



Episodes of *Discovery.*

Opera Maine brings first-rate productions and performers to the Pine Tree State.

▶ **WAGNER MAY SEEM** like a big bite for a small regional opera company, but Opera Maine's artistic director, Dona D. Vaughn, had a compelling reason for programming *Der Fliegende Holländer* on the Portland company's mainstage in July 2022.

"Maine had its own ghost ship, the Dash. So we made our ship the Dash, and it all happened on the Maine coast," says Vaughn. "We did it with the full cooperation of the Maine Maritime Museum, which gave us a lot of information. We even had wallpaper in Daland's house that was authentic to the time. The costumes, period spinning wheels—everything done as it would have been done in Maine, and all coming from the Bath Museum and different places, who were happy to collaborate with us."

"It was absolutely magical," says Felicia Moore, who made her company debut as Senta. "I found myself very inspired by the water. [Senta] is very steady in her belief that her past and her future are

not meant to be on land but at sea with the Dutchman." At a photo shoot for projections to be used in the production, Moore got to try out the costume Millie Hiibel had designed for her. "I've never gotten that emotional seeing a costume for the first time," she says. "The fabric and color were so stunning. It was this sort of light cerulean blue that changed color depending on the way the light hit it, so it really looked like moving water. I told Millie, 'You get her. You absolutely *get* Senta.' There's something about Senta where she wants to be untamed and free, just like her surroundings."

The company, which began life as Portland Opera Repertory Theater in 1995, was rechristened PORTopera in 2007 and became Opera Maine in

Opera Maine's
*Fliegende
Holländer*, 2022

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2017. Vaughn has directed every mainstage production since the company's inaugural *Carmen*, taking over as artistic director in 2003 from founder Bruce Hangen. This month, she stages Rossini's *Cenerentola*, featuring Hongni Wu in the title role. The Chinese-born mezzo worked with Vaughn as a graduate student at Manhattan School of Music and made her professional

what kind of production it is going to be. I've done a few, and I love each of them. Everybody loves and knows this story. I am totally confident with the people who I will be working with this summer."

The mainstage productions, one per season, receive two performances in the 1,900-seat Merrill Auditorium, and admission is free to anyone twenty-five and

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debut as Cherubino in the company's 2018 production of *Le Nozze di Figaro*.

"I had such a wonderful experience," Wu says of the *Figaro*. "It was my first opera gig, and singing with those professional singers was a big thing for me. Two months later I was one of the young artists in the Royal Opera House [Covent Garden]." Wu is excited to return to Opera Maine as Angelina (*Cenerentola*), a role she has now sung several times. "I am very [much] looking forward to the production, because I don't know

under. The company also boasts a young-artists' program, dating back to its second year, which presents studio productions of contemporary operas. Up this summer is Gareth Williams's *Rocking Horse Winner*, an adaptation of a D. H. Lawrence short story.

Vaughn believes the company's studio operas demonstrate that "The best thing that we can do as a small company is educate our audience without letting them know that's what we're doing. We plan something a little different that some people haven't heard of or are not

familiar with. It's edgy, it's a little scary. The subjects are not grand opera, but they're passionate. They get mixed reactions, and I like that. I want people leaving the theater discussing—even better, arguing. 'Why do we have to hear this sung about? I come to be entertained!' But interestingly enough, the ones who say that come back again the following summer, and I think this is terrific."

When possible, Vaughn programs talkbacks with local specialists on topics related to the operas. After Laura Kaminsky's *As One*, which features a transgender protagonist, the panel included the gender-clinic coordinator from the Barbara Bush Children's Hospital in Portland. Philip Glass's *Fall of the House of Usher* prompted a dialogue about Poe, Glass and the attraction of Gothic horror.

Vaughn credits Opera Maine's success to a collaborative spirit, a supportive board and community outreach, which includes serenades throughout the year in homes and other venues. The company also partners with the voice department at the University of Southern Maine to bring singers into local schools and introduce young people to opera.

"One of the interesting things for us is we often find that we are more celebrated nationally than we are locally," says Vaughn. "After all these years, we still have people say, 'What? There's a professional opera company in Maine? You're bringing Metropolitan Opera singers to Maine?' And yet, we are all over the newspapers, we're all over the radio. I hope we'll have more episodes of discovery that we exist, and that we're good at what we do. We really contribute to the culture and to the arts in the state." ■

Joanne Sydney Lessner is a singer, author and librettist.



Opera Maine's *Nozze di Figaro*, 2018, with Robert Mellon (*Figaro*), Hongni Wu (*Cherubino*) and Maeve Höglund (*Susanna*)