Partnership creates a multidimensional week of opera

by Rene Katsinas with Paul Houghtaling

When the director of the Opera Theatre at the University of Alabama (UA) called to inquire whether the residents of Capstone Village would be interested in participating in National Opera Week with their students, I was delighted to say “Yes!”

As with any performance, let’s start with the players.

During National Opera Week, opera companies and schools host free, accessible events to their communities with the goal of introducing new people to opera and maintaining the interest of opera lovers. The week is sponsored by OPERA America, the national service organization for opera, with support from the National Endowment for the Arts.

Capstone Village is a continuing care retirement community on the campus of the University of Alabama and owned by the University of Alabama. The residents can take advantage of the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute and Student Recreation Center on campus along with lectures by university faculty.

University students benefit by visiting the Capstone Village campus, working at internships and giving performances.

Opera Theatre is a program of the School of Music at the University of Alabama under the direction of Paul Houghtaling. As part of their education, students learn about performance and refine their skills.

Students and faculty have advanced to the finals in the competition organized by the National Opera Association (NOA) Collegiate Opera Scenes Competition for the last three years.

The stage was set.

During Opera Week, the residents (who normally sit in the audience) experienced the workshop training and practiced the skill sets that singers study to hone their craft as opera actors. The first session included acting, mime, improvisation and theater games. The next session was a lecture on the history of the world of opera. After the lecture, residents took opera students to lunch in the community’s dining room.

Later, residents watched a mock audition and got to become part of the audition panel by offering feedback to students. The celebration ended with residents interviewing graduate students on their experience with opera, why they chose a career in the field, what it is like to study opera at University of Alabama, and how they envision their careers progressing. Residents were especially intrigued with

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how graduating doctoral students would combine performance with their academic careers.

**A show is born**

The idea to offer a special program during National Opera Week evolved because Houghtaling wanted to do something innovative and felt that linking university students with residents would meet that goal—and be fun.

Planning for the event took about six weeks. All the activities were free to residents and scattered around the community to take advantage of available space.

The main lobby was the scene for the sensory exercises since the multi-purpose room was too small. Staff from Building Services removed the furniture to make space. Also in the lobby, the opera audition class took advantage of the piano and a set-up of 40 extra chairs. The Wade Lounge Bar/Coffee House provided space for the interviews with graduate students and the lecture on the history of opera.

Resident Greeters (volunteer members of the Outreach Committee) were on hand to make sure visitors and residents found their way quickly and with confidence to their events.

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**What's in a name?**

For a sensory exercise, residents created movements to identify themselves instead of using a name. A student was selected to memorize all the “movements” of the participants and then to perform them in order of participant placement around the room.

Dr. Houghtaling watches resident Ernestine Jackson perform her unique “name” movement.

Ida McCampbell demonstrates her unique “name” movement to the student who will memorize everyone’s movements.
About 40-50 residents attended the activities during the week. The program appealed to all of those who had attended a concert at Capstone Village. New residents were curious to see what all the buzz was about, and the majority wanted to support the students. Although it was mainly residents attending, a lot of staff made a point of listening to at least a few minutes of the audition class.

The only costs for the program were the meals for the opera students and refreshments at different events, expenses covered through the Resident Services budget.

**Secrets of success**

There are several reasons why the University of Alabama version of National Opera Week was appropriate for and attractive to the older adults of Capstone Village. First was the established relationship between the residents, the students and the director of the Opera Theatre, Paul Houghtaling.

Every year Houghtaling brings voice students to sing for the residents. These are in-house concerts offered in the

**Opera Week schedule**

**Monday, Oct. 31**

**Opera Class:** A fun session of friendly acting, easy mime, improvisation and theater games.

**Tuesday, Nov. 1**

History of Opera lecture: Paul Houghtaling will take you on a guided tour of the history and glory of the world of opera. This is a must-see event.

Take an Opera Student to Lunch.

Audition Class: Residents will hear and watch opera students perform a mock audition and become part of the audition panel by offering feedback.

**Wednesday, Nov. 2**

Village Update with Opera Grad Students: “Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Opera.” Here is a chance to ask students in the opera program about their careers, and about what it’s like to study with Paul Houghtaling. Think of questions to ask the students about:

- Why they chose Opera?
- Their musical experiences before UA?
- How will they handle the academic world of opera and perform?
- What are the challenges of starting a performing career at 30 or 30 plus?
- What are the challenges of starting an academic career in opera at 30?
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community’s main lobby. In addition to being the director of Opera Theatre, Houghtaling is an entertainer and a supporter of musical theater. The residents “eat him up” and many purchase season opera tickets because of him.

The second reason the programming was attractive was location. The Opera Theatre would come to Capstone Village for three days of programming. Thus, no transportation was needed and the program would be open to all residents.

