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Sesow paints during Opera Company of North Carolina's production of "Don Giovanni"

October 2006



lookwho'scoming

MATT SESOW

AT A GLANCE

KNOWN FOR | Emotionally raw, self-taught painting influenced by Jean-Michel Basquiat, Willem de Kooning and Francis Bacon.

BUT PAINTING TO LIVE OPERA? | Sesow will paint onstage and in the lobby during the Opera Company of North Carolina's production of "Don Giovanni" this week.

Sesow spoke with staff writer Ellen Sung from his home in the Adams Morgan neighborhood of Washington, D.C.



DETAILS

WHAT Opera Company of North Carolina's "Don Giovanni" with Matt Sesow painting onstage.
WHEN 7:30 p.m. Thursday-Friday.
WHERE Meymandi Concert Hall, Progress Energy Center, Raleigh.
COST $20-$75.
CONTACT 783-0098, www.operanc.com; 834-4000, www.ticketmaster.com.
INFORMATION www.sesow.com

Q How did this painting-and-opera project come about?

A The person who contacted me is Robert Galbraith, the director of the opera company. He had met me at a street festival up here in Washington, D.C., about three years ago. He told me he bought eight pieces from me that day.

Q Eight?

A One of the things I pride myself on is my prices are really low. He probably bought some of my smaller pieces, which are from $20 to $60. I also do a project every year called "31 Days of July." I take the cover of the Washington Post each day and get inspired by the news; I start a new canvas every day. Bob had bought one of those from me, too, online last year.

He contacted me three months ago seeing if I would be interested in the project. I actually had a solo show in Raleigh, N.C., last year at Rebus Works, so I guess that reintroduced him to my works.

When he contacted me, I was thrilled. The idea of me painting in front of an audience while there's an opera being performed is fascinating. I'm so excited about it.

SEE **SESOW,** PAGE 3C

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SESOW

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1C

Q How did you become known as an "outsider artist"?

A When I started painting in '94, I was working at IBM as a computer programmer. I was hit by an airplane when I was 8 which removed my dominant left hand. Thanks to a supportive family and everything I lived a pretty normal high school life. I played football, ran track, did all the varsity sports.

To me [the disability] wasn't a big deal. But once I started painting in 1994 as a hobby or almost as a joke, the disability was the first thing to come out, these really strong emotions. My colors and my lines were very bright and strong and powerful.

When I started to try to show my work in 1995, a woman ... I think she bought 14 of my pieces at a show in Georgetown. It turns out that she was an outsider art dealer, or folk art dealer. Because of my disability and because I like to paint raw, my style is very reminiscent of that folk art or outsider art style.

There was a lot of excitement: There was this kid and he got hit by a plane and his work looks like this! And I was going to IBM wearing a suit and tie.

My prices were really high. My friends really couldn't afford my work. It became very stressful just to be a painter. I didn't want to paint anymore.

In 2001, I was working in a dot-com and they went belly-up. I decided that day I was going to try to be a painter full-time. I fired my agent and I just started doing all of it myself, all of my marketing, approaching galleries and selling my work online. I would complete a painting and post it on the Internet so people could see things basically while they were wet.

Q It sounds like you're saying you don't consider yourself an outsider artist.

A No, no, I don't. To me it seems that outsider art is a term invented by people who will profit from it. It's like a label to validate high prices. I'm a person who has shown in museums, is in permanent collections — and I'm alive. You can deal directly with me.

I just consider myself an expressionist.

[With outsider art] it's almost like you have to live in your trauma. To me, art is a healing mechanism. It's almost expected of me to paint a severed hand or an airplane crashing into me.

When we get told what we are by people who are going to make a profit, that's a problem. I think most people who buy my art now don't even know what outsider art is and don't care. To me, that's so satisfying.

