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'Gray' a challenge for plucky opera company

By TOM DI NARDO
For the Daily News

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His **Center City Opera Theater** wraps its season with the commissioned premiere of Lowell Liebermann's "The Portrait of Dorian Gray," rescored into a chamber version. The original, written in 1996 for the Monte Carlo Opera and dedicated to Princess Caroline of Monaco, requires an impractical 94-piece orchestra and was only performed once more in Milwaukee.

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Liebermann attended the opening performance on Wednesday night.

"I was not the first person to ask Lowell to reorchestrate a chamber version," said Kurtz, the Center City company's founder, artistic director and conductor. "But I was finally persuasive enough to convince him it was in the best interest of the opera. We are using 36 players, and a cast from all over the country who all auditioned for us in New York. It's a very singable opera, with a very demanding tenor role for **Jorge Gorza** as Dorian."

He continued: "In the Oscar Wilde book, of course, Dorian remains young while the portrait ages, and we'll have projections, photographs and portions of the picture and eventual deterioration of his face. It's a fantastic opera, with as much lyricism as the great classics, and we hope this version will give new life to the work."

This first premiere by the company, which was founded in 1999, will be sung in English.

Kurtz's company had several seasons in performance at Haverford School on the Main Line and, after a two-year hiatus, honored its name and switched to shows at the more costly Perelman Theater at the Kimmel Center in 2004.

This imaginative season has been based on operas inspired by literary works, including "Hansel and Gretel," "Macbeth" and "Romeo and Juliet," plus the regional premieres of Mark Adamo's "Little Women" and Carlisle Floyd's "Of Mice And Men."

The company has always presented fully-staged productions and has grown despite the challenges involved in being a laboratory for new and contemporary works.

"I can't believe it's only a four-opera town," said Kurtz, referring to the number of Opera Company of Philadelphia shows at the Academy of Music. "Opera is more than spectacle, because no one can compete with the multi-million[-dollar], huge shows at the Met, for instance. But I'm more interested in the intimate feel of a smaller theater with a higher degree of connectivity, and I try not to keep extraneous information on the stage. It's also a great opportunity for singers, designers and directors to gain experience as well.

"Anyone interested in musical theater should give 'Dorian Gray' a try because it's full of arias, tunes that are hummable and lyrical, comfortable music."

Kurtz's company represents the second professional one in the city, considering that the Academy of Vocal Arts, Curtis Opera Theater and Temple University Opera Theater are all conservatories.

Yet opera mavens know that all three often select non-repertory works and can perform at a higher level than many regional companies, so another professional company provides another opportunity for these artists to work and expands Philly as a top opera town.

The company has ties to at least two of these prestigious schools, with three Academy of Vocal Arts graduates in the cast and Curtis' Field Concert Hall hosting the company's orchestra rehearsals.

During the season, the company has also been holding outreach programs in classrooms where excerpts of this season's familiar stories are presented "up close and personal, where the students can sense the emotions," Kurtz said.

Kurtz received his doctorate in conducting from the Peabody Institute in Baltimore, has conducted orchestras in Israel and southwest Florida, founded a community orchestra in Fort Myers, Fla., and has worked with the Metropolitan Opera Guild.

His company's general director, **Jonathan Loy**, also from the Northeast, apprenticed at the Pittsburgh Opera and studied opera in Italy. They met in 2002 before the company's move to Center City and were astonished to find that their parents were longtime friends.

"Our operas have been very well received this season, with sellouts for four of the five shows - the familiar ones," said Kurtz. " 'Of Mice And Men' didn't do so well, but in many ways it's a better work than Floyd's more famous 'Susannah' " presented by the Opera Company of Philadelphia three seasons ago.

"Opera is a living art, and we want to do our part to introduce new works to Philadelphia. Next year we're doing 'Werther' and 'Samson and Delilah' and hope to have a commission that we're working on. We have many hopes for the future.

"It's just exciting to be a part of this magnificent art form." *

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Perelman Theater at the Kimmel Center, 8 p.m. Saturday and Tuesday, 2:30 p.m. Sunday, \$39-\$98, 215-893-1999, www.operatheater.org.