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Wayne Wyman, right, director for Capital Opera's 'Madama Butterfly,' works with performers, from left, Dawn Pierce Summer Grest and Krassen Karagiozov during a dress rehearsal.

Staff Photo by Ted Richardson

## Capital Opera spreading its wings

Craig Jarvis, Staff Writer

RALEIGH - Wayne Wyman, the new artistic and managing director of Capital Opera, is running through a scene from "Madama Butterfly" in Jones Auditorium on the Meredith College campus. Navy Lt. Pinkerton, the leading male role in Puccini's popular tragedy, is talking to the matchmaker who has arranged a nonbinding marriage to a 15-year-old geisha called Butterfly, when Wyman interrupts.

"From you I need more misogynist arrogance," Wyman tells his Pinkerton, Cary tenor Wade Henderson, a computer programmer with an active avocation as a vocalist. "You think you're the most clever guy who ever walked the Earth. You're so full of yourself."

The pianist resumes playing, and this time Henderson nails the scene.

If the rehearsals are any indication, this ninth production from the baby sister of Triangle opera is pumped with a new sense of purpose and energy. Soprano Summer Grest, who sings the title role, can feel it.

### 'A tight ship'

"It's really running like a business," said Grest, who has been in previous Capital Opera productions. "Before it was well loved and well thought out. They did such a great job, but they could only do so much. Wayne really runs it like a tight ship."

And the ship has set sail, largely thanks to about \$26,000 in grants from the city of Raleigh and the United Arts Council of Raleigh and Wake County. The figure represents less than half the cost of staging "Madama Butterfly," but it's a huge infusion of cash for a four-year-old company on a shoestring budget.

The new production marks Capital Opera's first performance in the Progress Energy Center's Fletcher Opera Theater, a plush and roomy venue that was designed with opera's physical and acoustic needs in mind. The company has also launched its first professional marketing campaign and begun selling season tickets.

Wyman, a conductor and stage manager with the artistic equivalent of a green thumb, is a key figure in this growth spurt. In San Antonio, Texas, he helped turn a fledgling opera company with \$6,000 into a critical success with a \$500,000 budget. He left in 2003.

Until now, Capital Opera's leadership has come from Joel Adams, a retired Enloe High School voice teacher, and Ellen Williams, a music professor and vocal studies coordinator at Meredith. Both did a little bit of everything to keep the enterprise afloat.

"We had no idea how to make it happen," Adams said in a recent interview. "We were flying by the seat of our pants."

### **Longtime dream**

Starting an opera company had been Adams' dream for 15 years, and he found his wish maker in singer Kathleen Torchia. Torchia had started a small opera company in Sacramento, Calif. To her surprise, singers from all over the country begged her for work because there were so few jobs available.

She launched a second company in her hometown of Harrisburg, Pa., attracting the attention of opera lovers in Raleigh. They asked her to consider a third company here.

Adams and Williams took the reins after the 2003 production of Puccini's "La Boheme" that inaugurated Capitol Opera Raleigh.

Torchia made financial contributions to keep the operation going, and the company remained under the umbrella of her nonprofit organization.

Williams and Adams continued with two operas every year and took their productions into Wake County public schools. They also began fundraising and exploring ways to stand on their own feet.

More recently, they reached that point, forming their own nonprofit and tweaking the company's name to Capital -- to reflect the city rather than the building -- Opera and dropping the "Raleigh." Where the original plan was to spotlight trained singers in the community, the company now includes singers from elsewhere.

"We've grown beyond Kathleen's vision," Williams said. "This is a big leap for us."

Torchia, who is starting a fourth opera company in Albany, N.Y., this summer and plans one more in Lansing, Mich., after that, was surprised but pleased to find that the Raleigh company had branched out on its own.

"They're so well-organized that I haven't really needed to do much," she said.

"I'm so proud of what they're doing, and the quality people whose hands this fell into."

Wyman had directed productions for Capital Opera before becoming the company's leader. In his new role, his first priority was to persuade the board of directors to spend money to improve the productions and get the word out.

"It took someone like Wayne coming in to convince us to take the plunge," Adams said. "We were reserved. These were waters we hadn't tread."

In addition to the move to Fletcher and the marketing efforts, the company plans to more than double the fees for principal artists.

### **Magnet for singers**

Wyman said recent auditions for next season attracted 40 singers, some coming from farther away than in the past.

The company likes to say the audience will see emerging artists -- and "by emerging artists we don't mean young singers," Wyman said. "We mean singers who are ready to perform."

Grest, the soprano who sings Butterfly, says it is an understatement to say there aren't many jobs for opera singers.

A UNC-Greensboro grad, she lives in Chicago, where she has begun an MBA program. She has performed in Illinois and Tennessee and recently won a regional vocal award in Wisconsin.

She jumped at the chance to return to Raleigh. She turned down a small part in the U.S. premiere of "Jerry Springer -- The Opera" in Chicago for the starring role in "Butterfly."

"You have to realize you're probably not going to have a Met career," said Grest, 29. "The chances are very small.

"You think hard about your niche, find some happiness in the interim and sort of hope and work toward your goal."

Capital Opera's organizers hope the move to the Fletcher Opera Theater will attract bigger audiences and raise the company's profile. "A lot of beginning companies would kill for a space like that," Wyman said.

He thinks there is room in the Triangle for the three resident companies, each with its own niche. Opera Company of North Carolina uses more established singers brought in from far away. Long Leaf Opera Theatre, which has moved to a summer-only season, performs only works written in English.

"That's our goal, for all of us to be successful," Wyman said.

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