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photo by Murry Sorrell/Metropolitan Opera



Opposite page: Dolora Zajick as Amneris in Verdi's *Aida*, Metropolitan Opera, 2007.

Left: Zajick works with countertenor Daniel Moody during the 2009 Institute for Young Dramatic Voices.

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Dolora Zajick and the Institute for Young Dramatic Voices

by Brian Manternach

Mezzo-soprano Dolora Zajick has had one of the most successful and long-running careers of any singer in recent decades. That success came after overcoming significant obstacles due to the size of her dramatic voice. Now, Zajick is determined to help the next generation of dramatic voices encounter fewer hurdles on the road to success than she did. Her ideas are revolutionary, including working on significant operatic repertoire with singers still in high school. But Zajick insists that when handled with care, these voices will thrive.

At the age of 12, Samantha Friedman had a startling conversation with her choir director. "Samantha," he said, "your voice is so big, I think you're going to ruin it in a few years."

Now a 19-year-old aspiring opera singer, Friedman vividly recalls the conversation. "I was devastated," she remembers, "I did not know what to think!" Despite the protestations of her voice teacher at the time, the pointed comments continued to stay with her.

"I never knew what was wrong with my voice," Friedman said. "I always thought I was stupid or behind because I had been studying voice many years longer than a lot of people and they seemed just farther ahead of me."

These experiences, among others, have caused her to seek a different kind of instruction and an approach that works with, rather than against, the natural attributes of her voice. For the past three summers she has found that instruction in the mountain town of Orem, Utah,

40 miles south of Salt Lake City, at the summer home of the Institute for Young Dramatic Voices—the brainchild of Dolora Zajick.

Hailed as "the opera world's top dramatic mezzo" (*Opera News*, Feb 2005, Vol. 69, No. 8), Zajick brings her wealth of performance experience to the program—but also a personal story of developing a dramatic voice amidst an instructional atmosphere that was often perplexed by just how to guide such voices.

Zajick answers Emily Buse's question during a vocal class.



"I was lucky in that I had a teacher that understood what my voice was from the very beginning," Zajick says. "I was in pretty good technical shape when I arrived to New York. But it wasn't refined yet. There were a lot of people at the school that did not understand me and there were a handful that did. I ran into a lot of flack for the size of my voice," she continues, "but because of that handful of people that understood, I stuck to my guns. I was told a thousand times that I was ruining my voice, but my

voice teacher said I wasn't, so I believed her."

