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Theatre Arts Professor Anne Bogart Directs Opera Featuring Placido Domingo

By Kristin Sterling

As most Columbia students and faculty are returning to campus, refreshed from the summer vacation, Theatre Arts Professor Anne Bogart is in Los Angeles, directing the world premiere of Deborah Drattell's opera "Nicholas and Alexandra," starring Placido Domingo. In this production Domingo, who is the Los Angeles Opera general director, marks his 120th role -- more than any other tenor in the history of music -- as the monk Rasputin. The production includes five performances that will run September 14-27 at the Los Angeles Opera.



Bogart offers suggestions to performers.
Photos by Robert Millard; Courtesy LA Opera.

How does a director, even one as seasoned as Bogart, "direct" one of the world's best performers?

"Placido Domingo has his own ideas and comes prepared," she explains. "He'll tell you what he wants to do and you see how it fits into your vision. He knows a million times more about opera than I. My job is to listen acutely to him and coordinate his impulses into the overall production."

Bogart first heard Domingo sing in person several years ago at Metropolitan Opera, where she went to hear "Il Trovatore" with her mother who was a big fan of the singer. "I heard his voice through the lens of her enthusiasm and it was glorious," she recalls. "If my mother were alive now I know how delighted she would be that I am working with Domingo."

This is the first time she is working with Domingo, and she was recommended by Composer Deborah Drattell, whom Bogart previously worked with on the operas "Lilith" and "Marina: A Captive Spirit." Unlike directing for theatre, an opera director does not select performers. Domingo, the 24 principals and 40 chorus members were all selected before Bogart was named director. Bogart is also bringing 10 members of her theatre company, the SITI Company, to participate in the production.



When she was approached by Drattell about "Nicholas and Alexandra," the last imperial family of Czarist Russia, Bogart was deeply interested in the material and went on to study the era. Last summer she, Drattell, Robert Israel, set designer, and Kathy Zuber, costume designer, traveled to St. Petersburg, Russia, and spent 10 days investigating the homes that Nicholas and Alexandra lived in, the Russian Orthodox churches they worshipped in and the basement where Rasputin was killed.



Members of the "Nicholas and Alexandra" cast rehearse.

love between Nicholas and Alexandra, which according to most historical accounts was real and palpable. The story takes place moments before the family is about to be slaughtered, and then returns to the time they met. The story moves back and forth over the course of their relationship and the fall of the empire.

As Rasputin, Domingo plays a **shadowy, mysterious character who is** considered a miracle worker and confidante by the imperial family for healing their hemophiliac son. But many citizens considered this peasant to be a crafty manipulator of their rulers and the dark force that was ruining the country. Many believed Rasputin to be a force that could only be stopped by death.

"Domingo is the consummate actor and an extraordinary singer," says Bogart. "He animates characters like the Rasputin and brings intelligence and grace to it."

Directing an opera with Domingo and being a tenured Columbia professor aren't the only things keeping Bogart busy this year. During the summer she spent two weeks at the White Oak Plantation, Mikhail Baryshnikov's studio on the Florida/Georgia border. There she and a team from the SITI Company worked on "Reunion," a play that tells the story of aging, angry Group Theater members who are reunited at a symposium to discuss their story in the 1930s. Bogart hopes the play will be accepted into the 2004 Humana Festival of New Plays.

She also spent time in Saratoga Springs, N.Y., as part of SITI's summer program, working on "A Midsummer Night's Dream," which will premiere at San Jose Repertory in January 2004. Additionally, she is working on the U.S. premiere of "Death and the Ploughman," a 1401 German play depicting a man who loses his beloved wife and confronts death, seeking answers.

"It is the most beautiful philosophical text ever written for theater," says Bogart. The play opens at the Wexner Center in Columbus, Ohio, in April 2004.

And there is more. Her "Bobrauschenbergamerica," first seen at the 2001 Humana Festival, will be produced at the Next Wave Festival at Brooklyn Academy of Music in October. The play is an overview of America as seen through the eyes of visual artist Bob Rauschenberg. Finally, she and the SITI Company are working on a multi-disciplinary dance/theater piece, called "systems/layers," that follows eight characters through one day of their life in a city. Bogart's company is collaborating with the Louisville music ensemble, Rachel's, who are composing the score and will play live in performance.

When asked how she juggles such a wide range of productions simultaneously, Bogart simply replies, "It's just a habit. It's how I've always worked and it's what I enjoy."

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