Third, the program was designed to be interactive and to involve the residents.

Fourth was the opportunity to interact with the younger generation, the students of Opera Theatre. The residents enjoy conversing with and getting to know the students. They establish relationships that continue past the doorway of the community. A resident who makes a personal connection at an in-house concert on this campus is much more likely to attend an outside event at the UA School of Music to see and hear this student in the future.

The fifth reason for implementing this program and its benefit to the residents was entertainment and good music. Who can refuse good music? Who would refuse good music for free? Music promotes cognitive function, results in reminiscing, involvement in the present (here and now), relieves stress and soothes the savage beast in all of us.

After the performance

Opera Week at Capstone Village not only was a first for residents, but according to Opera America, this is the first time the week has been celebrated outside of the “opera community” itself. In fact, “Opera

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Changing the Way We Age

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America was so intrigued by UA’s National Opera Week offering that they featured it in their national press release as a unique and noteworthy event.” (1)

The majority of residents liked talking with, interviewing and listening to the opera students. They expressed the wish to have interactive National Opera Week again. A few residents did suggest fewer hands-on classes (such as sensory games) and more music. All said they enjoyed interacting with the students.

Student artists in the Opera Theatre are likewise enriched by their visits to Capstone Village. On this particular occasion, the students got a chance to share some of their training with the residents and to include them in it, which was a first. The students were thrilled to see that so many residents were eager to get up and participate, to move, to dance, to improvise. And they had fun!

What performers do can seem easy or maybe even a bit glamorous, but to give a glimpse of the “behind the scenes” training—what goes on even before rehearsals start—was a great opportunity.

Students need to learn to be fearlessly creative, spontaneous, maybe even a little wacky. For instance, we introduced ourselves by doing a physical gesture along with our names, maybe an indication of our favorite hobby or just a flourish to describe our personalities. We were all pleased to see how many residents were willing to set their vulnerabilities aside and be wacky right along with us.

Based on the overwhelming success of the week (expressed by residents and students), we decided to make National Opera Week a regular programming event at Capstone Village.

Rene Katsinas, RhD, is Director of Residential Services at Capstone Village Continuing Care Retirement Community in Tuscaloosa, Alabama (www.capstonevillage.com). With a doctorate in rehabilitation and masters in therapeutic recreation, Katsinas is responsible for planning and implementing all activities and transportation on the campus. In 2008, Katsinas received the CRSA Corporate Award for Active Aging Week.

Paul Houghtaling, DMA, is Assistant Professor of Voice and Director of Opera Theatre at the University of Alabama School of Music. Houghtaling has enjoyed success in a variety of stage roles, as well as concert repertoire ranging from works of Bach and Handel to Cage and Crumb, and has delighted audiences across the United States and Europe with his innate theatricality, commanding presence and distinctive style.

Reference


Find the planning checklist for Opera Week on the next page.

Resources

National Opera Week
OPERA America
www.operaamerica.org/content/advocacy/now.aspx

University of Alabama Opera Theatre
www.music.ua.edu/opera
Program implementation checklist

Advertisement:
- Build interest
- Build excitement
- Promote events
  - Present the program at the community meeting multiple times
  - Notices or handouts in cubbies and on bulletin boards
  - Notice on daily activity sheet
  - Extra information on Monthly Calendar
  - Information on Village TV channel

Room Arrangements
- Find adequate space; arrange for clearing of space
- Arrange for seating
- Arrange for refreshments
- Arrange for Resident Greeters

Coordination with Students and Paul Houghtaling
- Prior to Event and Date
  - Confer by email to set dates and times; confirm
  - Review the activities the month before with PH
  - Review the descriptions, dates and times prior to Nov calendar printing
  - Revise descriptions
  - Write work orders and meet with Building Services and Dining Services to confirm arrangements
- Week of Event
  - Confirm activities with Paul H and gather student numbers
  - Confirm dining set-ups and Building Services room set-ups
  - Reconfirm descriptions, dates and times
  - Release daily handouts encouraging participation and providing information
- Day of Event
  - Reconfirm numbers with Dining Services and Building Services
  - Reconfirm set-ups with Building Services
  - Schmooze with residents daily at Early Risers (breakfast) and lunch to remind and encourage participation
  - Meet with dining staff about lunch and how to expedite students and residents to tables to encourage conversation
  - Greet students and Paul Houghtaling the day and time of each event
  - Coordinate with Resident Greeters
  - Facilitate interaction between students and residents
  - Join interaction and model behavior for resident

Documentation of the event
- Digital pictures
- Media releases
- Notice to Student UA Paper about event prior to date
- Submit pictures to Dialog (internal UA Employee Newsprint)
- Submit idea of article to ICAA
- Display pictures for residents and families