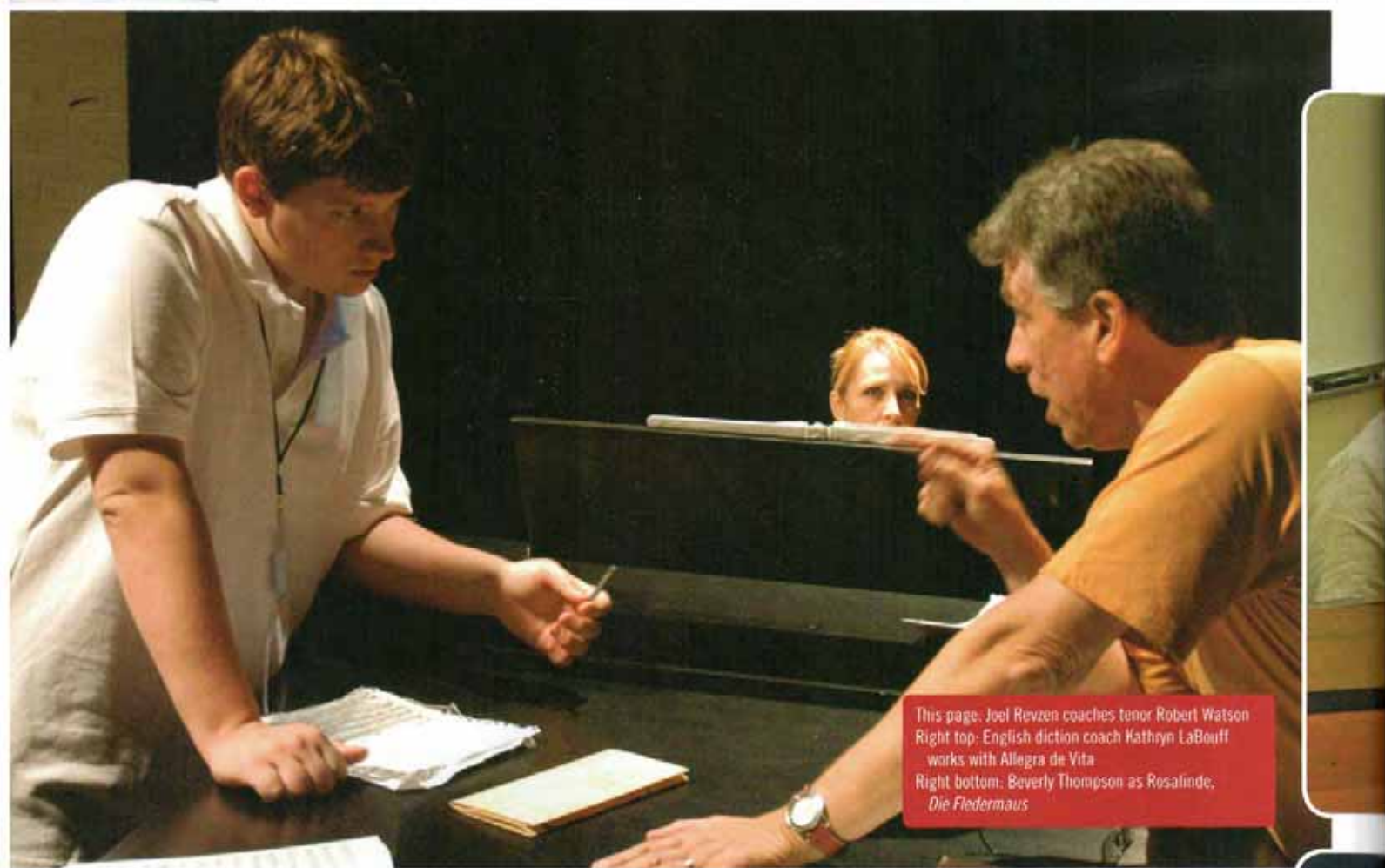
The Institute for Young Dramatic Voices provides much of what one would expect from a typical summer opera program: an experienced faculty, individual lessons and coachings, and performance opportunities. What makes this program unique, however, is a specific focus on singers with voices that do not seem to fit into traditional programs. As the Institute's website (www.the-zajick-program-for-young-

singers.org) indicates: "Our mission is to identify and nurture dramatic and unusual voices and guide those unique talents so that they reach the world's great opera stages."

The dearth of dramatic voices in today's opera houses is often bemoaned by aficionados as well as casting directors. Zajick believes that the failure to treat these voices differently at a young age has contributed to the phenomenon. "People were complaining, 'Where are all the Verdi/Wagner singers?'" she says. "Their voices take longer to control. Because some people have difficulty knowing what to do with a major voice, these kids ended up in a place where by the time they were old enough . . . they weren't schooled in the other things. They hadn't had experience on stage, and they were working against the experience of their more lyric colleagues who get it together sooner vocally."

Zajick explains, "I saw many gifted dramatic voices not make it because a lot of places and people don't quite understand sometimes how you deal with a large voice." She says, "A large, young, dramatic voice is a little like a baby elephant trying to walk down a flight of stairs. You have to give them bigger stairs [*laughs*] until they can do the more intricate things."

Besides highlighting the need to treat larger voices differently from a technical and developmental standpoint, Zajick also feels that such voices can be



This page: Joel Revzen coaches tenor Robert Watson
Right top: English diction coach Kathryn LaBouff works with Allegra de Vita
Right bottom: Beverly Thompson as Rosalinde, *Die Fledermaus*

“This program is designed to spot those dramatic singers—potential dramatic voices—that are very young and get them before the damage is done. And to give them a place where they can grow.”

identified at a much younger age than they are traditionally classified. “Most dramatic voices pretty much emerge by the time they’re 22,” she says. “Most people have this idea that, ‘Oh, I’ll be a dramatic in 10 years.’ It usually isn’t that way.”

“I remember when we did a masterclass in San Diego,” she continues. “We asked for kids between the ages of 15 and 26. The larger voices were in the younger kids and not in the older kids, which we thought was interesting. What happened to them? But I do know what happened, because I ran up against many of those hurdles myself. So I decided that there needed to be a solution.”

