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Backstage At The Opera

Piedmont Opera Theatre's production of Mozart's "The Marriage of Figaro" is coming to Winston-Salem April 7, 9 and 11. If you are interested in what it will take to put it together, what kind of people compile an opera's shopping list and who does it all, read on.

Let's start with General Director Norman Johnson -- quiet, soft-spoken, disarmingly modest, not your average impresario. Before one opera is over he's already out shopping for the next. "I'll need thirty singers for the chorus, nine soloists, about thirty-five musicians in the pit..."

And the cost? Last year's successful production of "Lucia di Lammermoor" cost $103,000 for three performances. You could buy a Rolls Royce for that, which is a pretty apt comparison since opera is generally acknowledged to be the Rolls Royce of art forms. Johnson insists on shopping for the best. "We only have about two weeks to put this performance together," he says, "so I get people who really know their craft."

Shopping for musicians is a formidable task. Most of us who have plodded

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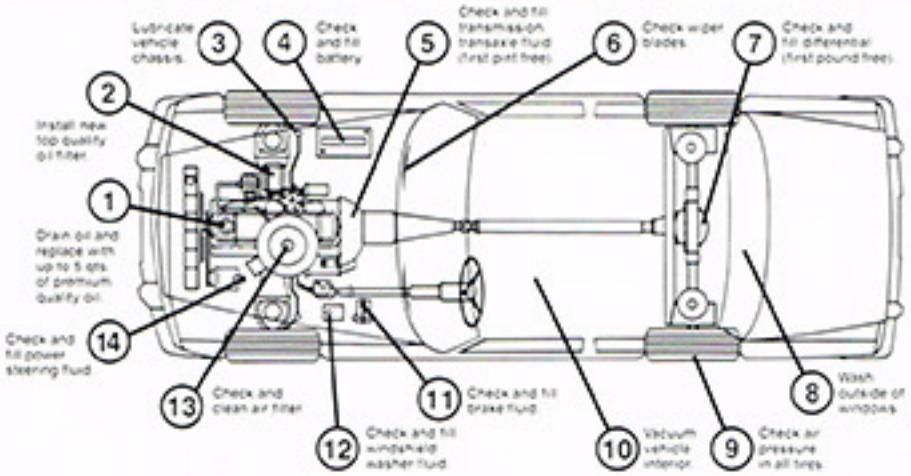

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through childhood lessons on an instrument would take one look at the average opera score and echo the Emperor's line in "Amadeus," "Too many notes!" Fortunately, Piedmont Opera can engage members of the Winston-Salem Symphony to do the job. Most of these players know the score by the time they come to the first rehearsal. The first time principal horn Fred Bergstone played "The Marriage of Figaro" was with the New York City Opera. "I had to sight read it!" he says. "Of course, since then I've played it maybe a half dozen times, but I don't mind playing it again, not Mozart. I'd say he's pretty much the greatest genius of opera."

Finding singers can be harder than finding musicians. In Piedmont Opera performances the leading roles are sung by full-time, professional singers who are flown in from New York, Los Angeles and San Francisco. They arrive two weeks before the opera opens. For three weeks they will leave behind their spouses and children to come and live in a strange city (ours) and concentrate on one thing -- opera! Being an opera singer doesn't sound like a very strenuous profession, but the tiny, inch-long muscles that control the vocal cords take the most grueling punishment. Imagine working out with muscles smaller than your little finger for two-and-a-half hours straight (the average length of an opera), and you'll understand why those muscles can easily become strained.

Somewhere in between the leading roles and the chorus are what's called the supporting roles -- the maid, the doctor, the gardener. Bill and Carolyn Stevens have sung supporting roles in several Piedmont Opera Theatre productions. Bill jokes that he does all the "stuttering lawyer roles" (for some reason several operas contain lawyers who stutter). The Stevens live in Winston-Salem, so they can stay in their own home. But being in an opera still requires sacrifice. "We have to be ready to rehearse from 1 p.m. to 10 or 11 p.m. at night," says Carolyn. "That makes it tough to schedule baby sitters and car pools."

Unlike the stars, who are on stage most

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of the time during a performance, singers in supporting roles spend a lot of time in the dressing room waiting to go on.

"Last year I took in my computer," Bill says. "I guess it looked kind of strange, me sitting there in a powdered wig and knee britches working away on a computer."

How early does a performer have to show up for work on the night of a show? It depends on a host of things: How complicated your make-up is, how soon in the show you make an entrance, and, frankly, how important your role is. Wig and make-up designer Martha Ruskai begins her make-up sessions about two and a half hours before curtain time. She schedules the supporting roles first, then tries to get the principals made up with just enough time to put on their costumes, warm up their voices and go on. "I allow half an hour for each face," says Ruskai, "so if someone's late it really throws off the schedule."

All the singers playing roles in "The Marriage of Figaro" will wear wigs, which was the fashion in Mozart's time, even for men. It takes an expert wig maker about 40 hours to make a wig, hand tying each group of two or three hairs into a mesh base. Ruskai says a bundle of quality human hair 1 yard long and 2 inches in diameter costs her $1,000. Once made, however, a wig will last for about 25 operas, with really good care.

Most performers show up at the make-up table dressed in their favorite floppy bathrobe. Once they're finished there the wardrobe supervisor takes over.

