

The New York Times

MOVIES, PERFORMING ARTS/WEEKEND DESK | January 24, 2003, Friday

Never Say Die in Indie Opera

By ANNE MIDGETTE

SPOTLIGHT clicks on and lights a cardboard sun. The seven-member chorus bursts into song as a singer costumed as a waiter slices oranges on the piano. The soprano enters with the tenor hidden beneath her skirt. Judith Barnes is rehearsing an opera at the Vertical Player Repertory, which happens to be in her apartment.

In a former factory in Brooklyn, in a room that used to be Ms. Barnes's sculpture studio before she got a degree in voice from Indiana University and returned to Brooklyn with the opera bug, Vertical Player Repertory is embarked on its fifth season. The high brick walls and tin ceiling have resonated with everything from Handel's "Alcina" to Mascagni's "Cavalleria Rusticana." This week the room is full of the percussion sets, keyboards and hanging fabrics of the set of "The Dwarf," a new comic opera by Yoav Gal. (Final performances are tonight, tomorrow and Sunday.)

It seems crowded now; it will be more so with an audience of 60 or so people for the performance, standing against the wall or sitting on cushions on the floor. Vertical Player Repertory is attracting an ever larger audience. At this rehearsal the piano is supplying all the music, which illustrates the humorous fairy tale quality of the story by giving its harmonies a sardonic twist. In performance there will be four instrumentalists. Mr. Gal had to reduce the orchestration from the original 25.

In small opera, everyone has to pitch in. The lead soprano is the stage director and created the sets. The composer is moonlighting as a costume designer. The opera is about a woman who goes around with her lover, a dwarf named Lingus, under her gown, and designing a bustle large enough to conceal Aram Tchobanian, the tenor who plays Lingus, seemed as much a source of pride to Mr. Gal as writing the piece itself. He watched anxiously as Ms. Barnes and Mr. Tchobanian tried it out for the first time.

"Am I waddling?" Ms. Barnes asked. "Maybe a little," said a chorus member. "I'll sashay," Ms. Barnes decided, suiting her actions to her words. Mr. Tchobanian shuffled along on his knees behind her, his toes peeping out beneath her gown. "Wear white socks," someone advised him.

[Complete article can be found on the New York Times archive, www.nytimes.com]



Aram Tchobanian and Judith Barnes in "The Dwarf," by Yoav Gal, at the Vertical Player Repertory in Brooklyn. Photo by Kelly Guenther for The New York Times