Theatre. She thrives on being as industrious today as when she started out.

"I do get paid for it so it must be work," says the actress, her trademark husky voice coming across the phone from Los Angeles, where she is busy taping the sitcom. "But this is what I love to do. I was made for it. That's how I am wired."

Her long and storied career is filled with landmark projects that cut across genre lines. She was part of the beloved children's TV show "The Electric Company," and she left an indelible mark on movie musical history as Anita, the skirt-swirling firecracker in "West Side Story."

Moreno marries a petite dancer's frame with a super-sized regal bearing, and her ineffable star quality is particularly formidable onstage. Often, in recent years, she has made Berkeley Rep her theatrical home, winning raves as Maria Callas in "Master Class" and Amanda Wingfield in

See **MORENO**, Page 4



ASSOCIATED PRESS ARCHIVES

SHOWBIZ PAST: Rita Moreno plays Anita in a scene from "West Side Story" in 1961. Moreno won an Oscar for her performance.

'RITA MORENO: LIFE WITHOUT MAKEUP'

Through: Oct. 30

Where: Berkeley Repertory Theatre, 2025 Addison St., Berkeley

Tickets: \$14.50-\$73 (subject to change); 510-647-2949, www.berkeleyrep.org



JOHN GREEN/STAFF

Thomas Hampson, center, stars as Rick Rescorla, a decorated Vietnam vet who saved thousands, in "Heart of a Soldier."

SAN FRANCISCO OPERA

World premiere of "Heart of a Soldier" by Christopher Theofanidis and Donna Di Novelli, starring baritone Thomas Hampson

When: 8 p.m. Saturday, Sept. 27 and 30; 7:30 p.m. Sept. 13 and 21; 2 p.m. Sept. 18 and 24

Where: War Memorial Opera House, 301 Van Ness, San Francisco

Running time: 2 hours, 10 minutes

Tickets: \$21-\$389, 415-864-3330, www.sfoopera.com

Online: See a slideshow at www.mercurynews.com

9/11 opera tells the story of a Twin Towers hero

S.F. Opera's world premiere of 'Heart of a Soldier' to mark anniversary of attack

By Andrew Gilbert
Correspondent

Contemporary American opera often seems more comfortable exploring moral ambiguity than bravery and the nature of heroism: Witness Berkeley composer John Adams's "Nixon in China" and "Dr. Atomic."

But in Rick Rescorla, San Francisco Opera has found a figure who embodies classical virtues that have fallen out of fashion in popular culture since the war in Vietnam, where Rescorla served with

distinction. Decades later, as chief of security for Morgan Stanley and Dean Witter, he defied instructions to stay put, and led thousands of employees out of the World Trade Center on Sept. 11, 2001, only to perish in the South Tower while seeking to evacuate more people.

On Saturday, San Francisco Opera presents the world premiere of its latest commissioned work, "Heart of a Soldier," timed to commemorate the anniversary of the terrorist attacks. Featuring baritone Thomas Hampson as Rescorla, tenor William Burden as his friend and fellow veteran Daniel J. Hill and soprano Melody Moore as Rescorla's widow, Susan, the production is based on the 2002 best-

Inside

Rundowns on 9/11-related television specials and entertainment events. **Page 6**

seller "Heart of a Soldier: a Story of Love, Heroism, and September 11th," by Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist James B. Stewart and on interviews with Susan Rescorla and Hill.

For composer Christopher Theofanidis, who wrote "Heart of a Soldier" with librettist Donna Di Novelli, the project was an opportunity to explore the life of a person whose extraordinary character and

See **HEART**, Page 4

Davis

Continued from Page 1

in Verdi's "La Traviata."

A resident singer with Opera San Jose in 2008-09 and a guest artist each season since, she has dramatic range. Examples include her heart-breaking performances as the tragic Magda in Puccini's "La Rondine" and her comically charmed ones as flirty Fiordiligi in Mozart's "Così fan tutte."

"I'm a big fan," says stage director Jose Maria Condem, who directed Davis in "La Rondine" and took her to Opera Santa Barbara, where he is artistic director, to sing the role of Violetta in Verdi's "La Traviata."