In order to identify and guide the development of each singer, the Institute for Young Dramatic Voices has several categories which singers are placed into.

“We have four levels,” Zajick explains. “The first level is called the Discovery Program and it’s for the entry-level singers that have had absolutely no experience singing or had very little experience singing—basically the raw talents.” Students in the Discovery Program typically range from age 15 to 22, although the age limits can be somewhat arbitrary based on the needs of the individual voices. As Zajick describes, “Sometimes you get a raw talent that’s 22 that knocks your socks off.”

The second category is the Introductory Level, which involves students in the same age group as those in the Discovery Program but who have more training and experience. “That way,” Zajick explains, “we can accommodate both levels and then, when a student rises to the occasion and has the right kind of voice, we move them into the other program.”

Singers between age 23 and 30 enter the Intermediate Program designed to accommodate students who are preparing to enter training programs or are already participating in such programs. For example, one of the past summer’s participants, soprano Rachel Willis-Sørensen, is currently a Studio Artist with the Houston Grand Opera.

The final category is the Advanced Student, for singers age 27 to 35. Zajick refers to this as “an older category . . . for a singer that is just about ready to embark on their career and they already have management or they already have engagements and they’re just coming here for polish and technical [work].”

While the program has seen just three summers, Zajick declares, “We’re there with them for the long haul.” She



says, “This program is designed to spot those dramatic singers—potential dramatic voices—that are very young and get them before the damage is done. And to give them a place where they can grow.

“I think that teachers have a tendency to err on the side of caution,” Zajick explains, “which is great for a lyric voice, but it’s really bad news for a more dramatic voice because then the voice never actually gets emotion. So, the first step when you’re working with a dramatic voice is just to get the whole voice rolling so all the registers are lined up and so there’s focus in the sound and it’s well supported. You don’t work a lot on dynamic control—you work more on rhythmic expression.”

Twenty-five-year-old Intermediate participant Willis-Sorensen agrees. “I think what most of us experience . . . is that people don’t really understand what your voice is, so they think it will be easier for you if you sing small. So what most people end up doing is holding. When you have a big voice, it naturally sounds a little more mature and people are always worried that you’re hurting yourself if you use all of it. But actually,” she continues, “you’re hurting yourself by pretending like you have a little voice. That’s a muscular tension that could really do damage in the long term.”

With the younger students in the Institute, Zajick stresses correct linguistic articulation, attention to rhythm and tempo, and singing “vocally correctly” as more important elements than dynamic change, which “takes a higher level of sophistication.”

“Big voices have particular trouble with [dynamic changes] in the beginning because they’re just trying to get it rolling. Then they get with a teacher that will say, ‘Well, if it’s big, you must be pushing.’ While that wisdom is right for most aspiring singers,” Zajick says, “it’s not right for dramatic voices. If they’re properly supporting, they’re not pushing. The whole thing is not to make your voice bigger than it is or to make your voice smaller than it is—it’s to let it roll.”

Nineteen-year-old Discovery Program

singer Jonathan Cawley relates to this experience. “Throughout my entire life of performing . . . I was always told, ‘Can you go a little softer, a little softer, a little softer?’ Because I was always trying to bring down my volume, instead of supporting and bringing down the volume . . . I was tightening up the back of my tongue. All of my volume I was controlling with my tongue. So, one of the biggest things here that has changed is I find that I’m looser. It’s freer in the areas that it needs to be to prevent any vocal damage in the future.”

This past summer, the majority of the participants were in the Introductory Level. However, the six students in the Discovery Program—some as young as 15—were given their own scene from *The Merry Widow* to perform.

“One of the misperceptions about opera singing is that it takes a long time to be able to sing in a performance,” Zajick states. “The truth of the matter is that a hundred years ago, they were starting their debuts a decade earlier than they do now. Singers now have to

“With the younger students in the Institute, Zajick stresses correct linguistic articulation, attention to rhythm and tempo, and singing ‘vocally correctly’ as more important elements than dynamic change, which ‘takes a higher level of sophistication.’”

wait until they reach a certain physical maturity in order to sing those roles.” She cites several reasons, including larger theaters, larger orchestras, and

instruments that are “more sonorous” than their earlier counterparts. “Our philosophy is that if you sing it in a small venue, it’s OK.”