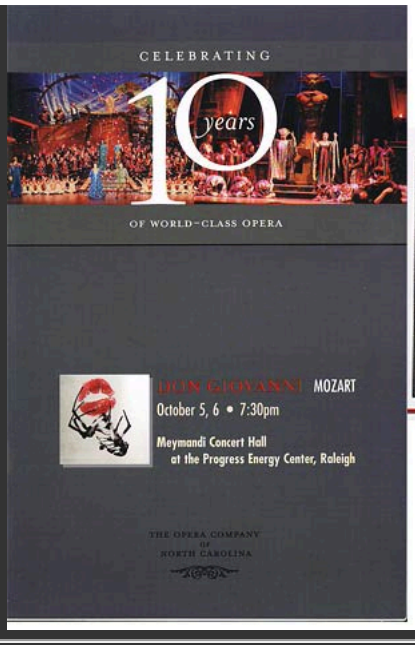
Q Painting is usually such a solitary pursuit. Do you think the audiences at the opera will be a distraction?

A No. I'm actually worried that I might be a distraction!

I'm a pretty expressive person with my painting. I'm going to be this one-handed guy up there probably with paint all over me more than on the canvas. And I'm a pretty tall guy. So I'll try my best not to be disruptive.

Q Are you inspired by the story of Don Giovanni?

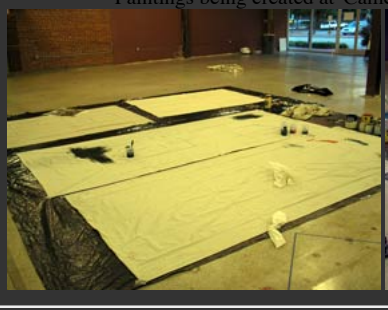
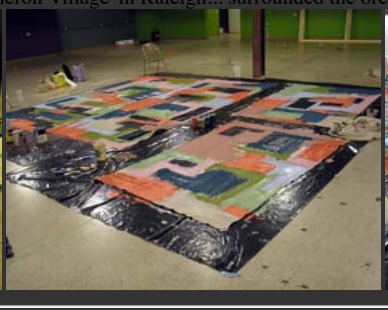
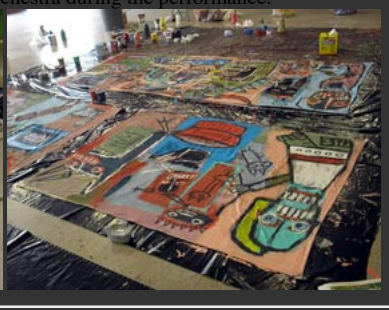
A I really haven't seen a live performance. I do have the movie ... but it's a movie. I want to be inspired by what Bob does. The music of Mozart, that will inspire me and that has inspired me. The use of music while painting is very key to my style.





Matt Sesow, *Artist*, is a full-time visual artist born and raised in Nebraska. In 1994, he was introduced to painting as a way to socialise. Today, Matt Sesow's unique vision, experiences, and prolific output have garnered him a special place in contemporary art. Labels used to describe Sesow's work have included "Expressionist", "Outsider" and even "Art Brut". Matt's involvement with Don Giovanni is not his first foray into the performing arts. In 2003, he painted six large canvas used as backdrop and inspiration for a month-long performance celebrating the life and accomplishments of Alfred Kinsey at the "Theatre of Note" in Hollywood. Matt welcomes interaction and reaction to his paintings. If you'd like to see more of his work, please visit him on the internet at www.sesow.com.

Paintings being created at 'Cameron Village' in Raleigh... surrounded the orchestra during the performance:



"Zoo Keeper"

Created as part of the Oct. 2006 performance of Don Giovanni by the Opera Company of North Carolina. CLICK here for DETAILS

approx 11feet by 6feet
acrylic/housepaint on canvas
*SOLD
CLICK here for View #1
CLICK here for View #2
CLICK here for View #3



"Commendatore"

Created as part of the Oct. 2006 performance of Don Giovanni by the Opera Company of North Carolina. CLICK here for DETAILS

approx 12feet by 7feet
acrylic/housepaint on canvas
*SOLD



"Master Giovanni"

