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Opera San Jose dives into Georges Bizet's "The Pearl Fishers"

by jacque.orvis

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Melody King performing during Bizet's "The Pearl Fishers" Opera panel in the King Library on August 27th. Jessica Olthof / Spartan Daily

Opera San Jose gave a preview performance of the upcoming French opera "The Pearl Fishers" in the Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Library Tuesday afternoon, giving a behind-the-scenes look what it takes to create a show.

Three cast members – Melody King as Leila, James Callon as Nadir and Zachary Altman as Zurga — also attended the preview, each singing arias — or melodies meant as mini intermissions between intense scenes — from the opera.

Altman led the panel with a preview performance from the third act in which his character, Zurga, expresses the conflict between his desire for Leila and his devotion to Nadir.

French composer Georges Bizet's "The Pearl Fishers" is a love story about two fishermen, Nadir and Zurga, torn apart by their desire for a mysterious priestess, Leila, according to Larry Hancock, Opera San Jose's director of production.

In the story set on the island of Ceylon (modern-day Sri Lanka), "The Pearl Fishers" is a "mesmerizing tale of love and sacrifice," as described in the San Jose Opera annual program.

Hancock added that, while the opera is not as famous as Bizet's "Carmen," a "logical progression" of the seduction of a soldier by the gypsy Carmen, "The Pearl Fishers" is a fairytale of sorts, a tale of a magical priestess who provides protection for the fishermen.

Set to premiere in September, it took the Opera San Jose crew a few months to brainstorm, design and erect the set for the performance, scene designer Charlie Smith said.

“We wanted an open, airy feel... a sense of grand environment,” he said about the set inspired by ancient architecture and temples.

Inspired by a “battle between man and his own nature,” Smith and the set design crew spent two to three months on the set, spending weeks on just creating the vines that blanket the faux stone steps and walls onstage, for example.

He said the creative process involved researching ancient civilizations, drafting technical drawings of individual elements and building a full-color model to pitch the design details before beginning construction of the set.

“They look like they’ve been sitting on stage for 2,000 years,” Smith said about the stone steps alongside the stage.

Smith also said that the set design process became much easier once the design started taking direction.

Even though they are done building the set, there is still a lot of work to be done fitting costumes, adjusting lighting and painting the set before opening night, he said.

The process of creating and coaching the performers on their French is a dedicated role, as well, said language coach Lea Frey.

“Most didn’t need coaching,” she said, remarking that the performers are experts in the French language.

Nonetheless, Frey said she took meticulous notes on diction during rehearsals and kept track of errors made by each performer to make sure that all vowels were perfectly enunciated and errors didn’t become habits on performing night.

Bizet’s "The Pearl Fishers" is set to premiere at the California Theatre on Saturday, September 8 at 8 p.m. after the season opening gala dinner at 5 p.m.

For more information and ticket sales, visit www.operasj.org.

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