"She's a very accomplished technician; her craft is incredible," says Condem, who should know, having directed such luminary sopranos as Patricia Racette at San Francisco Opera and Deborah Voigt at Lyric Opera of Chicago. He describes Davis' voice as "very shimmering, beautiful. But what you cannot teach is sensibility — or vulnerability, and she puts that in her singing very clearly. That's why things like 'La bohème' or 'Traviata' — they just fit her like a perfect glove."

Bogguss puts it like this:

"Becky's voice is so true, so straight in the middle of the pitch. And because she hits it so clearly, it goes to the bone."

Always singing, Davis moved around as a child. Her father, Tony Davis, sold Caterpillar trucks overseas, so the family moved to the Ivory Coast, then to Paris. When Becky was 7, the family moved to Naperville, Ill., outside Chicago, where she remembers cornfields and hot air balloons — and many hours spent at the family's Methodist church, which "had about nine choirs."

She and younger sisters Kim and Tori sang in church. At home, there were musical role models: mother Sally, Aunt Suzy Bogguss and maternal grandmother B.J. Bogguss would sing "Side By Side" in three-part harmony during holiday get-togethers. Often the girls joined in, with "great intonation," says Suzy Bogguss, who treasures an old cassette tape of the children singing "Silent Night."

Basically, only the women sang: "My dad is tone deaf," Davis explains, with a shrug. But the dutiful daughter credits her love of history — and the stories behind so many operas — to her father, a history major in college. That has paid dividends: Lately, Davis has explored books and films



PATRICK TEHAN/STAFF

Rebecca Davis rehearses for Opera San Jose's upcoming production of Mozart's "Idomeneo."

about the Trojan War, the setting for "Idomeneo," in which Davis sings the role of Ilia, the captured and love-struck Trojan princess.

In high school, Becky sang in musicals. She also learned about madrigals and jazz, even becoming an all-state jazz vocalist. Enrolling at Illinois Wesleyan University in Bloomington in 1993, she thought about a career singing jazz — until the school killed its vocal jazz program during her freshman year. A year later, she took off a semester and hit the road with Bogguss, nannying Suzy's infant son, Ben, during off-hours, and singing four-part harmony onstage with

her aunt and the guys in the band.

"Huge crowds," Davis remembers. "We were traveling with Clint Black, Dwight Yoakam, Garth Brooks. Faith Hill was opening for my aunt, so I got to meet her. And when I got back from that tour, I was going to graduate from college, and I was going to go into country music."

At school, she lived in a sorority house, partying to Snoop Dogg and Dr. Dre. In class, she found a voice instructor named Jody Kienzler, who changed her life. Davis, who had been writing pop tunes, sang one for her teacher.

It was titled "In This

House," a song "with kind of a haunting story," Davis recounts. "And Jody said, 'Oh my goodness, you really like this kind of melancholy. Let's give you some Schubert ... and let's give you some arias.'"

Davis began eating up operatic showpieces. She favored mezzo-soprano parts — lower in range than a soprano's — but Kienzler carefully "stretched my voice in both directions," she says. In 1997 at a regional competition sponsored by the Metropolitan Opera, judges told Davis, "We really think your voice is starting to bloom at the top."

Her trajectory toward soprano roles was set. In 2000, Davis received her master's degree in vocal performance from Northwestern University. In 2001, she won the Grand Prize of the Chicago Bel Canto competition. That took her to Italy for two months of study with Carlo Bergonzi, the great lyric tenor, famous for his Verdi roles. Singing Verdi for Bergonzi, she would "feel the presence" of her paternal grandmother, Josephine Spósito Davis, who was Sicilian in background and loved Mario Lanza.

Finally, in 2007, Davis got the call from Opera San Jose, whose scouts had heard her in the regional competitive clearinghouse known as the Western Auditions. And since that

time, she says triumphantly, "I have considered myself a working opera singer."

Last summer at Merola, Davis didn't make the cut to move onto the more rarefied Adler Fellowship Program, whose members perform main-stage roles with San Francisco Opera. But Davis has her supporters, including Merola and Adler vocal coach Sheri Greenawald, and figures she still is "on San Francisco Opera's radar."

