



Lyric Opera supernumerary Reuben Rios is helped into his costume as the Prince of Persia by dresser Roger Weir before a performance of "Turandot."

'IT'S A VERDI. . . IT'S A POULENC. . . **IT'S SUPERNUMERARY!'**

MEET THE DEDICATED BIT PLAYERS WHO MAKE THE LYRIC OPERA GO

The second act of "Die Fledermaus" at Lyric Opera is an elaborately choreographed affair. The cast is clad in ball gowns and tuxes and dancers whirl about the stage as the stars belt out their songs. Everyone gears up for a boisterous group ode to champagne, in which they will all raise their glasses. But first they need some glasses. And so, in the midst of this intricate, professional production, out walk six men portraying waiters. They include an advertising executive, a movie theater manager, a retired high school history teacher and the owner of a printing shop. They're supernumeraries, the people on an opera stage who neither speak nor sing, yet whose presence in the production is crucial. Sometimes, as with the waiters, they're barely noticeable. Yet you'd notice instantly if the cast raised a toast to champagne with empty hands. At other times they create the context for a scene, without which the opera would fall flat. Imagine "Aida" without soldiers and slaves. Occasionally a single supernumerary will command the audience's full attention, like the menacing executioner in this season's "Turandot" whose sword emitted sparks as he sharpened it on a spinning grindstone. He has a day job too. He's the Lyric's security guard.

BY **EMILY STONE** | PHOTOS BY **STEVE KAGAN**

The Lyric's roster of "supers" is about 1,200 people strong. They're high school students and septuagenarians. They're dentists, accountants and government workers. All are volunteers, earning \$15 per rehearsal or performance. Some are season ticketholders who sing along with the arias backstage. Others were opera novices when they started and liked being on stage. But they all love being supers. They love the camaraderie and knowing their family is watching from the audience. They love seeing how shows come together and hearing the world's best voices from a few feet away.

"I've never been on stage in my life," says "Die Fledermaus" waiter Ken Giambrone, listening in the wings for his cue. A longtime Lyric subscriber, he started superring this season, was cast in several productions and is anticipating his next audition. "It's just thrilling to me to be on the same stage with people I have recordings of and have listened to for years."

Giambrone, who owns his own advertising company, knows the audience isn't focusing on him. But when he's on stage, that's beside the point. "I want to make sure it's right," he says, "make it as good as it can be even though it's just a little part."

Male supers are in higher demand—there are more soldiers than prostitutes in the annals of opera. If they're game, men can be cast in several operas a season, which requires their presence nearly every night for months, since rehearsals for one opera generally overlap with the performances of two others.

"You're never sure what opera you're doing until they wheel out the costumes," says veteran super Roy Arvio, whose 20-year record is six roles in one season.

"Die Fledermaus" director Bruce Donnell wanted supers who conveyed the regal bearing of a 19th Century Viennese waiter. And they needed to fit into the Lyric's six coat-and-tails costumes. Donnell asked the auditioning men to walk around a room holding a tray of champagne flutes. He quickly chose six waiters plus a roulette croupier.

The process isn't always smooth. Donnell recalls a traveling production of "Aida" that he directed for New York's Metropolitan Opera. At each stop a new busload of supers arrived to play Ethiopian slaves. One night in Memphis, the bus never arrived. He says he told the ushers that as soon as they finished seating everyone for Act II they needed to hustle backstage, drop their pants, toss on a loin-cloth, grab a torch and follow the leader across the stage. It worked.

Jeff Coufal

When Jeff Coufal's son, Xeno, was 4, he started pestering his father for opera tickets. He had seen the Marx Brothers film "Night at The Opera," and enjoyed listening to classical music. Coufal, an opera-phobe at the time, stalled for several years. Eventually he caved, and Santa delivered tickets to the boy. Xeno was entranced by the performance, his father says, and noticed when some kids ran across the stage in one scene. Xeno announced that he wanted to do that, so Coufal poked around and discovered the world of supernumeraries. Father and son tried out together at Xeno's insistence five years ago.

Both were cast immediately and were soon joined by Xeno's 10-year-old sister, Willa. All three performed together in "Turandot" this season.

"It's a very different way of being with your kids," says Coufal, 46, a print shop owner. "You don't have to take that Dad role."

It can also get hectic, like the time Xeno, now 13, was in "A Cunning Little Vixen." Coufal was in "Aida," and both Willa and Coufal were rehearsing for "Tosca." "That was completely nuts," Coufal says. "But it was a blast."

His kids are getting quite knowledgeable about opera music, he says, even if their peers didn't know what to make of the autographed photo of a soprano that Xeno proudly toted around several years ago.

Both Xeno and Willa have matured from the experience, Coufal says. Xeno's role in "Vixen" required that he respond to about 10 precise musical cues. "This was the most rigorous thing he'd done in his life," Coufal says. "It has taught them a great deal of responsibility."

Coufal loves being on stage. He accents his waiter role in "Die Fledermaus" with flourishes of his silver tray. And he doesn't shy from recounting his favorite war stories in the dressing room before a show. He particularly enjoyed his role in "A Masked Ball," where he was on stage as the curtain rose and all eyes focused on him for the first five minutes as he impersonated the king.

"It's thrilling to be on stage with all those guys looking at you," he says.

Coufal also likes the fellowship among the supers and getting to know chorus members and, occasionally, the principals. And he appreciates the professionalism at the Lyric.

"You go to work every day, and there's somebody there screwing up. Somebody who is going to drop the ball," he says. "You go to the Lyric, and everyone is the best in the business. It's like the hand of God has picked you up."



Jeff Coufal and his children, Willa (middle) and Xeno.



Susan Lesher

Susan Lesher

Susan Lesher was driving home from her teaching job some 30 years ago when she heard on the radio that the Lyric needed supernumeraries for "Elektra."

