

Top: Magdalena Llamas and C. David Morrow, as Mother and King Melchior, *Amahl and the Night Visitors*, Chelsea Opera, 2006
Bottom: Lawrence Long as Leporello, *Don Giovanni*, Chelsea Opera, 2007



photo by Erin McIntyre



photo by Lynne Hayden-Findlay

Chelsea Opera

Grand Opera in the Neighborhood

by Julie S. Halpern

Two singers turned entrepreneurs are sharing fine opera productions with a Manhattan neighborhood. Read how they are making their dreams a reality for themselves and other singers alike.

The crowded rehearsal room buzzes with energy as two casts of the Chelsea Opera production of Menotti's *Amahl and the Night Visitors* vocalize, make last minute score checks, drink coffee, and munch cookies. Within seconds, Chelsea Opera's stage director, Lynne Hayden-Findlay, takes the podium. All eyes and ears focus on Hayden-Findlay, whose warm, soft-spoken style is an ideal foil for the high-energy cast.

The stage director gives some encouragement to the two Amahls, whose voices are in different stages of vocal maturity, and they hobble away on their crutches, ready to perform. With the two young stars pumped up, the rehearsal is off to a promising start. Amahl will open in a few weeks, but the production is already nearly at performance level. The singers are prepared and confident, their voices soaring under the baton of Music Director Carmine Aufiero.

Many of the principals and chorus performed the opera last season and are thrilled to be returning. The choristers, who have distinct personalities and large, powerful voices, receive as much attention and direction as the principals. These talented singers radiate confidence as they move about the stage with a specificity and purpose not usually found in large ensembles, clearly enjoying the experience. A number of choristers took the time to sit down with *CS* and share their positive experiences.

Hayden-Findlay and her partner, coproducer Leonarda (Lee) Priore, are the cofounders and driving force behind the company's continued success, but when asked about their achievements they are quick to thank nearly everyone involved in their productions, playing down their own accomplishments. Hayden-Findlay and Priore may be modest, but reactions to the young company's performances are definitely not. Chelsea Opera's 2004 inaugural production, Puccini's *Suor Angelica*, garnered rave reviews for stagecraft and vocal excellence. *America Oggi*, an Italian language newspaper published in New Jersey, praised the company as, "small in size, but with tremendous heart." Chelsea Opera, which has been going strong for the past three years, scored again in 2005 with its first full production of Mascagni's *Cavalleria rusticana*.

Chelsea Opera was the first company to give Daniel Rodriguez, "The Singing Policeman," his operatic debut—as Canio in Leoncavallo's *Pagliacci*—in the spring of 2006. Priore had previously produced *The Ballad of Baby Doe*, with Rodriguez in the cast and marked to make his operatic debut. The tragic events of Sept. 11, 2001, however, interrupted the scheduled performance and debut. Rodriguez became a household name thereafter by singing at numerous memorial services. The country was inspired by the beauty of his tenor voice against the backdrop of those horrific events.

Priore continued to consider Rodriguez for appropriate roles and felt the tormented Canio would be a perfect fit. This authentic American hero, who has experienced international acclaim, is now enjoying an increasingly successful opera career, much of it due in part to the vision of Priore and Hayden-Findlay.

Manhattan's Chelsea neighborhood has long been a community that nurtures the arts and artists, but it is better known for its

art galleries, boutiques, and off-Broadway theaters. Chelsea Opera is a welcome addition to this vibrant part of the city and has quickly established itself as a neighborhood attraction. The young company consistently performs to packed, enthusiastic audiences, many of them Chelsea residents.

