

## Opera 'Susannah' debuts at Circle Arts

By Sara Samora The Herald-Zeitung. April 28, 2019

When the scene of Carlisle Floyd's "Susannah" opens with a square dance, an audience member may think they are attending a speaking play or maybe a musical.

But when the cast opened their mouths, it's not spoken nor is it quite musical.

Instead, the voices are loud, vibrating and in your face. When they annunciate, the southern twang is still there.

It suits "Susannah," set in a rural mountain town in Tennessee in the 1950s, where a young woman is badmouthed and condemned by the townspeople for grabbing the attention of men.

"These are issues and people that we know anybody here is going to sit up there and go, 'that's just like my Uncle Fred,'" said [Cindy Sadler](#), stage director. "You know everybody's going to recognize somebody in this opera."

The new organization has also completed their inaugural season, and they are ending it with Floyd's piece.

Elizabeth Herlitz Cortés, a New Braunfels native and who plays the lead of "Susannah," said for the first time in Circle Arts' 40-year existence, the theatre has opened its doors to another company, and it happened to be the [Texas Concert Opera Collective](#).

It was fortunate for Cortés and company; many of their past performances have been at Seguin High School, with whom they partnered throughout the season. Additionally, SHS's Matador choir has performed with the TCOC as their chorus for three of their four shows in exchange for utilizing the school's performance arts center for free.

"One of our big missions is to provide opera for all students between Austin and San Antonio for free for our area," Cortés said.

However for the final performance of the season, they were unable to book “Susannah” at Seguin High School, for the space was already occupied there. That’s when Circle Arts stepped in.

“We considered it a blessing,” Cortés said. “The Greater New Braunfels Arts Council was also key in getting us to getting us the space, and they’ve been fantastic, so right now we believe that rising tide lifts all good.”

Cindy Sadler, stage director for the show, told the cast that Circle Arts was a great space for opera.

“When you get to experience this kind of thing up close and personal, which is not usually how people experience opera, it really makes a difference,” Sadler said. “This opera is not grand opera, it’s not a big spectacle. It’s very real, it’s very modern.”

In a scene where the preacher, Olin Blitch, bass-baritone [John Marcus Bindel](#) stares into the audience as he sings how Susannah needed to confess her sins. There’s intensity in his eyes and on his face; he doesn’t have a microphone, nor does the rest of the cast. They don’t need it. Bindel’s intense glare along with the booming voice can make anyone feel they are at a Sunday service, and not an opera.

“So opera singers generally don’t use mics,” Sadler said. “The only time you’ll see opera singers using mics is if they’re in an outdoor arena. But as you can see it’s not needed.”

Sadler is an opera singer herself, a contralto. She added that opera singers were trained to sing over orchestras, over each other, and big choruses.

“That’s the function of acoustics,” she said.

Sadler added that they had tried to stage the show in such a way that it includes the audience.

“I think having it so intimate is going to make that experience even more special for people,” she said. “We’ve deliberately done that, so I hope that

they're going to enjoy that and enjoy the audience participation aspect of that which John brings to us so beautifully."

Their next performance will be at the Shakespeare in the Village Festival in June. They have also received grant money from the occupancy and tourism fund and soon, they will get to vote on what to perform next for their second season.

"We're all singers so we get together and we choose what we sing together as a collective," Cortés said. "All of the roles that we want to sing which is actually not how it's done in the regular business and in other businesses and within other larger companies."

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