Adding her personal experience, she says, “I learned the role of Azucena at 24 and a lot of people would say, ‘That’s a terrible thing to do.’ But for me it was the right thing because I had the right kind of voice.” She further illustrates the point by saying, “I’ve been told that teaching chest voice will ruin singers. Well, I’ve been ruining my voice for 35 years!” she chuckles.

Certain precautions are taken for the youngest singers in the Institute to ensure their success. “First of all,” Zajick explains, “when you’re that young, you can’t sing more than a half hour a day. You just can’t. I would rather they honestly sing and that we restrict it to a very short period of time so they know what singing really is. What happens is people get into a saving mode and then that’s how they perform. Then they don’t really use their voices and they don’t really use their breathing. So, you want them to use their whole range, but you want them to use it within their capabilities.”

She continues, “For example, we would not expect a 15-year-old to know how to cover, but we would definitely be teaching it to a 21-year-old. We have a 16-year-old—we’ve touched on cover. He’s not ready to fully cover beyond a couple of pitches, but he already understands the intermediary process.”

This approach to the voice allows time for these same students to “get what they miss,” as Zajick states. “They get acting lessons every day. They get body movement every day. They get aerobics every day. They get Italian and English diction every day. And next year, if we can afford it, we’re adding our German coach.

Because our focus is going to be Verdi and Wagner, we have to start developing our German wing now. We’re going to be expanding to that just as soon as we can increase our funding.”

Providing necessary training, therefore, beyond the strictly vocal is an equally important focus of the Institute. “They get to be on stage, they get to perform, they get to move around,” Zajick says. “And we’re giving the technical expertise that sometimes they miss because everybody’s trying to protect them because they don’t want to hurt their voices.”

In an effort to carefully monitor the progress of the most vulnerable voices, the youngest singers in the Institute are given significant individualized attention. “They’re not allowed to sing too high unless they’re being supervised,” Zajick says. “The younger you are, the more supervised you are about your practicing time. The older you get, the less supervision you need.”

This supervision comes from a handpicked faculty that Zajick describes as “acceptable in any opera company.” She explains, “The theory is that if you find the really great voices and the kids that have real musicality and put them with great coaches and voice teachers, that can only be a winning situation.”

She further describes the faculty as “opera experts who have had experience with young voices as well.” She highlights the need for this specific knowledge base: “There’s an expertise there that’s absolutely necessary when you’re working with fragile voices—so that you know when they’re not pushing. And you have to know where those lines are so that you know where a big voice really needs to go.”

The 16-member teaching faculty of the 2009 Institute for Young Dramatic Voices included such accomplished artists as



maestro Joel Revzen, who has been on the Metropolitan Opera conducting staff since 1999, and coach Kathleen Kelly, who is head of the music staff at Houston Grand Opera and music director of the HGO Studio. Kathryn LaBouff, assistant chair of the voice faculty at the Manhattan School of Music, serves the Institute as English diction coach and the director of community and academic relations.

Vocal instructor and Institute Artistic Director Rosemary Mathews has performed more than 20 leading operatic roles and taught at various colleges and universities before becoming a music educator in public schools. Richard Elder Adams, vice president emeritus of the Manhattan School of Music, serves as a guest instructor/consultant.

This impressively credentialed faculty works collaboratively with every student. As Zajick describes, "We consult each other—everything is team taught. One person [alone] doesn't teach them. We

very carefully look where the students make the most progress, and that's where we put them."

It was this cooperative aspect of the program that most impressed Adams on his first visit to the Institute as a guest instructor. "I've just been overwhelmed with the whole quality of the teaching and the responses I can hear from one day to the next, almost. The students are so engaged, and I think that comes from the quality of the teaching."

Regarding Zajick's teaching, Adams says, "She has a very, very good analytical ear. She knows how to reach right to them and communicate verbally what they need."

He acknowledges the counter-cultural approach to the Institute. "More programs than not really discourage people from doing the very thing that they're doing here. Some schools don't even allow [students] to begin arias until they're 20. But Dolora's not saying that

every student out there should be doing this. It's just these voices that have a very particular potential."

