

Entertainment

Opera neophytes treated to some 'raw' talent

Balboa Performing Arts presents 'Opera in the Raw,' designed to bring the artform to new audiences.

By Jessie Brunner

Glenn and Mindy Stearns are looking forward to the sound of resonating music in their home, which they hope will muffle the exclamations of their 15-month-old daughter Brooke.

On Jan. 28, the couple — who starred as the Howells on the reality TV show "The Real Gilligan's Island" — will host the Balboa Performing Arts Theater Foundation's presentation of "Opera in the Raw" at their Pelican Hill villa. Created by Opera Pacific, "Opera in the Raw" is designed to bring opera to new audiences in an informal and intimate setting.

"We haven't been very schooled in the world of opera, but we have an appreciation for bringing culture and entertainment to Orange County in any way we can," said Mindy Stearns, whose living room will be cleared out to hold a stage and about 100 chairs.

Seven professionally trained Opera Pacific singers will present an abridged, English-language version of Gaetano Donizetti's "The Elixir of Love," with the musical accompaniment of the Stearns family piano.

The comedic opera tells the story of a simple peasant, Nemorino, who falls in love with the wealthy and much-admired town beauty, Adina. A love triangle is forged when a chauvinistic sergeant, Belcore, makes an abrupt pass at the young lady, forcing the young man to rely on the charms of a magical love potion.

With minimal props and dressed in simple costumes, "Opera in the Raw" promises audiences an atypical opera experience that is accessible to anyone.

"For people new to opera, it's a great introduction, and for people who know opera in and out, it's a great opportunity to experience it in a new and exciting way," said James Martin Schaefer, who has been performing with Opera Pacific since 2003 and will star as the arrogant Belcore in the Jan. 28 performance.

The rare style of opera offers singers like Schaefer a chance to further develop their characters and voices, as they do not have to worry about projecting their voices throughout a large theater. The 30-year-old singer said it is a "powerful experience" for both artists and audience members to break down the "fourth wall" of theater that normally separates the two entities.

As part of the Balboa Performing Arts Theater Foundation's Season Without Walls, overcoming that divide was precisely the goal of the show.

"It's so immediate and up close, you don't feel intimidated at all," said Christopher Trela, director of marketing and development for the organization. "The singers are more relaxed and that makes the audience more relaxed, letting them get into it more."

The Season Without Walls is set to include two more events this year. They will present the Orange County Pacific Symphony's American Composers Festival concert "Los Sonidos de Mexico" on Apr. 20 in the Orange County Performing Arts Center's Samueli Theatre, and on June 3, Flamenco guitarist Emilio will perform at the Bowers Museum in Santa Ana.

Because of the limited seating available for "Opera in the Raw," attendees must have a subscription to the series, which is available for \$70. For more information call (949) 673-0895.