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14 KEY TO Philadelphia May 21 - JUNE 3, 2007

theater

Opera Forces Dorian Out of the Closet

Ageless play gets chamber treatment at the Kimmel

By Jack & Sandy Jacobowitz

What if someone made you an offer you couldn't refuse? To remain forever young and beautiful while a portrait of you suffered "the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" and AGE! That's the premise of Oscar Wilde's gothic 19th century novel *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, brought to life as an opera staged by the Center City Opera Theater (CCOT).

The opera was written and composed by Lowell Liebermann in 1996. This performance will be the world premiere of a re-orchestrated chamber orchestra version commissioned by the CCOT. Liebermann is a prolific composer, pianist and conductor whose work is frequently performed to critical acclaim. *Dorian* is his first opera, surprisingly Liebermann is both the composer and librettist. When we asked Andrew Kurtz, conductor, artistic director and founder, whether this was common, he replied, "No, but there are others who've done this in the past, for example, Wagner."

Readers of a certain age will surely remember the 1945 Oscar winning movie with George Sanders, Angela Lansbury and Hurd Hatfield. For those who don't, the libretto tells the story of a charming, handsome young man and his friendships with Basil, a portrait artist, and Lord Henry, an amoral, pleasure seeking man about town, not unlike Wilde himself!

While his portrait is being completed he utters the prescient words: "If it were I who was to be always young, and the picture that was to grow old." You should always be careful what you wish for - you may get it!

Seduced and encouraged by Lord Henry's hedonism, Dorian embarks on a life of pure pleasure without regard for the pain inflicted on others, and boy oh boy is he good at being bad! Seductions, betrayals and murders follow in short order and every evil deed leaves him unscarred while his portrait changes. After

sampling all of life's perverse possibilities Dorian finally seems to repent when he spares a young girl from sexual exploitation. He rushes to confirm his change of heart by looking at the portrait for some sign of a change for the better.



Tenor Jorge Garza sings title role of Dorian Gray

What he sees in the portrait causes him to slash the painting. He then falls to the floor, dead!

Since commissioning and mounting a new opera is always a difficult task, we spoke to Andrew Kurtz and CCOT Marketing Director Annie Burridge to find out more about this company. We asked why the group chose this opera and Andrew replied, "It's a fantastic, well written opera, based on one of the greatest literary classics of all time. Beautiful music plus great drama equals perfect opera! In addition there was a clear theme to this year's productions. We based the season on the great literary classics i.e. *Hansel & Gretel*, *Little Women*, *Of Mice and Men*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Macbeth* and now *Dorian Gray*."

According to Burridge, "*Dorian* is particularly relevant to our times. There's an enormous industry in anti-aging. Everyone is fiercely fighting to stay young and willing to pay for it!" She went on to talk about the music and how you could hum or whistle it." For a sample you can visit their website at www.operatheater.org.

CCOT's target audience is the ordinary opera and theater lover, the same audiences that might go to the Opera Company of Philadelphia and Walnut Street Theatre. They consider themselves innovative in the same way as the Arden Theatre. They put on seven productions a year, five semi-staged and two fully staged.

CCOT is not a repertoire company; they hold auditions nationally several times a year. They also select from emerging young singers around the country including graduates of our local pre-eminent vocal institutions, Curtis and Academy of Vocal Arts (AVA). "Our singers have performed with major companies including the MET, Seattle Opera, Houston Grand Opera and New York City Opera," said Kurtz. As to why this opera was re-orchestrated, he said, "We use a chamber orchestra of 36 players. *Dorian* was originally composed for a full orchestra of 94 players! That's why we re-orchestrated; we don't have a pit large enough to accommodate that large an orchestra."

Many music lovers say they can't understand what the singers are saying in an English language opera. Kurtz says not to worry. "At times, a particular word is 'stretched' over time, because it's being sung, making it a bit more difficult to understand. This is true of popular music too. We work hard to make sure our cast's diction can be heard. In the intimacy of the Perelman Theater, this should not be a problem. Also, though this opera is in English we use English super titles. That should be a big help for those few posky words."

Performances are June 6, 9, 10 and 12 at Kimmel Center's Perelman Theater, 260 S. Broad St. For more information call 215-893-1999.

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