The Puppy Episode: Oberlin premieres new chamber opera on Feb. 16 and 17

by Daniel Hathaway

That buzz you might be hearing in the Oberlin air this month is the sound of opera construction, and it's not just building stage sets. In the span of a few days, Oberlin Winter Term students are working with a professional librettist (Royce Vavrek), composer (Matthew Recio), stage director (Christopher Mirto), and conductor (Tiffany Chang), all of whom are bringing their individual expertise to the task of finishing the mounting of a new opera from scratch.

The Puppy Episode, the second in a series of three-year opera projects, will be premiered in Warner Concert Hall on February 16 and 17 (click here for tickets). The performance on the 16th will be live streamed.

"It takes so many people to put on a production, especially a new one," Oberlin Opera professor and director Christopher Mirto said in a recent Zoom call. And most of them join the process like hopping onto a moving train.

In the case of *The Puppy Episode,* librettist Royce Vavrek and composer Matthew Recio were present from the first spark of an idea. "I was courting Royce as a collaborator," said Recio, who was also on the call. "I finished the Vanguard program at Chicago Opera Theater in June, and Lydia, the conductor, gave me a list of librettists. I got to do some speed dating in three or four calls with each candidate."

Recio wanted the show to have a queer element, and Vavrek hit upon the idea of using a well-known episode of *The Ellen Degeneres Show* where the comedian comes out, causing a ripple effect. That script got coded as "The Puppy Episode."

"People forget how momentous that moment was," Recio said. As Mirto added, "It was 25 years ago this year, and it was significant if you were in that community at that moment."

L-R: Royce Vavrek, Matthew Recio, Christopher Mirto

Degeneres — like the puppy — is not a central character in the libretto. "There's a comedian, but she's kind of a surrealist narrator," Recio said. "The show tracks the lives of three individuals. Gil is a teenager, Phyllis is elderly and has dementia, and Louise is middle-aged. All the characters relate during the story and intersect at the end. The story isn't just about coming out — it's about relationships."

The general plan came together quickly. "We met on my birthday in March 2020, the day the world shut down," Recio said. "We had a powwow online, and when I went back to Chicago we had the skeleton sketched out."

Then Mirto — along with the pandemic — entered the scene. "Royce sent me an early libretto and I assembled a design team," he said.

The opera was workshopped at Chicago Opera Theater, but not staged. "COT likes to do the development and pass it off to another company," Recio said, "so Chris was the first one to touch it. We rehearsed it in Chicago in October and on Zoom in December. I hired a recording engineer to sync it with the piano track. It was informative but not ideal. We rehearsed for a week and a half, and had two orchestra

rehearsals with the eight instrumentalists — flute doubling piccolo and bass flute, clarinet doubling bass clarinet, string quartet, piano, and percussion." Assistant professor of conducting Tiffany Chang will conduct the Oberlin premiere.

How many times has Mirto been involved in such a project from the beginning? "*Wild Beasts of the Bungalow* was my first. I came in when the show was 75% complete. For *The Puppy Episode* it was 50%. I hope I'll be in on the next one from the get go."

So far, the rehearsal process has gone smoothly, with just a few score changes to accommodate the range of a different tenor. And Chris Mirto has found it enlightening. "It's the most personal project I've worked on as a new father, and as a kid who lived through what the characters are going through."

Click here to read another preview of the opera by Oberlin Conservatory's Erich Burnett.

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