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Opera-tor

HENDRIX SETS THE STAGE FOR ALUMNUS’ OPERA DIRECTING CAREER

BY ROB O’CONNOR ’95, EDITOR

When he graduated from Hendrix, **Daniel Ellis ’96**, a psychology major and the College’s first theatre minor, wasn’t sure what to do next. Maybe social psychology or social work? Theatre, perhaps?

It’s safe to say he didn’t think that, two decades later, he’d be living out of a suitcase, helping professional opera’s most renowned artistic directors stage productions around the world.

“Opera was a mid-life crisis to my theatre career,” said Ellis, a native of Vilonia, Arkansas, which did not have a high school theatre program. An All-State high school choir member, Ellis sang in the Hendrix Choir for four years on a participation scholarship. He got involved in theatre at Hendrix as a sophomore.

Originally a pre-med major, Ellis thought he wanted to be an anesthesiologist, but he switched his major to psychology and, by his senior year, he was feeling the pull of the stage.

“I really didn’t know what I wanted to do, so I put everything on hold,” he said, recalling the professional advice of Hendrix theatre professor Dr. Rosemary Henenberg, who encouraged him to take a year off to think about it.

In the meantime, he acted in or directed 14 shows and began to look at graduate programs in theatre.

“I discovered that I enjoyed the big-picture and creative process of directing more than acting,” he said. “My job allows me to take the words of the script and create a living 3-D representation of that on stage. It requires an understanding of many different art forms, critical and creative thinking, script analysis, and fastidious research while having the people and diplomacy skills to convince other creative people to get behind your ideas.”

That discovery led him to New York and The New School of Drama, formerly the Actor’s Studio Drama School, for a three-year MFA program. After 10 years in New York, a stage veteran advised him to get some experience outside of New York, so he left for Minneapolis, Minnesota’s thriving theatre scene and began a five-year stint as the stage and light director for nationally-acclaimed a cappella vocal quintet Five by Design. In Minnesota, another mentor suggested Ellis look at working in opera, where his music, production, and theatre backgrounds would be a huge advantage. Otherwise, his opera experience was limited to a semester of Dr. John Kreb’s Introduction to Opera course and his participation in the Hendrix Music Department’s Night of Opera Scenes once a year.

At 38, he accepted an assistant director position with the Minnesota Opera Resident Artist Program, a two-year residency during the opera’s 50th and 51st seasons.

“It was an eye-opening experience to see how a professional opera company operates firsthand. Often there can be over 100 people onstage at once, so staging an opera can be extremely challenging,” said Ellis, who said he had a panic attack when 87 choristers rushed toward him on the first day of vocal rehearsals for Verdi’s *Nabucco*, Ellis’ first opera.

During his two-year residency, he assisted on 10 operas (two five-show seasons).

“The residency was intense. I had to learn a great deal of material quickly having little experience and knowledge at the time of the genre,” said Ellis, who also served as director for two productions with Project Opera, Minnesota Opera’s education program for kids 7 to 17. His production of *Griffelkin* won the 3rd Place award in the 2014 American Prize in Directing Competition. “The residency was a perfect opportunity to get my feet wet and learn my trade.”

In his second season, he worked on Barrie Kosky and Suzanne Andrade’s production of Mozart’s *Die Zauberflöte* (*The Magic Flute*).

The experience would lead to his European directing debut as the revival stage director for the production at the Komische Oper in Berlin, Germany.

When he heard that the Lyric Opera of Chicago was hiring for its 2015-2016 season, he jumped at the opportunity to work at one of the country’s top companies and assist on the world premiere of Sir David McVicar’s production of *Wozzeck*.

This spring, Ellis will be at the helm of *Wozzeck*’s European debut at the Grand Théâtre de Genève, in Geneva, Switzerland, as well as directing *The Magic Flute* for Cincinnati Opera and Opera Philadelphia.

“As a revival stage director I remount a production in the same manner and style as it was originally created often working with a new cast of singers,” he said. “Professional opera companies like tried and true productions. Being a revival stage director for these types of productions is one way to make the switch from ‘a mid-career up and coming’ to ‘tried and true’ myself.”

Career-wise, there’s no real rule book in opera, he said.

“The nice thing about what I do is that there’s not necessarily a glass ceiling,” he said. “You kind of make it up as you go.”

And a psychology degree and theatre minor from a liberal arts college in Arkansas is as fine a place to start as any, Ellis thinks.

“I don’t have regrets about Hendrix, except that I should have taken more foreign language classes. I should have taken French and German,” said Ellis. “Hendrix gave me a lot of what I needed to know. Until I went to grad school, I didn’t realize how well Hendrix prepared me for a career in the arts.”

“If anything, I learned there was more to life than just a textbook and what you learn on the page,” he said. “Hendrix taught me how to debate, as opposed to argue, how to be a critical thinker, and how every obstacle is merely an opportunity to step back and discover another solution if you’re willing to look for it.”