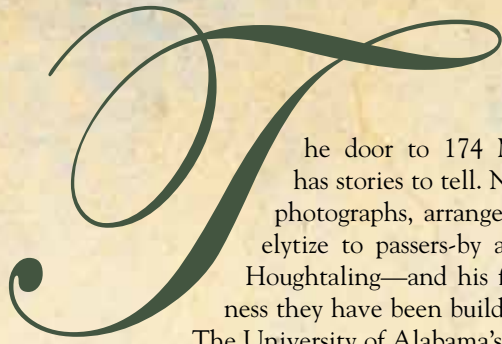




FINDING A *Voice*

NOW IN ITS SEVENTH YEAR, UA'S OPERA THEATRE PROGRAM HAS PROVEN ITS MERIT IN THE ARTS COMMUNITY BOTH STATEWIDE AND NATIONWIDE, AND IS PREPARING TO TAKE CENTER STAGE IN A NEW HOME.

by Haley Grogan



The door to 174 Moody Music Building has stories to tell. Newspaper clippings and photographs, arranged in grid fashion, proselytize to passers-by about a man—Dr. Paul Houghtaling—and his followers, and the business they have been building for nearly a decade: The University of Alabama’s opera theatre program. And it is a business, according to Houghtaling (or as his students call him, Pro-Hough, a shortened version of Professor Houghtaling), director of the program and associate professor of voice in the School of Music, behind whose door the opera program found a home after his arrival on campus seven years ago. “I run it like a company,” he said in a no-nonsense tone. “In Italian, ‘opera’ means ‘the work.’ You’re held accountable if you’re late—there is no lateness in my world. I teach structure, discipline and hard work, and the results are performances from which the students learn about themselves and learn their limits, and learn to reach for the artistic skies.”

The UA opera theatre program, because it is smaller than others in the Southeast with only around 45 students, is able to offer individual attention and personalized career guidance to those who participate. The students take classes on auditioning, improvisation, dance, stage combat, stage makeup and music business (résumés, headshots, websites, promotions and marketing).

Directing experience is offered for graduate students and upperclassmen. UAOT puts on scenes, one-acts and full productions. It is those varied types of classes and experiences with performing, Houghtaling said, that make his program so much different from others. “People come from all over the country to get the unique

experience that we offer,” he said. “There’s no divisive barrier—the 18-year-old freshmen are working, training, singing, joking around and living the life of an artist right alongside the 30-year-old doctoral students. Everyone has something to learn from each other, and they work



Paul Houghtaling, director of the opera theatre program



*Jennifer Bryant in the spring 2012 production of Mozart’s *Così fan tutte*; next page, Bryant Bush in UAOT’s presentation of *The Mikado* in spring 2013*

with each other.”

Houghtaling said that what his opera students perform is a type of musical theatre, but that they approach it from the viewpoint of “healthy classical technique.” They cover everything from Baroque-style plays to world premieres, as well as music by composers on UA’s faculty. “We do it all, because as American artists we need to be versatile, more so than any other artist of national theatre in the world, because musical theatre is ours, because jazz is ours,” he said. “We also sing the foreign classics—the German opera, the Italian opera, the French. We sing the theatre that was meant to be sung on stage.”

In the years he has been here, Houghtaling said he has seen significant growth in the culture of Tuscaloosa, and that it is increasingly becoming a “cooler” place to live. He attributes that, in part, to the devastation wreaked by the April 2011 tornado, after which the city saw revitalization. “Tuscaloosa is the cultural phoenix,” he said, “rising from the ashes of a smaller town.” With that growth has come more appreciation for the arts, he theorized, and with that, more appreciation for UA’s opera program.

“I like to dispel the myth that opera is a foreboding, difficult, boring thing,” he said. “So what if it’s in a foreign language? I’ll give you titles and translations, if that alone is why you think you won’t like it. Most



people who say they don't like opera have never been to one, so I convince them to come to my shows, and then they do like it."