"I thought, 'Oh, that sounds like fun,'" she says, and immediately drove to the opera house. She was cast and started rehearsals that very night. Of course, dressing for work that morning in a skirt, she hadn't anticipated ending her day by repeatedly crawling across the stage as a slave.

"My knees were bloody and my hose were ripped," she says. Still, she kept returning. After 33 years and nearly 50 operas, Lesher says she thinks she's been around longer than any of the current supers.

She comes back over and over because she loves being in the middle of the music, within arms reach of such magnificent singers. A few times she's been on stage at the start of the opera, which was exhilarating. "The curtain goes up—there's kind of a swish. You feel the air and the music starts," she says.

And the costumes can be wonderful, such as the elaborate silk kimonos in "Madama Butterfly" with embroidery on the inner layers that the audience never saw.

"It's like playing dress-up for grown-ups," she says. Which does not reduce the importance of the roles, she adds.

"We think of ourselves as part of the opera company. Those of us doing it a long time really do feel a sense of responsibility."

Lesher, a 5th-grade teacher at the University of Chicago's Laboratory Schools, acted in high school plays and has sung in choruses and choirs. So she's comfortable in front of an audience. She auditions for every available opera, but roles are hard to come by. There aren't many women's roles, and it's tougher to be cast the older she gets. She's acted in up to two a season, but sometimes isn't cast at all. This year she appeared in "Turandot" and "Dialogues des Carmelites."

"I'm sort of a glutton for punishment," she says of her tenacity in the face of rejection.

"It's important. It's fun. I enjoy doing it, but my life doesn't revolve around it. So if I'm not cast in something I don't go into depression. There are some people who do."



Darnell Norman

Darnell Norman's worst moment came just before the curtain rose in the "Turandot" dress rehearsal.

Opera stars and even seasoned supernumeraries know how to handle the minutes before a show starts. But Norman is neither of these. He's the Lyric's security guard and was tapped to play the role of sinister executioner based on his substantial physique. He was about to step onto the opera stage for the first time before an audience, which had come for a sneak peek at the production.

"I was a wreck," says Norman, 46. "I'm totally out of my element up there."

He hadn't performed since the 6th grade, when he filled in for a kid who was home with the chickenpox. In the first act of "Turandot," Norman was supposed to stride confidently onto the stage and command the audience's full attention while applying his sword to the grindstone and causing sparks to fly. But his hands were shaking. Just before the curtain went up, his fake ponytail fell off. He screamed. A makeup artist held his hands to calm him down.

But it was the music that ultimately steadied him, he says.

"The music takes you over," says Norman, who grew up listening to opera with his aunt. "I just went out there and gave it my best."

Norman has worked at the Lyric's front desk for nearly five years. He watches the rehearsals and productions on a TV monitor in his booth and hears the music piped in through the building's sound system. From this vantage point, he says, he sometimes wondered what it would be like to be on the stage. But it wasn't until the Lyric staff approached him about "Turandot" that he gave it serious thought.

"They said I would make a nice executioner," he says, adding that as a former bouncer, "I'm used to looking menacing."

He hesitated at having such a large first role, but realized that an opportunity to be front and center in a world-class production was unlikely to come again. So, he cut off his dreadlocks, spent an hour before each performance being painted orange from scalp to waist ("They've got a lot of canvas to work with") and learned not to be distracted by the booming voices a few feet away.

"I'm used to hearing them over the system in the lobby," he says. "I'm not used to being that close."

Though the pre-show panic attacks got better, they never fully subsided. But they were worth enduring. Hearing the audience's applause from the wings at the end of each show was, he says, "overwhelming."

"I've been bitten," he notes, using the term common among supers who say they're hooked. He'd like to super again, but not necessarily in such a big role.

Norman was in the unique position among new supers of already knowing the Lyric staff and many of the stars from his spot at the security desk.

"It's like a family atmosphere. To finally get to work with the family that you take care of, it's kind of special."



Theo Vlahopoulos

The piano run-through of "Die Fledermaus" wasn't going smoothly. The choreographer had just stopped the action and three supernumeraries huddled backstage, reading over the sheet of notes and cues that they hide, literally, up their sleeves.

"It will fall into place. It always does," concluded Theo Vlahopoulos. As a veteran of more than 40 productions, he should know.

Vlahopoulos, 62, had never heard of supernumeraries when he auditioned 23 years ago after reading an article by two supers. He didn't even know that much about opera but thought the experience sounded like fun. And it was. He took time off when he moved to Boston and then to his native Greece for several years, but has been back at it full-time since returning to Chicago in 1996.

"Some of us have inside us some kind of repressed actor," he says. He became fascinated with theater as a boy when his grandmother and aunts took him to performances. But the retired banker claims no special aptitude for the stage. "I never thought that I had any talent to become an actor. This super thing suits me quite fine."

He enjoys the rapport that exists among the supers. He supplied the traditional pre-show wine and cheese in their dressing room for opening night of "Die Fledermaus." And when friend and fellow longtime super Archie Bryant worried aloud that his gloves were a different shade of white than the rest of the men's, Vlahopoulos lent his wise council. "No one is going to be looking at you," he told Bryant.

In "Die Fledermaus," Vlahopoulos had a rare opportunity to help organize an outing for the supers and principals. He had befriended star Marlis Petersen, whom Vlahopoulos says was eager for some Greek lessons. The two pooled their respective groups and 17 dined together in Greektown.

Vlahopoulos has been happily converted to an opera fan. His goal is to be cast in as many different operas as he can because each new production provides an education in more music. He auditions for every production, landing up to five roles a season.

"Sometimes I actually live here," he says. □

Emily Stone is a Chicago free-lancer who writes frequently for the Magazine.