



DUET: George Stevens as Figaro with Zandile Gwebityala as Susanna.

LEADS, PRODUCTION TEAM SHINE

Worthy tribute to Mozart

LE NOZZE DI FIGARO (The Marriage of Figaro) conducted by Kamal Khan, directed by Chuck Hudson, designed by Michael Mitchell, lighting by John Baker, with George Stevens, Zandile Gwebityala, Pretty Yende, Amos Nomnabo, Sophie Harmsen, Sunnyboy Dladla, Noluthando Mili, Thamsanqua Khaba, Bulelani Madondile; UCT Symphony Orchestra and Opera Chorus, until Saturday. **DEON IRISH** reviews.

THE ANNUAL UCT Opera School production has always been one of the most enjoyable events of the Cape Town musical year and this year's offering of *The Marriage of Figaro*, in recognition of the 250th anniversary of Mozart's birth, proved no exception.

To be accurate, it isn't entirely a student production, with a most welcome guest star in the form of Bremen-based George Stevens, and the collaboration with CTO apparent in the presence of several members of that company's Opera Studio.

Overall credit must obviously go to a production team, who have worked long and hard to achieve so fluent a production, especially one which moves at this pace.

Hudson's direction is a winning combination of textual and historical fidelity, coupled with just enough leeway to ensure a surprising degree of contemporary currency.

Hudson's attention to detail in characterisation is exemplary and the result is a set of characters who are believable as fiction, but recognisable as types in our own experience.

He has been helped with a clever stage set which creates magnificence by inference and adapts to the four scenes wholly convincingly.

Costuming is richly attractive, although the one cavil was the rather gross decoration of the Countess's otherwise lovely gown.

Khan does a marvellous job with his largely student orchestra, which includes a handful of teachers. This is not a score to be trifled with; in its transparency and re-

quired delicacy, precision and balance, it presents a stern test to the best of orchestras.

I don't recall a better performance by a UCT student orchestra in the many years I have been attending these productions. The playing is exceptional, and speaks of hard work by conductor and players.

What Khan can take personal credit for is the sure stylistic sense, including a frequently witty harpsichord continuo, and delicately rigid control of ensemble. That might sound like a contradiction; it isn't.

In a work that abounds with set pieces (from duets up to septets), a breakdown of ensemble between singers and between stage and pit is an ever-present danger.

It was instructive to see the firmness with which Khan controlled the slightest tendencies to lose rhythmic cohesion.

Moving from pit to stage, one starts with Stevens's Figaro, a marvellous portrayal of a loved character.

This Figaro shows his teeth, occasionally; perhaps the 18th century censors knew what they were doing when they classified the piece as "subversive".

On opening night, Stevens was struck by 'flu and looked very ill backstage.

Sheer professionalism ensured that one barely got a glimpse of that in a performance which radiated energy, self-confidence and even apparent enjoyment.

Fortunately, his voice was largely unaffected; how he managed such breath control remains a mystery.

The other highlight of the evening was Yende's Countess.

The second act commences with the soprano plunged straight into the cavatina, *Porgi, Amor*, rather like a concerto slow movement for voice.

There was understandably a slight tension in the voice, which tended slightly sharp on a few intervals; but, as soon as she settled down, one simply luxuriated in true vocal beauty.

Her characterisation is faultless, never losing her dignity or sense of self. One waited for the *Dove sono* expectantly and the wait was triumphantly justified. But there was yet another treat in store: a hauntingly beautiful account of the gorgeous duet, *Che soave zeffiretto*, with Gwebityala, a newcomer who was constantly engaging in the unusually substantial soubrette role of Susanna.

Of the other characters, Harmsen's Cherubino was a pleasingly credible portrayal and her *Voi che sapete* another highlight. The Count was engagingly portrayed by Nomnabo, although his voice needs to develop more "edge" to ensure carrying audibility.

Finally mention must be made of Dladla's totally over the top Basilio - a real comedic talent responsible for a whirlpool of comedic goings on.

This is a thoroughly good staging and a worthy tribute from two of the Mother City's leading cultural institutions to the genius of Mozart.

EVAN MILTON
insiderack

Baritone sings praises of home-grown talent

George Stevens comes home to perform in *Le Nozze di Figaro*

CAPE Town-born baritone George Stevens, now based in Germany, is home to sing the title role in *Le Nozze di Figaro* at the Baxter Theatre with young voices from the Cape Town Opera Studio, the UCT Opera School Chorus and UCT Symphony Orchestra.



Stevens, 39, started singing professionally at the end of 1991, although before that sang in church choirs.

"I sang with what I had, which was a natural voice," he says. "It was all new to me and I started getting quite a lot of work when the natural voice was just not enough - technique has to be taught, and it has to be learned for certain kinds of roles."

He has had to fall back on this training to get him through the opening nights of *Figaro*.