She has serious ambitions, for sure. Yet one senses that career isn't everything to Davis, who talks a lot about her husband Jeff Wendorf, a mechanic in Illinois, who not only supports her career path but also has grown to enjoy opera. She also talks about her sister Tori, who has suffered from schizophrenia since her early 20s. As a result, Davis and Bogguss together stage annual benefit concerts for the National Alliance on Mental Illness in DuPage (Ill.) County.

Davis talks with exuberance about the joy of singing onstage, wherever that might happen: "It's when I feel in the zone of life," she says. "It's when I feel the freest. When you find that moment when everything is peaceful and free, you have to find a way to stay there." She is there.

Moreno

Continued from Page 1

"The Glass Menagerie."

"One of the things I like so much about her is that she has resolutely refused to allow herself to be pigeonholed as a performer," says Greg MacKellan, artistic director of San Francisco's 42nd Street Moon troupe. "The breadth and depth of her career has kept her a star for so long."

As one reviewer famously put it, "She's done everything every other actress ever dreamed of, sometimes twice, and almost always better." No matter what she's doing, collaborators say she attacks the project like a trooper.

"She's generous and very, very funny and interesting and a bit fragile and democratic," says director Les Waters ("The Glass Menagerie"). "Is she a diva? Hell, no. She's a worker. She works harder than anyone I've ever met."

The fire in her eyes certainly seems undiminished over time. That spark makes her stand out even among the elite ranks of artists who have won an Oscar ("West Side Story"), two Emmys ("The Rockford Files" and "The Muppet Show"), a Tony ("The Ritz") and a Grammy ("Electric Company"). For the record, she was the first actress to ever pull it off.

"Hell's bells, isn't that fabulous?" she purrs. "I love that!"

Show business certainly has changed since she started out. Born in 1931 in Humacao, Puerto Rico, the daughter of a seamstress and a farmer, Moreno was far from a sure shot to become a Hollywood legend. She moved to New York at age 5 and broke into the biz performing on the bat

mitzvah circuit. She landed her first Broadway role at 13, catching the eye of Hollywood scouts. Movie mogul Louis B. Mayer signed her at MGM, where she got a lot of work playing "native girls," a period in her life she refers to as "the struggle."

She is happy to note that Latinos have made a lot of progress in Hollywood, if not as much as she would like. "The door is now ajar if not all the way open," she says. "We still don't get the really good parts, the roles that would bring on Oscar interest. We just don't."

Back in the day, she landed small parts in classic films such as "Singin' in the Rain" and "The King and I." And then, in 1961, came "West Side Story."

Despite all her accolades, she admits being nervous about baring her soul onstage. The first half-dozen times Berkeley Rep artistic director Tony Taccone pitched the project to her, she rejected it flat out.

"Ew! The idea of going through my life, the sad things, the bad stuff, I hated it. It absolutely terrified me," she recalls. "But then two years ago, he came back and said, 'You know dearie, now is the time.' And he was right."

As it happens, the timing has turned out to be perfect. Moreno still misses her late husband and manager Leonard Gordon, who died last year at age 90 — they had been married since 1965 — but she is also recovering from the loss and getting a new lease on life. And now she doesn't have to fret about how he might react to the tell-all tidbits in her show.

"There are things I wanted to share that I worried about," she says candidly. "Now that Lenny is gone, it's OK. It's a wonderful kind of freedom."



ARIC CRABB/STAFF

Rita Moreno says she's now ready to talk about her life in her memoir production, "Life Without Makeup."

She is also bouncing back from having her knee replaced. She freely admits that she is no spring chicken, but she gets quite annoyed at being typecast because of her age.

"I'm in a great place now. I'm so grateful," she says, before admitting, "I'm not dancing like I used to. The knee doesn't want to bend and the balance isn't great and at first I was worried about what the critics would say, but you know what? (Expletive) 'em!"

Indeed, the real star of the show, which she hopes

to take to New York at some point, is her mystique — not her gams.

"She has talent and mystery," Waters says. "There's some intangible part of her that is held back — that she won't let you see — and that, to me, is the thing that makes her a star."

Dishing on the treasure trove of Hollywood trivia that is her life — she once dated Elvis to make Brando jealous and it worked — is the spice of "Life Without Makeup," which Moreno and Taccone are crafting together.