Created as part of the Oct. 2006 performance of Don Giovanni by the Opera Company of North Carolina.
CLICK here for sketch used to paint from

approx 12feet by 7feet
acrylic/housepaint on canvas
*SOLD
CLICK here for View #1
CLICK here for View #2
CLICK here for "Making of" on stage



"Scorned"

Created as part of the Oct. 2006 performance of Don Giovanni by the Opera Company of North Carolina. CLICK here for DETAILS

approx 6feet by 6feet
acrylic/housepaint on canvas
*SOLD



"Hunted"

Created as part of the Oct. 2006 performance of Don Giovanni by the Opera Company of North Carolina.
CLICK here for sketch used to paint from

approx 12feet by 7feet
acrylic/housepaint on canvas
*SOLD
CLICK here for on stage #1
CLICK here for on stage #2
CLICK here for on stage #3
CLICK here for on stage #4
CLICK here for on stage #5
CLICK here for on stage #6



"Reality Theater"

Created as part of the Oct. 2006 performance of Don Giovanni by the Opera Company of North Carolina. CLICK here for DETAILS

approx 11feet by 6feet
acrylic/housepaint on canvas
*SOLD



"Serenade"

Created as part of the Oct. 2006 performance of Don Giovanni by the Opera Company of North Carolina. CLICK here for DETAILS

approx 6feet by 6feet
acrylic/housepaint on canvas
*SOLD



"Seduction"

Created as part of the Oct. 2006 performance of Don Giovanni by the Opera Company of North Carolina. CLICK here for DETAILS

approx 12feet by 7feet
acrylic/housepaint on canvas
*SOLD
CLICK here for "Making of" on stage

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Wolfgang wired
The Opera Company of North Carolina kicks off an ambitious season with a reality TV spin on 'Don Giovanni'

CRAIG JARVIS, Staff Writer

RALEIGH - A closed-circuit TV cameraman roves the audience and then the stage, mingling with the cast of "Don Giovanni" as the performers scamper over scaffolding and chrome towers. As Mozart's arias flow, the singers' images appear on TV screens placed on the stage.

This is a new take on "Don Giovanni," a multimedia production that considers the Don Juan legend in the era of TV and YouTube. Presented in the year of Mozart's 250th birthday, the production also reimagines Opera Company of North Carolina in its 10th anniversary season.

"Our company is about to change very dramatically," said Frank Grebowski, the company's new general director. "Our presence in the community is about to increase several-fold."

"Don Giovanni" opens the first season in which the company is staging three full productions. Rehearsals began last week with an invitation to the public to drop by Cameron Village and watch the stars work.

Grebowski and artistic director Robert Galbraith, who founded the company with his wife, Margaret Poyner Galbraith, brainstormed a flood of ideas for reaching beyond opera's traditional audience -- performing scenes from "La Boheme" in shopping malls, starting discussion groups for "The Crucible" in schools, libraries and retirement homes, sending singers out with carols at Christmas.

The vision for "Don Giovanni" responds artistically to the goal of reaching people who perceive opera as overly refined and irrelevant to modern life. And it's the company's first attempt at original interpretation.

"It's the project I'm most excited about," Galbraith said. "It's a contemporary look that has never been seen in Raleigh before."

The singers will wear clothes from their own closets instead of lavish costumes. The stage will be strewn with what Galbraith calls "technical gadgets" -- scaffolding, kits, hanging sculpture,

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DETAILS
WHAT "Don Giovanni."

WHEN 7:30 p.m. Oct. 5-6.

WHERE Meymandi Concert Hall, Progress Energy Center, Raleigh.

COST $20-$75.

CONTACT 783-0098, www.operanc.com; 834-4000, www.ticketmaster.com.

The cast
HERBERT PERRY (DON GIOVANNI): The bass-baritone has garnered rave reviews for his portrayal of Don Giovanni. His career has spanned all of the major U.S. opera houses and has included several national telecasts and recording projects. Perry has an outstanding reputation as an interpreter of contemporary music, most notably in his work with American composer Phillip Glass.