Zajick contrasts the Institute with other programs through the attention given to each individual. At some conservatories, for instance, "everything is classroom taught and a lot of things fall through the cracks. They tell the kids, 'Well, you've got to practice, practice, practice,' but they don't tell them how to practice. Here . . . everything is done in steps so that they learn *how* to learn music."

Zajick admits that what she is doing may raise questions among voice teachers. She responds, "The proof is in the pudding. We just need time to prove our point, that's all."

Seventeen-year-old Introductory Level student Chynna Roose is satisfied. "They just whipped me into shape! I mean, I'm not there yet, but they gave me an idea of what I'm supposed to be doing. They really did something marvelous."

Willis-Sørensen also appreciates the high level of instruction and understanding. “To be given allowance to sing with your full voice . . . feels awesome. And obviously [Zajick] would never let us do it without supporting, without using the natural resonance that exists in the human voice, and figuring out how to access the ease,” she says. “It’s easier for a big voice to sing loud. That’s pretty much a given. But, once you figure out how to use your resonance, like Dolora teaches, and your support, then you can sing at any dynamic level. But before then you shouldn’t really be squeezing it into a little box. It’s bad. It’s unhealthy. It’s probably the undoing of many a large voice.”

The showcase performance that closed the 2009 Institute for Young Dramatic Voices displayed all of what Zajick had described. The first portion of the program featured arias from *La*

bohème, *The Queen of Spades*, *Adriana Lecouvreur*, and others, with singers ranging in age from 17 to 21.

The second half, which included scenes from *Carmen*, *Falstaff*, *Don Giovanni*, and *Le nozze di Figaro*, among others, was highlighted by the final scene of *Aida* sung by a 19-year-old Amneris, 21-year-old Radamès, and 25-year-old Aida. With each performance, the singers appeared comfortable on stage, sang expressively, and were lacking any visible excessive tension.

In summarizing the Institute, one of the students said, “The word ‘nurturing’ keeps coming to mind.” True to form, following the interviews and showcase performance, Zajick was like a proud parent. She asked, “Did you enjoy the show? Can you believe how young they are? How did you like that 21-year-old tenor as Radamès? How did you like that 16-year-old tenor that sang Fenton? And

then there’s that 17-year-old bass who sang Leporello!”

The appreciative audience of mostly family members mixed in with local music enthusiasts included an older gentleman who, after perusing the program, suspiciously asked the woman next to him, “What is ‘La bome?’” She corrected him, “‘La bo-*heem*.’ It’s an opera.” Perhaps some authorities in the operatic world may have a similar reaction toward Zajick’s nontraditional approach to training dramatic voices at young ages—confused and more than a bit skeptical.

Zajick, however, acknowledges that while the Institute is certainly not for every singer wishing to pursue an operatic career, she is thankful for the good fortune in her own life of having teachers who understood how to guide her voice as it developed. “But,” she says, “I saw a lot of colleagues that

Zajick as the title role, *Joan of Arc*, San Francisco Opera, 2006

weren't that lucky. When I was older, I could tell the difference—but when I was these kids' age, there's no way I would have been able to tell the difference. So, I'm here to guide them. That's the purpose. And I firmly believe that if you give me 10 years—and that's seven years more from this point—I can increase the number of Wagnerian and Verdi singers. I know that's a little bravado, but I think I can do it—if I live long enough!" she laughs.

Introductory Level singer Samantha Friedman is clearly convinced, especially when she considers how far she has come from the day her choir director made comments that could have derailed her career aspirations. "If you heard me three years ago, I sounded like a very light, average, high school singer," she says. "Now I feel like I sound more like a young opera singer—a young opera singer in training. I feel like Dolora, along with all these other teachers, is really pushing me along and really forming me into a top-level opera singer, which is what I want."

While providing those like Friedman with what they want, the Institute for Young Dramatic Voices may also be providing the operatic world exactly what it needs.

Tenor Brian Manternach has appeared throughout the country in opera, recitals, and concert work. In the last year he has presented recitals at colleges and universities in Michigan, Minnesota, Oklahoma, Texas, and Utah. Manternach has taught studio voice at the University of Notre Dame and is currently the director of Choral/Vocal Activities at Juan Diego Catholic High School near Salt Lake City. He holds degrees in vocal performance from Saint John's University of Minnesota (BA), the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (MM), and the Indiana University Jacobs School of Music (Doctor of Music). E-mail the author at bmantern@gmail.com.