Each April, UAOT presents more recognizable songs as part of *One Night Only, an Annual Evening of Broadway and Pop Favorites*. The popular production, performed in an intimate cabaret setting, was instituted by Houghtaling in 2008 as part of the opera program's regular season. *One Night Only* features songs in a variety of styles ranging from Cole Porter and Rodgers & Hammerstein to Billie Holliday, Carrie Underwood and Adele. The event showcases the versatility of the singers, as well as the accompanying pianists, who get to improvise to bring the styles to life.

Perhaps the most unique and important part of the program, Houghtaling said, is the offering of audition classes. "The whole thrust of my program is the art of the audition," he said. "Nothing

happens without the ability to walk into a room and do a little miniature performance, a miniature opera, a five-minute thing that will launch you into a career. You can't have a career without the jobs, and you can't win a job without the audition."

His students, both current and former, all sing praises for the program, especially the audition classes. Dr. Jennifer Bryant, who graduated from UA with her doctor of musical arts degree in 2012, said Houghtaling's audition classes were unlike anything she had experienced, despite having studied voice for both her bachelor's and master's degrees. "Having attended two other programs, I thought I had an idea of how an opera program worked," she said. "Being given the opportunity to

present what you're working on as a professional singer in an environment that is supportive but also critical was really good. You basically present what you would go show for an audition with an agent or a company in front of a group of colleagues first, so you've got some outside viewpoints on it and can practice doing it. Having that experience is really important for the success of his students."

Bryant is now an adjunct instructor of voice at Birmingham Southern College in Birmingham, Ala., and the University of Montevallo in Montevallo, Ala. Additionally, she sings with Opera Birmingham, and is a guest artist in recitals throughout the state. She said she hopes to have an opera program of her own one day, and that she plans to

"I LIKE TO DISPEL THE MYTH THAT OPERA IS A FOREBODING, DIFFICULT, BORING THING." —Paul Houghtaling



Randy Cummings/Stan Hill Photo



Perry Davis Harper played Don José in the opera *Carmen* in October 2013 with leading lady Ginger Costa-Jackson.

“I DECIDED TO FOLLOW HOUGHTALING’S GUIDANCE AND TRUST HIS OPINION THAT I HAD A FUTURE IN THIS CAREER, THUS INFLUENCING MY DECISION TO PURSUE A GRADUATE DEGREE AT UA.” —Perry Davis Harper

base it on UA’s. “Houghtaling’s program is really intensive,” she said. “It prepares students and artists for a career in music, and the professional singing world in particular.”

Perry Davis Harper, who graduated from the University with his master of music degree in December 2012, is now working as a professional performer in opera and musical theatre. He credits much of his success to UAOT, which he said he discovered by chance in the fall of 2008. He had participated in opera during his undergraduate studies, and thought he might get involved in Houghtaling’s program while on a different path of study. “I was reading his

door,” Harper said, referencing the many articles fixed to it, “when he opened it. I just asked him, ‘Can I sing for you?’” Harper won a role in one of the upcoming productions and spent the summer working with Houghtaling to convert his voice from a baritone to a tenor, which was more his natural voice type, but which he had never exercised.

Harper decided to apply and audition for a graduate assistantship within the opera theatre program. “I decided to follow Houghtaling’s guidance and trust his opinion that I had a future in this career, thus influencing my decision to pursue a graduate degree at UA,” he said. Harper also touted the audition practice as one

of the main reasons he has won parts in performances since his graduation. “You have to dress, walk and greet the panel [of judges] in a certain way,” he said. “There have always been moments of validation for the opera program from my auditioning.”

Because Houghtaling runs the operation like a business and expects full dedication from his students, he said those involved stay thoroughly busy during their years on campus. They typically begin their days with vocal practices around 8 a.m., before launching into state-mandated core courses and other music classes within the Moody School of Music, like music theory, music history, conducting and lyric diction, among others. Then, around 4:30 or 5 p.m., they have opera class or rehearsals for performances. “It is a long and full day for each of them,” Houghtaling said, “much like it would be in their careers as artists.”