"Making sure everyone gets dressed is my first concern on a performance night," says Lisa Roberts, wardrobe supervisor. But she has to be ready for any emergency throughout the performance. Once she was given an urgent

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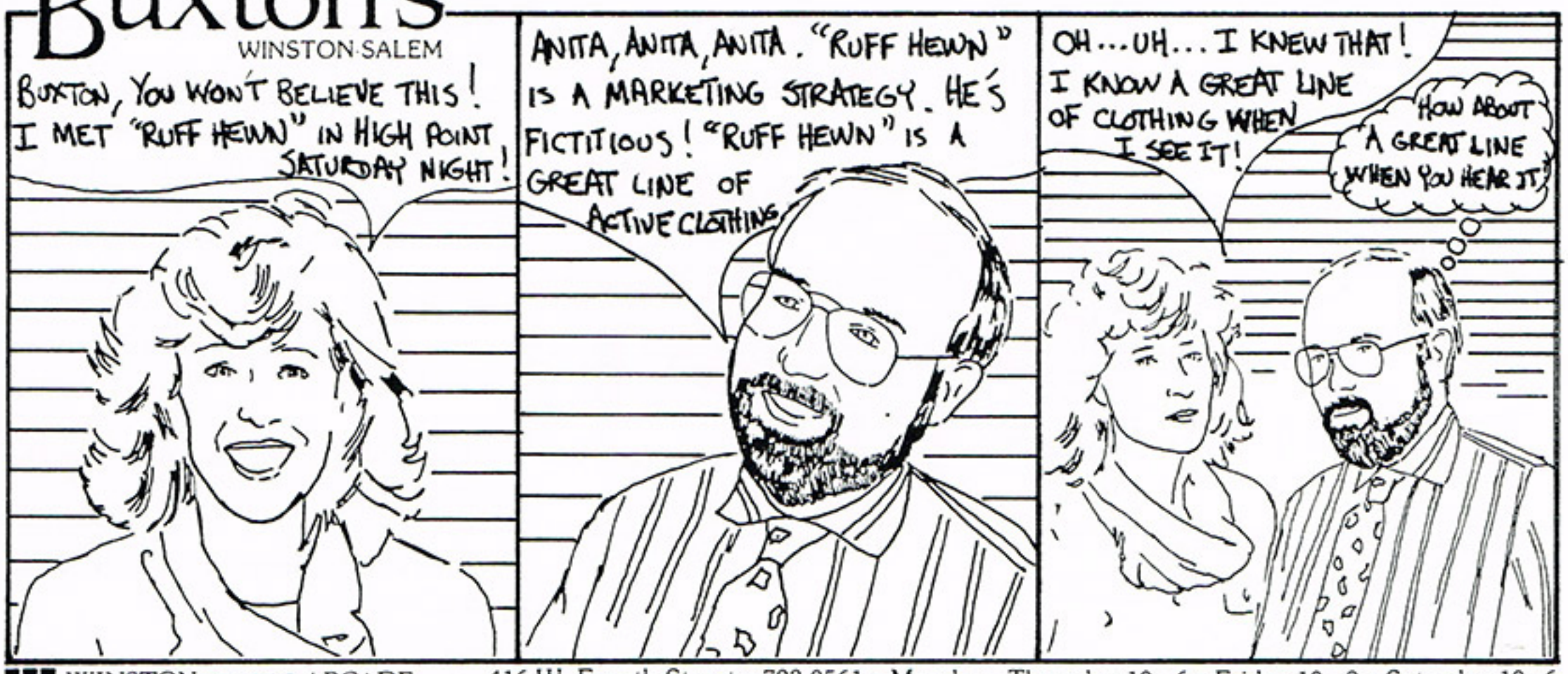

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call to rush to the side of the stage immediately. The tenor had split his pants. Desperately, she sewed him back into them while the soprano was singing her solo, just in time for him to reappear and join her in a duet.

The costumes for "The Marriage of Figaro" are rented from a company in Toronto, Canada. They usually are shipped two weeks in advance, but once they skipped customs inspection in Buffalo and disappeared. Opening night drew closer and closer while frantic efforts were made to locate the missing costumes. Finally they were traced to a customs warehouse in Greensboro where they had been impounded; the paperwork was not in order. Luckily they were released two days before opening night.

The scenery is the first part of the production to go into the Stevens Center. Technical director Jim Hullihan supervises a stage crew of up to six electricians and 10 to 12 carpenters in the all-day "load-in." Hullihan will have studied the plans in advance, but when the scenery comes off the truck he and his crew will have to figure out how to piece it all together. Unlike Legos, it doesn't come with directions.

Most stage hands come into the production because it's a family tradition; their fathers were stage hands before them. It's OK pay, but hard work and awful hours. Sometimes, it's even dangerous. Hullihan recalls trying to stage a special flashing effect when one of the singers was making a particularly villainous exit. "We used a 'flash pot,' which is a mixture of photographic flash powder, sparkle additive and an electric match. The first time we tried it I think we put in a bit too much flash powder -- the explosion was enormous, much too big a bang," Hullihan says. "The singer was very surprised. We toned it down after that."

Any special hazardous effects in "The Marriage of Figaro?"

"We're not planning any," Hullihan says, "but..."