"For a situation like now," he says, "when I am ill with the flu or bronchitis, the only thing that helps is technique. Opening night was hell - my chest was filled with phlegm and I had difficulty breathing. Last night was better, but I could feel, towards the end, that the voice couldn't lift into the mask as in the beginning."

He speaks in a mellowed and deliberate tone, emphasising his points with measured pauses. "It is a disciplined life if you are paying the bills with the voice," he says.

Stevens also plays the flute and the trumpet "not professionally, but enough" and points out that, after playing for a few hours, you can put the instrument away for a while. The voice, he notes, is different - it is an instrument your carry all the time.

"I believe the voice is the most unique instrument, but there are so many things that influence it: the way you talk, what you eat, what you breathe in. If you smoke. You must have eight hours of sleep each night. All these things influence the instrument."

Then, of course, there is the music. "It brings me great joy," he says. "There may be an audience of a hundred or a thousand, but when one person comes up to you and says, 'I really enjoyed your singing, I was moved ... I don't need the applause - that is what I live for.'"

He was appointed as the soloist at the Bremer Staatstheater in 1998 and has sung strong and demanding roles like Iago in *Othello*, Mephistophéles in Berlioz's *La Damnation de Faust* and Torvald in *Pegliacci*.

Also, although he despairs of much modern composition, saying that "a fair share of modern work is so unpleasant that to sing it you have to find just one line that gives you a bit of pleasure," he has also tackled and enjoyed modern pieces, like singing the world premiere of Detlev Glanert's *Rose/Stars* in 1999. But he also enjoys the melody, and the com-

■ George Stevens, right, with Sophie Hammen.

edy of Mozart and *Figaro*.
"There are so many things in it that it can be directed in so many ways and still it can be funny," he says of the Baxter production and the young talent in it.

"I like the fact that each of the characters has a chance to show their vocal splendour. Although *Figaro* is the title role, his little girl, Susanna, has the most to sing. And it is a great cast. I was amazed," he says, then corrects himself. "No, not amazed, it's what I expected. I just love their enthusiasm and to experience how they enjoy it as well."

Widely quoted for his distress at a soccer coach being offered R66 million while the arts, and performing arts in particular, languish without sufficient sponsorship, he tackles the question of opera in an African

context. "Opera has been around in Cape Town for ages. What eurocentrism is about I have absolutely no idea. I see people wearing Diesel jeans - I don't know if that is eurocentrism? I'd like to know if soccer is eurocentric? I have to choose my words carefully, but I want to know why 'eurocentrism' is talked about with opera? Haven't seen an African car, really, but we all drive. If someone has talent and chooses to go in a direction for that talent, whether it is African or eurocentric, as long as the talent can be exercised, I think it is good."

He remembers, with some fondness, his surprising introduction to professional singing - this before his training with Wendy Fina, a soprano. Cape's permanent opera chorus and his professional debut (Selim in

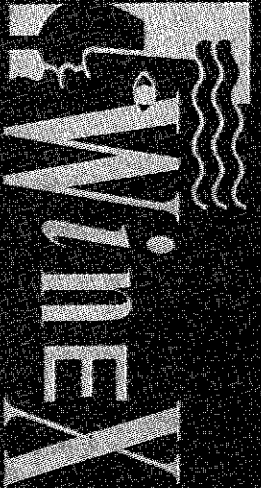
Rossini's *Il Turco in Italia*, which was also broadcast on SABC TV.

"Among the coloured community, I must say, talent wasn't a big thing. It was accepted that 90% of people could either sing or dance or have some sort of talent, and it wasn't really looked upon as a special gift. It was like a normality. I only became aware of it as something special when someone said, 'You have talent' and I thought to myself, 'But my brothers and sisters can sing as well!'"

"I visit the country once a year to see my family. I love to sing at home, but my base is in Europe," he says.

"There is enough talent to keep opera alive in this country," he concludes, but is then struck by another thought, an exclamation: "The interesting thing is that people are not forced to do it - they want to do it!"

'I like it that each of the characters has the chance to show their vocal splendour'



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All's well that ends well for this 'Figaro'

LE NOZZE DI FIGARO

CAST: George Stevens, Zandile Gwebityala, Sophie Harmsen, Pretty Yende and members of the Cape Town Opera
 DIRECTOR: Chuck Hudson
 VENUE: Baxter Theatre until Saturday

BY BEVERLY BROMMERT

It is something of a tour de force to take a perennial pleaser like Mozart's *Nozze di Figaro* and give it the freshness of a less familiar work while keeping to traditional staging and costumes with due respect for a sense of period.

This is precisely what this production from Cape Town Opera offers its audience and the result is an evening of undiluted pleasure.

