

## Take Us Home With You ...We Want To Live!

By Bob Bernard

It was a family parade — or a parade of families, if you will.

Leading the way was an indigenous Guatemalan matriarch, her jaw set, followed by two stumbling, confused youngsters, whom looked to be her grand-children. Next came a young woman — the children's mother, weeping silently. Next in line was a white couple, the woman also weeping, with a Mayan baby cradled in her arms. The parade reached the door and exited into the hotel's lobby. The Guatemalans turned left, out to the parking lot; the white couple, with the baby, turned right, toward the hotel's elevators.

It was the final movement in another episode of the booming Guatemalan baby adoption industry, a business that, at its peak, resulted in an annual exportation of 1% of the country's population.

Is that operatic enough for you?

Well, it certainly was for writer Cynthia Ferrell, experiencing an epiphanic moment while vacationing at the Marriot hotel in Guatemala City. Being moved emotionally, this occasion inspired Ms. Ferrell to begin her first opera libretto two years ago.

Recall:

Los Angeles Opera has commissioned eight operas in recent memory: *Florencia en el Amazonas*, *Fantastic Mr. Fox*, *Nicholas and Alexandra*, *Grendel*, *Alice in Wonderland*, *The First Emperor*, *The Fly*, and *Il Postino*. *Florencia* was based upon the "magical realism" writings of Gabriel Garcia Marquez; the settings for both *Nicholas & Alexandra* and *The First Emperor* were based upon historical references; *Grendel* was inspired by the epic poem Beowulf; and *Alice*, *Fly*, and *Fox* had their origins in books. In September we shall see the premiere of *Il Postino*, a work drawing its inspiration from the story by Antonio Skármeta and the Italianized film with the same title.

In all cases, what has been available to Los Angeles' audiences has been the finished product. In order to understand the intermediate steps that follow from an original concept on the way to a staged opera, we spoke at length with librettist Cynthia Ferrell.

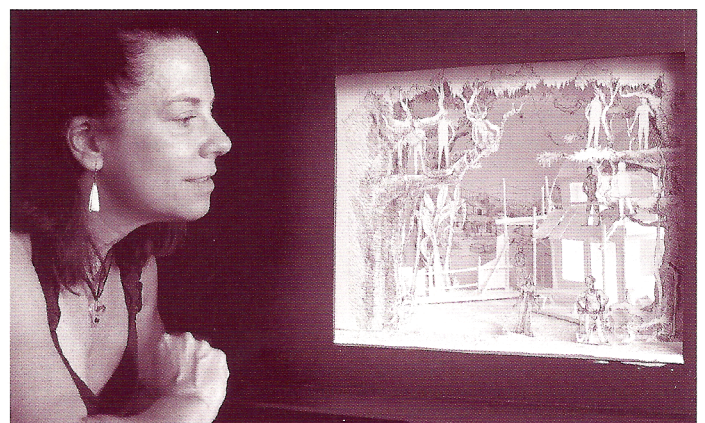
It is not an idle boast that radio station KUSC regularly proclaims our community to be 'The creative capitol of the world'. It was at one of our artist gathering places, international dramaturge Donald Freed's weekly Brentwood symposium, where librettist Ferrell fully developed her concept. At another venue, the Academy for New Musical Theatre in North Hollywood, Ferrell and composer Peter Michael von der Nahmer began their collaboration.

Ms. Ferrell, a prolific writer, has a multi-faceted literary career, including stage and screenplays, essays, musicals, and publishing in her portfolio. A Los Angeles native, she won undergraduate film awards at UCLA, and the Jerome Lawrence Fellowship, Conquest Prize and Phi Kappa Nu Creativity Medal during her Masters studies at USC. Her awards include citations from the New Orleans /Tennessee Williams Literary Festival, the Jerome Lawrence Play Festival, and the Writer's Digest International Writing Competition.

Mr. von der Nahmer, a native of Munich, was educated there and at the Aspen Music School, also earning certification in film scoring from UCLA. His compositional style has been likened to the minimalist melodic writing of American composer John Adams. In 2004, the Society for New Music awarded him their Dr. J. H. Auchinloss prize for his quartet, "The Monk and the Fish."

Although Ms. Ferrell's revelatory moment occurred at the five-star Marriot hotel [complete with "Baby Lounge", a place where prospective parents view and briefly hold and play with the infants they are negotiating to adopt], she, however, set her opera in the Mayan jungle, the locale where the prelude and postlude to those cross-cultural hotel dramas are lived. Here are the principals: Roo, a young mother who, in a process of commodified procreation, "harvests" her babies for adoption to couples from overseas; Polo, her young brother; Denis, her father; and Itzel, an unmarried cousin. The opera's central crisis is the dual nature of the adoption trade, a system that promotes "kangaroo mothers" — *El Canguro*.

Preliminary set design has taken the form of a tabletop model by local artist Clare Graham.



Librettist Cynthia Ferrell, studying the tabletop set design made of intricately cut paper with various removable sections.

Initial compositional work has been accomplished with von der Nahmer, with whom Ferrell currently collaborates on a Spektrum Villa Musica commissioned song cycle, *Angelesos*.

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*We Want to Live, continued from page 7*

Herrenhaus Edenkoben, Hungarian Composer Peter Eötvös' international workshop for conductors near Frankfurt, sponsored a portrait concert of *El Canguro* arias last May. Looking ahead, Great Britain's York Theatre Royal has offered its performance space for an *El Canguro* workshop, but right now, in common with recent artistic endeavors at LAO and other artistic organizations, money gremlins have mandated a pause in the creative process.

A sample audio recording, using an early draft from the score, was made at Moonlight Studios.

In the Pirandello tragicomedy, "Six Characters in Search of an Author", six personae are condemned to play out — in reiterative fashion — their stories, which are based, by our modern-day standards, upon a morality that is most dated.

Conversely, in *El Canguro*, librettist Cynthia Ferrell tells the stories of Roo, Polo, Denis, and Itzel, four all-too-real characters who play out stories that, unfortunately, depict a current morality — or immorality, if you will — that is existent every day in the Mayan jungles. This true-to-life melodrama is also played out repetitiously.

The Pirandello drama was staged as part of the Los Angeles Olympic Arts Festival. As the audience exited the Wadsworth Theater in 1984, each one of us walked past a full-size cutout of the six characters and heard their (pre-recorded) voices, pleading with us, "Take us home with you. We want to live!"

One wonders: Which opera company and which stage director will adopt Roo, Polo, Denis, and Itzel? One senses that they will find a home because, just as with the Pirandello characters, they "want to live" .... They must live.



*Production engineer Jeff Lewis and composer Michael von der Nahmer, on station during the recording session at Moonlight Studios*

*Photo: Chuck Lewis*



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- ★ Master Class with Eric Halvarson  
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- ★ Fourth Opera League Seminar  
"Die Gezeichneten" (The Stigmatized)  
April 10, 2010
- ★ Tony Palmer "Wagner" Film Festival  
May 22-23, 2010

See p.5 for more information