TIMOTHY NOLEN (LEPORELLO): The Broadway and Metropolitan Opera star won a critic's award as Judge Turpin in "Sweeney Todd," and he played the title role in Broadway's "Phantom of the

chrome towers and TV sets. With the roving camera and projected images, he said, he's contrasting reality television with the fiction of opera.

"There's a stronger, more profound reality in our storytelling, in our pretending, than what we're getting as our daily dose of reality on television," he said.

As an added element of interest, an artist will create two large paintings about the opera during each of the two performances. Matt Sesow of Washington, D.C., who paints in the outsider or contemporary folk style, will begin the first picture 15 minutes before the curtain rises and finish it before the overture. He'll also paint the second during intermission.

Along with the new comes something old: The orchestra will be on the stage rather than in a pit, which Galbraith said is true to Mozart's time.

Tapping resources

This departure from past productions reflects differences behind the scenes. Galbraith sees this as a pivotal time, and he wants the company to run more like a business. His newly shaved head is a radical switch from the ponytail he wore just a couple of years ago, but the changes he has in mind are more than cosmetic.

Up to now, Galbraith has stayed closely involved in running the company, even when he had a managing director on staff.

"It's time for me to get into the nuts and bolts of the artistic element and leave it to someone like Frank to guide the business," he said.

The company has a stellar track record artistically, but its history is written in red ink. Income from ticket sales and donations has increased in recent years, and Grebowski said he thinks the market is strong enough to double or triple the company's budget, which hovers just under $1 million. Yet the company, which has relied heavily on financing from the Gailbraiths, still operated at a loss last year, partly because it staged two operas for the first time since 1999.

The company is working with a consultant on how to recruit board members from a broader segment of the community who have access to money and other resources that haven't been tapped. And the company is paying attention to the Triangle's geography. Last season, it staged "Salome" in the newly refurbished Memorial Hall at UNC-Chapel Hill. Now Galbraith and Grebowski are surveying Durham's Brightleaf Square, where Triangle Opera staged shows in the open air for years. Opera Company of North Carolina absorbed Triangle Opera four years ago, and a return to Brightleaf seems fitting.

Galbraith has been talking for a long time about staging three operas in a season, and to him and Grebowski the time seems right. They chose works with an eye to younger audiences -- Robert Ward's "The Crucible" and Puccini's "La Boheme" follow "Don Giovanni" -- and hope to bring students into the opera fold.

"This is doing something more than saying 'opera is neat,' " Grebowski said. "This speaks to the kids: 'La Boheme' is popular with teens, they've read 'The Crucible,' everyone knows a Giovanni."

The company is also thinking of inviting students to rehearsals, visiting schools to talk about the issues and sing selections, and offering student discounts.

Opera." He has been a guest star on TV's "The Sopranos" and "Guiding Light" and is a respected director and narrator.

HERBERT ECKHOFF (COMMENDATORE): The bass-baritone is well known to international opera, symphony and oratorio audiences. He made his Metropolitan Opera debut in "La Traviata" in 1987 and performed in "Billy Budd" in 1989-90. Eckhoff has appeared on opera stages nationally and internationally, receiving rave reviews in symphonic and oratorio performances.

KELLY CAE HOGAN (DONNA ANNA): The soprano returns to the Opera Company of North Carolina after her company debut last season as Salome. She will return to the Metropolitan Opera for performances of "Jenufa" and "La Boheme," as well as making her debut with Opera Tampa as Leonora in "Il Trovatore." Hogan has worked with companies throughout the U.S. and is praised as a concert artist.

CHRISTINE WEIDINGER (DONNA ELVIRA): The soprano has starred in most major opera houses worldwide. A frequent partner and longtime friend of mezzo-soprano Marilyn Horne, Weidinger performed with Horne in "Tancredi," Handel's "Rinaldo" and "La Fenice." In North Carolina, Weidinger has performed at the Greensboro Opera. She lives in North Carolina with her husband, Raleigh native Ken Smith.

ANDREA EDITH MOORE (ZERLINA): The soprano, a Durham native, has a number of operatic roles to her credit. She is a founding member of the New York-based Acanthus Chamber Opera. In February, she will be heard on the Evolution Contemporary Music Series in Baltimore. She was named the Opera Company of North Carolina's 2005 Emerging Artist of the Year.