Rita Moreno with her husband, Leonard Gordon, at their Berkeley home in 1999. Gordon died last year.

RAY CHAVEZ/STAFF ARCHIVES

The spine of the play, however, is highly personal. One of the hardest parts to relive concerns her thorny relationship with her mother, who had Moreno when she was just 17.

"She had a lot of strength, the strength you see in me I got from her," she says, sighing heavily. "She succeeded in a lot of ways but she also failed me in a lot of ways."

Still, Moreno is quick to point out that this is no gossip free-for-all. "Some ladies get to my age and they let it all hang out. That's not me. I won't name names just to hurt people. I don't want to use others to get attention. That's not what my life is about."

She makes an exception when it comes to her explosive romance with Marlon Brando. There she reveals quite a bit in the name of love.

"He shaped me in so many ways," she says. "He shaped my life. He shaped my work. In many ways, he was the love of my life. And the way it ended? I took too many sleeping pills."

Ever the temptress, she waits a beat before adding: "If you want to hear the rest of the story, you've got to come see the show, honey!"

Contact Karen D'Souza at 408-271-3772. Check out her theater reviews at www.mercurynews.com/karensouza.

Heart

Continued from Page 1

vision prepared him for events that were unimaginable to his security colleagues.

"People are so jaded by the media telling them what a hero is," says Theofanidis, 43, during a break in a recent rehearsal. "The term is so abused. Rick Rescorla would be the first person to say that he wasn't. He was doing the best that he could in that idealistic, particular soldier way. When it comes right down to it, it's doing the right thing in the most clench of moments."

Rescorla's life was shaped by war from his infancy. Born in Cornwall, England, he befriended and idolized American soldiers stationed near his home during World War II, many of whom perished on D-Day. He first enlisted with the British Army, training as a paratrooper, and eventually made his way to New York City, where he enlisted in the U.S. Army in 1963.

As a platoon leader in the airmobile 7th Cavalry Regiment, he was in the thick of the action in the 1965 battle of Ia Drang (he is pictured on the cover of the book "We



JOHN GREEN/STAFF

Composer Christopher Theofanidis, left, and baritone Thomas Hampson go over the score before a rehearsal of the new opera "Heart of a Soldier."

Were Soldiers Once ... And Young"). Affectionately nicknamed "Hard Core" by his men, he earned a Silver Star, the Bronze Star with oak leaf cluster, a Purple Heart and the Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry.

The opera doesn't dwell on his military exploits, but does include a Vietnam battle sequence that evokes the confusion, chaos and gut-churn-

ing terror of war as well as Rescorla's self-possession under fire.

"As a military man, courage is founded in that ability to negate the sense of self-preservation," says Hampson, 56, a versatile baritone who has long championed new music and American art songs. "This was something that Rick did often in his life, without hubris or fatalism.

That, for me, defines him as extraordinary."

One thing the opera doesn't explore is Rescorla's Cassandra-like foresight. In 1992, he called attention to the World Trade Center's vulnerability to a truck bomb aimed at the basement parking garage, a warning ignored by the Port Authority. In the

See HEART, Page 5

Celebrations
To place your Celebrations notice call 408.271.3608
or email: celebrations@mercurynews.com

Anniversaries



Ray and Marilyn Olufson
Happy 60th Anniversary Mom and Dad!

Your love and dedication to each other and to our entire family have been and will continue to be a wonderful example for all who know you.

We are so thankful for you and we love you very much.



Charley and Barbara Brown
Will be celebrating their 60th wedding anniversary.

They were married on September 6, 1951 at First Baptist Church in Huntingdon, PA. They moved to Sunnyvale in 1961 when Charley, a United Airlines mechanic was transferred to SFO from the east coast. Barbara is a potter who teaches at local art centers. For over 20 years, Charley and Barbara vacationed in the Yucatan in Mexico and celebrated their 50th anniversary there. They will celebrate their 60th anniversary Monday, September 5th at Pedro's Mexican Restaurant in Santa Clara, with their children, three grandchildren, and other family members.

Happy Anniversary, Mom & Dad!
We Love you!