Apart from the understated elegance of Michael Mitchell's well-devised sets, shown to good effect by John T Baker's skilful lighting, the strength of this *Nozze di Figaro* is in the élan with which it is performed by an essentially youthful cast whose proficiency belies their lack of experience.

George Stevens, in the role of Figaro, has the benefit of several years in professional performance, and he outdid himself on opening night given his indisposition (he had just succumbed to the current flu, but no one would have suspected it judging by the strength of his delivery).

Right up to his major aria in the final act, he gave an impression of complete comfort on stage as his vocal chords proved equal to the demands of *Aprite un po' quegli'occhi*.

He provides an ideal foil to the pert and charming Susanna



CHARMING: Pretty Yende as Contessa Almaviva (left) and Zandile Gwebityala as Susanna.

portrayed by Zandile Gwebityala, a sweet-voiced presence whenever she appears.

Among the several gems studing this production is the contribution of Pretty Yende, as the Contessa Almaviva. This aptly named young soprano brings grace and assurance to her role, with a truly beautiful rendition of the meditative aria in Act Three, *Dove sono i bei momenti*.

Except for some slight diffidence on her first appearance, quickly dissipated by growing authority as she warmed to her audience, Yende assumed control of the action with the unforced ease of a seasoned performer.

Another noteworthy interpretation is that of Noluthando Mili, whose Marcellina (normally a stodgy and unglamorous character) pulsated with energy and effortlessly dominates the stage.

Soprano Sophie Harmsen makes a huge success of one of

the most challenging roles in the opera as Cherubino. The adolescent page whose raging hormones land him in one scrape after another is usually portrayed without much conviction by female executants, who tend to devote more effort to the vocal demands of the part than to fleshing out the persona per se.

Harmsen does an excellent job in making him credible, at once boyishly gauche and radiating passion in the presence of skirts. Her canzone *Voi che sapete* in Act Two is a highlight of the opera.

Amos Nomnabo (Almaviva) cuts a personable figure in a role that comes close to that of anti-hero, singing and acting with conviction to complement the strength of Yende's Contessa.

With sleek accompaniment from the UCT Symphony Orchestra coaxed from Kama Khan's persuasive baton, this *Nozze di Figaro* is a treat for opera-lovers.



PERENNIAL PLEASER: George Stevens as Figaro and Zandile Gwebityala as Susanna in Mozart's *Nozze di Figaro*.
 PICTURES: PAT BROMILOW-DOWNING

SO MUCH TALENT, SO LITTLE SUPPORT

Fighting to keep opera alive in SA

FIONA CHISHOLM

THE popular Cape Town-born baritone George Stevens is both happy and cross.

He is proud to be the first male singer in 11 years to win the prestigious R50 000 Kurt Hubnert award in Germany, but he's "really really disturbed" that South Africa can offer R96m to a Brazilian to coach Bafana Bafana.

"There's so little support for the arts and there is so much talent here. It makes me very sad to see the struggle to keep opera alive."

Stevens is the star of Cape Town Opera and UCT Opera School's *Le Nozze di Figaro* which opens on Sunday at 6pm at the Baxter for five performances.

Though he's played Figaro "several million times", he's happy that he's still finding new things to learn.

"I've learnt patience," he laughed. "After years in Germany it is unusual to hear from a director that you must sing out to the front. German directors prefer you to sing upstage, away from the audience! Some have crazy concepts and I get the feeling they always want to put their own personality on a production."

"It's taken a lot of patience to put back into my head all those things - like the importance of the text - which were once normal for me."

He's worked with some really famous directors but never one like Chuck Hudson from New York.

"The notes he types on his lap-

top and prints for the cast are the greatest thing I've ever experienced."

"Even when you think 'Hey he wasn't looking at me' he knows what you were doing."

"He must have this fantastic memory because there are four people on the stage and yet he gives each of us individual notes point by point."

Stevens is in the fortunate position of being well-liked and very famous (said quite modestly) in the Bremer Staatstheatre, where since 1998 he's been engaged as a soloist and played strong singing and acting roles.

"It's hard work being a repertory singer. You can be giving three or four performances a week as Figaro at the same time as learning a role in *Trovatore* or the *Damnation of Faust*."

"However it is the only way to build up a repertoire."

"Just before I came to South Africa, I won the Kurt Hubnert prize for my *Rigoletto* and Sancho Panza in *Don Quixote*. I can use that R50 000 prize money!"

In Europe freelance singers seldom get the chance to choose their roles. "You can only do so if you are either very famous or nothing at all."

"There's no in-between. Mostly freelancers take what work they can get but they are also up against typecasting."

He recalls how he auditioned for the meddling father figure Germont in a festival production of *La Traviata*.

He did well but was told that the conductor could not make the decision, as the director wanted a blind Germont.

"As I was leaving the theatre one of the technicians said he felt like telling the director to get me a pair of dark glasses. Then he could have me as the blind Germont!"