JOEL ANDREW WEISS (DON OTTAVIO): The tenor made his international debut last season as Alfredo in "La Traviata" with the Polish National Opera, conducted by Jacek Kaspszyk. Upcoming performances include Rev. Parris in the Opera Company of North Carolina's staging of "The Crucible." Weiss made his TV debut in the first season of "The Sopranos." Weiss is married to Kelly Cae Hogan, who plays Donna Anna.

YUNGBAE YANG (MASETTO): The baritone recently completed his fourth year as a resident at The Academy of Vocal Arts in Philadelphia. Last season, he sang the 1st Nazarene in "Salome" with

Losses ... and wins

The school outreach plan didn't materialize for "Don Giovanni." But that hasn't muted Galbraith's enthusiasm.

Nor did the loss of Lucas Meachem in the lead role. Galbraith thought he had talked the young North Carolinian, who sang the male lead in "The Barber of Seville" last spring, into returning. But the baritone dropped Raleigh for the Lyric Opera of Chicago, where he is stepping in as a last-minute replacement in "Iphigenie en Tauride" with star mezzo-soprano Susan Graham.

Galbraith can't complain: He landed Herbert Perry, a bass-baritone who appears on the DVD recording of Peter Sellars' controversial "Giovanni," set in modern Harlem. Soprano Kelly Cae Hogan, who sang Salome for the Triangle company in February, will return as Donna Anna.

Galbraith is also eager to tackle "The Crucible," which transposes the topic of 1950s political repression into the Salem witch trials. Ward, who lives in Durham, won the 1962 Pulitzer Prize for his opera.

"I think we're dealing with a lot of the same issues now," Galbraith said. "It's long overdue that we pay homage to his works here. It's getting a revival across America. I think we're seeing a rebirth of an American classic."

Staff writer Craig Jarvis can be reached at 829-4576 or cjarvis@newsobserver.com.

the Opera Company of North Carolina.

IN TRAVEL
Austria is the center of the Mozart universe in the composer's 250th birthday year. PAGE 1H

'Postcards' from N.C. composers
"The Crucible," the Pulitzer Prize-winning opera by retired Duke University professor Robert Ward, will return to the Triangle in February at a plum time for North Carolina composers.

Starting this week, the N.C. Symphony will begin premiering works it has commissioned from seven state composers -- including Ward. The series, called "Postcards from North Carolina," features four- to six-minute works that reflect an element of North Carolina.

Here's the slate of composers and the first round of performances of their works:

* Kenneth Frazelle of Winston-Salem, "The Swans at Pungo Lake," Thursday in Southern Pines and Friday-Saturday in Raleigh.

* Roger Hannay, a Chapel Hill composer who died in January, "Triangle Transit," Oct. 12 in Chapel Hill and Oct. 13-14 in Raleigh.

* Stephen Jaffe of Durham, "Poetry of the Piedmont," Jan. 25 in Chapel Hill, Jan. 26-27 in Raleigh, Jan. 30 in Fayetteville, Jan. 31 in Greenville and Feb. 1 in Durham.

* Paul Elwood of Brevard, "Overlooking Glass Falls," Feb. 9-10 in Raleigh.

* Anthony Kelley of Durham, "Carolina Indigo -- Calls and Responses," April 12 in Southern Pines and April 13 in Raleigh.

* Robert Ward of Durham, "The Beginnings," May 3 in Chapel Hill and May 4-5 in Raleigh.

* J. Mark Scearce of Raleigh will bind the works as a suite to be scheduled next season. Call the symphony at 733-2750 or visit www.ncsymphony.org for details.

As for "The Crucible," based on Arthur Miller's play, Opera Company of North Carolina will stage Feb. 23 and 25 in Memorial Hall at UNC-Chapel Hill. The opera has enjoyed a string of performances of late; a staging at East Carolina University in Greenville was one of more than a dozen last season.

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