Hayden-Findlay and Priore met at ASOP (the American Singers' Opera Project), a highly regarded program conducted by Nancy Stokes-Milnes. Both found ASOP a worthwhile program for New York City-based singers who were unable to leave town or could not afford to participate in programs abroad. Lee had just taken a bold step, leaving all that was familiar to relocate from her native Utica. She was studying full time with Stokes-Milnes and pursuing personal singing career opportunities available in New York. Hayden-Findlay, recently widowed, was courageously beginning her professional career at age 40 after many years as a successful businesswoman. It took a few years, but Hayden-Findlay and

Daniel Rodriguez and Maryann Mootos, as Canio and Nedda, *I pagliacci*, Chelsea Opera, 2006



photo by Rick Struckwell

Priore realized they both shared the same dream: an opera company that would create opportunities for the many talented singers who are not working in the major houses.

Hayden-Findlay felt discouraged that many people did not take her professional aspirations seriously because of her age. Despite her lack of support, she persevered, and an audition finally yielded a place with the San Diego Opera Chorus, earning her an AGMA card. She went on to perform with Opera Orchestra of New York's ensemble as well as Operafestival di Roma. Hayden-Findlay continued her career, working as a church soloist until her retirement from singing last year. She is also proud of her successful second career as an ESL (English as a Second Language) instructor. She received

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her certification as an ESL trainer in 2002, and teaches in New York City.

Priore came to opera after working as a jazz and pop artist, singing in jazz clubs, smoke-filled bars, and other venues. Her first voice teacher, tenor Pasquale Caputo, noticed that the quality of her mezzo-soprano voice was well suited for opera and guided her through the transition from jazz to opera.

Priore continues to be sought out for her fully realized performances and actively pursues her performing career as well as sharing directing and production aspects at Chelsea Opera. She has performed with various New York and regional opera companies, including New Rochelle Opera, Rockland Opera, Central Florida Lyric Opera, Mohawk Valley

C. David Morrow poses with audience members after a production of “Amahl.”



photo by Lynne Hayden-Findlay

Stephen Hartley and Crystallia Spilianaki, as Silvio and Nedda, *I pagliacci*, Chelsea Opera, 2006

photo by Rick Stockwell

Opera, and Regina Opera. Last summer she performed the roles of Zita (*Gianni Schicchi*) and La Zia Principessa (*Suor Angelica*) with Empire Opera. Lee has also performed off-off-Broadway. Her musical theatre credits include Fanny Brice in *Funny Girl*, Nettie in *Carousel*, and the Mother Abbess in *The Sound of Music*. She also has an extensive oratorio and concert repertoire.

Chelsea Opera's talented music director and conductor, Carmine Aufiero, has garnered rave reviews, both nationally and abroad. "Carmine Aufiero conducted with sweep and energy," wrote Anthony Tommasini of the *New York Times*. "The palpable involvement of the cast was winning."

Aufiero made his New York debut conducting *Suor Angelica* with Chelsea Opera in 2004, having previously worked as an assistant conductor at the American Symphony Orchestra under Maestro Leon Botstein, as well as conducting the premiere of Kyle Gann's *Cinderella's Bad Magic*, in St. Petersburg, Russia. He will conduct Empire Opera's productions of *Suor Angelica* and *Gianni Schicchi* this summer. Aufiero has been on the faculty of the Martina Arroyo Foundation's Prelude to Performance programs since 2005, and has given masterclasses in Italian repertoire for Opera Noire.


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based Italian language newspaper *Oggi Sette* praised it as being a minimalist production that "brought to life the same emotions as the grand theaters [but] even more [so], because

the attention was concentrated on the singers and their voices more than the scenery?"

Chelsea Opera's upcoming season will feature Puccini's *Gianni Schicchi* (Nov. 8-10) and Douglas Moore's American masterpiece, *The Ballad of Baby Doe* (May 13-16, 2008). Plans are in place for an after-school outreach program featuring both productions. Lucky New York City school children will have the opportunity to enjoy the same programming treasured by grateful operagoers.

For updated information about the company's upcoming season, visit www.ChelseaOpera.org.

Julie S. Halpern is a performer, director, and writer living and working in New York City. She is presently directing Eight Minute Madness at the Turtle Shell Theatre in Manhattan and recently directed Domestic Mastermind for the Samuel French Festival. She is the artistic director of Love Street Theatre. 

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