Stevens has been impressed with the excellent student singers in his *Figaro* cast but has noted that some work hard "and others not so hard".

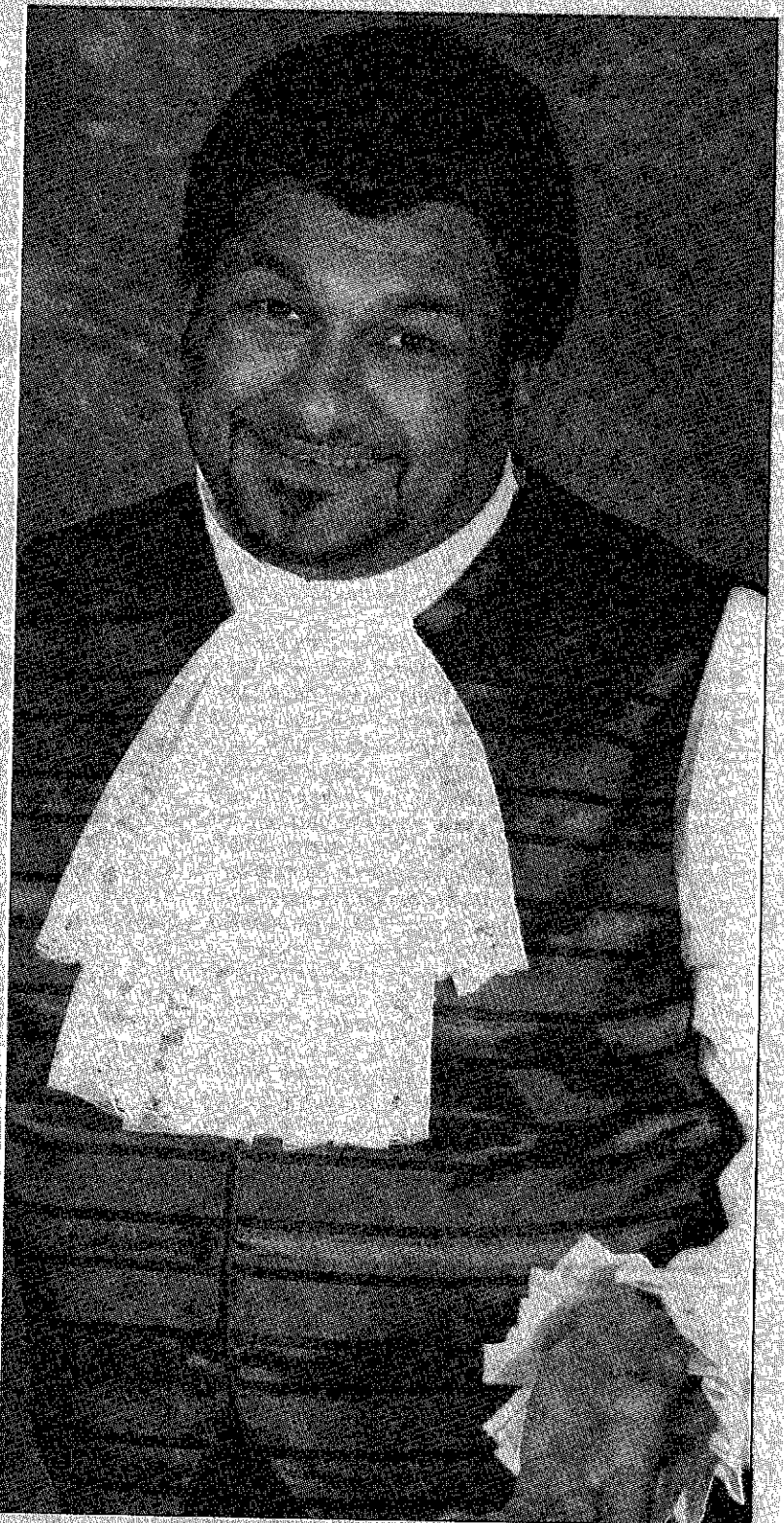
"In Europe it is OK to have a beautiful voice but it is not enough. Some singers who do not have naturally beautiful voices become good singers and find regular work, and *vice versa*. In my view Pavarotti doesn't have a great voice, but he is one hell of a good singer!"

Living in Germany with his entire family in Cape Town means that George Stevens has one foot in Cape Town and one in Germany.

"This is a working holiday so I haven't had much time to see my family but before returning to Germany I'm going to stock up on my special curry spices to make the old stews my mom used to make."

He is hoping that members of the New Apostolic Church where he worships and has a big musical following will make a point of coming to *Figaro*.

● After Sunday's performances there are others at 7.30pm on August 22, 23, 25 and 26. Booking is at Computicket.



POPULAR STAR: George Stevens has worked hard to get where he is.