

Professor's Libretto Headed For New York Production

Photo/Joanna E. Morrissey

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By Jim Montgomery Staff Writer



It's said in politics that there is no second act.

While that may be true in some professions, it doesn't apply in Susan Gubernat's case: a second act is the focus of her attention.

In addition to teaching poetry and creative writing at CSU-Hayward, Gubernat moonlights as a librettist. She's collaborating with composer Adam Silverman on *Korczak's Orphans*, an opera in three acts about the life of holocaust martyr Janusz Korczak. A fully orchestrated performance of the second act is scheduled to be performed by the New York City Opera (NYCO) company on May 26, as part of its VOX 2004 series, "Showcasing American Composers."

"Showcasing American Composers" is the brainchild of [New York City Opera, which has now teamed up with] influential musical theatre groups like America Opera Projects, the Center for Contemporary Opera, Encompass New Opera Theatre, and Music-Theatre Group [to present "VOX and Friends."]

"These companies have changed the landscape of opera and music theatre in New York City with their unique programming and their dedication to keeping the genre alive with a flow of new work," says Matthew Price, assistant to the NYCO's executive director.

For example Nobel laureate Toni Morrison has teamed with composer Richard Danielpour, creating a libretto [for "Margaret Garner"].

Act II of *Korczak's Orphans* has a performance history. Vermont Public Radio interviewed the principals and broadcast selections of the act in May '03. The Lebanon Opera House, Lebanon N.H., offered a workshop performance with piano and vocal score the same month.

After review, Silverman and Gubernat decided the opera's second act was ready for prime time. They submitted their opera for consideration by the VOX 2004 series. "Our work was chosen, competitively," says Gubernat.

Silverman and Gubernat decided to team up on an opera several years ago, after meeting in 2000 at the MacDowell Colony, an artist's retreat in New Hampshire. Prior to meeting Gubernat, Silverman had set one her poems to music, composing a piece for soprano and piano based on "To Become an Islander." Danielpour, the composer of *Margaret Garner*, introduced them.

In *Korczak's Orphans*, Silverman has created a full-length opera based on the last days of

Holocaust martyr Janusz Korczak.

Korczak had diverse talents, achieving success as a medical doctor, military officer, radio personality, author and educator. A love of children infused his work. In advocating the "personhood" of children, he employed novel principles of child psychology and moral education. He opened orphanages in Warsaw and directed them based on these principles until he was executed by the Nazis at Treblinka.

Korczak's Orphans is set during the turbulent summer of 1942. The opera recreates events related to the Aug. 6 arrest of Korczak and the children under his care, their heroic march out of the ghetto to an awaiting train bound for the notorious death camp at Treblinka.

Silverman recalls Korczak's impact: "Where the concentration camp at Treblinka used to stand, a garden now contains 17,000 memorial stones to represent the villages, towns, and countries of the million men, women, and children slaughtered there. Only one stone bears a person's name: it reads 'Janusz Korczak (Henryk Goldszmit) and the children.'"