Since the program is very demanding, Houghtaling said, it is not for the faint of heart. “If it’s just your hobby, it’s probably too intense for you. You’ll be way too sore from dance and acting classes, and just the rigor of it.” However, he did say that not all opera theatre program participants are music majors. “There are lots of students on UA’s campus who love to sing, beyond singing in the car or the shower,” he said. “The program is open to anyone who can sing,



and who has interest in serious training and learning what it takes to be a very serious artist. That's what we offer: opening up their eyes and ears to what it takes to be a professional artist. You don't have to be a music major to be a professional artist."

The only additional requirement beyond that desire, he said, is the willingness to be treated like a professional—back to the business aspect of the program—and to be held to the same responsibilities of preparation and attitude. "If you do your best work every day and be your best artist every day, you will be loved and embraced and feel really good about yourself," he said.

Senior Lauren Carlton participates in the opera theatre program while majoring in journalism—she minors in opera studies through New College, a personalized curriculum in which students can craft courses of study consistent with their interests and skills. She met Houghtaling at a voice competition in Mobile, Ala., during her senior year at Bob Jones High School in Madison, Ala., where he told her to take



a tour of UA and sit in on one of his opera classes. Four years later, Carlton said the opera classes she takes with Houghtaling and the other students are "the brightest spot" of her day. "It's a big part of my social group," she said. "I spend an equal amount of time in

*Lauren Carlton performed in *The Mikado*, along with Lawson Daves.*

Moody as I do in Reese Phifer [where the journalism department is headquartered] because the music courses are very time-consuming."

She said UAOT has given her the opportunity to be competitive on both a state and national level, preparing her for real-world performing jobs, and much of this success stems from the

"FROM FRESHMEN TO DOCTORAL CANDIDATES, EVERYONE IS ON AN EQUAL PLAYING FIELD. YOU'RE GOING TO LEAVE WITH THINGS TO PUT ON YOUR RÉSUMÉ." —*Lauren Carlton*



sense of unity that Houghtaling instills. “The best part about it is that every person who is in the program plays an integral part,” she explained. “If you’re not cast in a particular role in one production, you’ll be cast in the next one. Everyone has an equal amount of things to do. From freshmen to doctoral candidates, everyone is on an equal playing field. You’re going to leave with things to put on your résumé.”

Carlton said she plans on pursuing a professional career as a performer, after completing graduate studies. “Seeing alumni who have graduated and are currently singing and working is very encouraging,” she said. “They come

Carlton, left, with fellow opera theatre students before One Night Only in spring 2013; below, Houghtaling applauded his students following a performance.

back to us and say, ‘You don’t know how lucky you are to have this program.’”

In January 2014, the opera theatre will have a new home outside of the Moody Music Building—the University is spending approximately \$2 million to renovate a chapel located on land acquired from Bryce Hospital in 2009 into the Bryant-Jordan Performing Arts Studio, which will house the program. It will feature a state-of-the-art

performing area and dressing rooms, along with space to build sets.

Up until now, Houghtaling and his opera students have gotten creative with stage-building wherever they could find open patches of floor; now, there will be a place specifically for this, which Harper said is important. “Even though the opera program has always done a really great job, we never had our own space to work in, and having that will help with recruiting,” he said. “In the past, it’s been sort of like trying to sell a normal car with a hot-rod engine—you know you’re going fast, but you’ve got to show other people that, too. Now, they’ll be able to flip on a light and say, ‘This is our theatre.’”

Carlton echoed Harper’s sentiments. “It’s been a long time in the making,” she said, adding that since the UA program didn’t have a theatre, some people might have thought it wasn’t legitimate. She agreed that the new facility will go a long way toward recruiting students, but pointed out that where a performance happens isn’t everything. “I think it will add to *what* we do, but it is not *all* we do,” she said. “We could do what we do in the street.” ■

