

Merola Opera -- boot camp for future stars

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It's been 30 years now, and mezzo-soprano Dolora Zajick has been lauded a million times as one of the world's greatest singers, but she still remembers the thrills she experienced as a singer-in-training with the Merola Opera Program. Her apprenticeship led to a small off-stage role in Verdi's "Aida" at War Memorial Opera House: "They had to put me on a ladder out in the hall, and I remember I had on a pink dress, and I remember that I came out to take my bow and thought, 'Oh, wow! I'm on the stage of San Francisco Opera!'"

Zajick, 61, spent the summer of 1983 with Merola, the prestigious training program associated with San Francisco Opera. Named for Gaetano Merola, the company's founder, the program extracts prospects from the world's deep well of operatic talent, puts them under a sandblaster and propels them back out as professionals. You can get an idea of the results Saturday at War Memorial Opera House, when members of this year's class of 23 closes out the program's 56th season with a Grand Finale concert of selections by Wagner, Verdi, Mozart, Britten, Bernstein and others.



Mezzo-soprano Dolora Zajick. Photo by John Francis Bourke

Nevada-bred Zajick (who will star at San Francisco Opera his fall in Tobias Picker's new "Dolores Claiborne," based on the Stephen King novel) calls Merola an invaluable "boot camp" and "pivot" in her Hall of Fame career.

Soprano Elza van den Heever, 34, chooses "whirlwind of change" to describe her own Merola summers in 2003 and '04 - especially that moment in 2003 when Sheri Greenawald (the soprano who directs the program) and Zajick (a Merola coach that summer) "yanked me into a room and told me I was not a mezzo, as I'd thought I was, but a soprano." It's just a slight exaggeration to say that this was like telling a righty baseball pitcher that he actually is a lefty -- which explains why van den Heever broke down crying, "feeling just completely turned upside down," she says. "Yet something in my soul told me they were right. Thank God!"

Now based in Bordeaux, France, van den Heever -- who grew up in Johannesburg, South Africa, and didn't take a private voice lesson until she was 17 -- has an expanding career as a soprano. She made her Metropolitan Opera debut in December as Queen Elizabeth I in Donizetti's "Maria Stuarda."

Which brings us to tenor Issachah (pronounced: Izza-kye-a) Savage, whose career is simmering.

He was raised in a "very meager" North Philadelphia home, he says, and from around age 5 was chosen to sing solos in his family's Pentecostal church: "'Little Izzy,' they called me." Later falling in love with opera as a strapping African-American teenager, he became "always the odd man out," he jokes.



Soprano Elza van den Heever/Photo (Dario Acosta)

Not anymore. Savage, also 34, is one of this summer's Merola stars, a dramatic tenor, who says the "boot camp" (he uses the term, too) "truly has been a life-changing experience. It's a lot of strategic things happening at the same time, honing the best out of you, training in on your strengths but even more on your weaknesses."

He's always "clocking" his progress -- but with patience, he says, as he learns to be "less of a noise box and more of an artist."

There's a lot of buzz about Savage, who will sing "Mein lieber Schwann" from Wagner's "Lohengrin" at the Grand Finale. This fall, he moves on to the role of Egyptian general Radames in "Aida" at Houston Grand Opera -- opposite Zajick, one of his teachers, who will star as the princess Amneris. "I don't know whether to be excited or terrified," he says.

Also this fall, Savage will learn whether he's been chosen to move on to another polishing station, San Francisco Opera's Adler Fellows Program. (Zajick made that move, as did van den Heever.) Or, with his career already in motion, he might continue moving straight out into the big leagues.

What's the key to Merola's success?

"There's no silver bullet here," says Greenawald. "It's hard work, pretty much a grind."

Her father was a basketball coach in Morley, Iowa, and she talks in sports terms: "You don't practice the high-flying floater that happens to go in. (The Warriors!) Stephen Curry -- how many three-point jumpers does he practice in a day? No, it's routine-ing, routine-ing. I'm always comparing the singers to athletes. Any great artist has to have a routine that they trust, from which they can make other artistic choices."

She says the training of a singer never really changes. "It's always the same issues: tongues, jaws and breath," she says. "That's really about it. Singing is low-tech."

Merola surrounds its singers with experts in voice, languages, acting, breathing. And more: what to put in a résumé, what to wear to an audition -- "golden information," says Savage. He gleaned those practical tips from Greenawald's friends, who recently flew in from the Metropolitan Opera, Lyric Opera of Chicago and other top companies.

Van den Heever remembers singing in a Merola production of Britten's "The Rape of Lucretia" that forever changed her perception of opera's possibilities. She also remembers standing in front of a mirror -- as instructed by Greenawald, who is still her teacher -- with the tip of her index finger on the tip of her nose, a lesson in proper facial position while singing high notes.

Zajick says Merola has always taken a chance on singers who are a little "weird," with bold and unorthodox talents, leaning toward the dramatic side of the repertory. She was like that, she says. Van den Heever laughs gleefully, agreeing that she, too, is part of what Zajick calls the "Ugly Duckling Club."

Completing the circle, Zajick recruited Savage three years ago to her own Young Dramatic Voices summer institute in La Jolla, because "he has his own way of doing things. He's not going along with the herding instinct. I've discovered that the oddest singers -- when they get up on stage, they're the ones who can hold an audience."

Greenawald adds, "But I never think of them as ugly ducklings. I just think of them as great swans that just need a little help to sail on the pond."