

# Artist of many dimensions

## Karen Saillant

By Diana Burgwyn

Karen Saillant, founding director of the experimental International Opera Theater, loves to see the mundane, everyday stuff of life transformed into art. So when she needed costumes for a new chamber opera based on Shakespeare's play *The Tempest*, she turned to South Korean visual artist Mi-Kyuong Lee, who heads the fiber arts department at the University of the Arts. Lee designed a fabric made of 40,000 rubber bands, which were cut and tied together by her students. Out of that they fashioned a cape for one of the characters and a cave for the stage set.

Other tools in Lee's trade range from pipe cleaners to plastic bags, paper towels to paperclips. And she's used virtually all of them for productions of Saillant's four-year-old company, which is based in Philadelphia.

Saillant also believes in bringing diverse arts together into one indissoluble whole.

Since all of the operas she commissions are based on Shakespeare's plays, she has turned to a form popular in his day: commedia dell'arte, which had its roots in Italy during the Renaissance. Saillant maintains that a knowledge of commedia dell'arte—notably its improvisational elements—is crucial to a proper

interpretation of Shakespeare's work. Hence she brought Antonio Fava, one of the world's greatest interpreters of commedia dell'arte, to Philadelphia, where he held classes on several occasions.

Given her devotion to these esoteric art forms, Saillant sometimes hears people remark that the International Opera Theater is not a real opera company. "I'm happy when they say that," she says. "They're right. We are a company that makes art using the operatic form."

Each of her annual productions has received a world premiere in Italy, with librettos in the Italian language. To date only one has reached Philadelphia: *Il racconto d'invern* (*The Winter's Tale*), which was performed last June at the Gershman Y. It was composed by a young Philadelphian, Troy Herion, whose style combines classical music of the Romantic school with folk music of various ethnic groups and such contemporary influences as the Beatles. Herion recently received a Barrymore Award nomination for his music in the play *The Life of Galileo*. Saillant herself wrote the libretto for the opera with Romino Minucci, and Simone Luti, a collaborative conductor at Milan's *La scala*, led the performance.

Saillant's most recent Italian production was *A Midsummer Night's Dream* with music by Pietro Rigacci. Next October she will bring *The Tempest* to Philadelphia, and in Italy next



Karen Saillant



Fine artists from UArts, under direction of Mi-Kyuong Lee, put finishing touches on backdrop for *La Tempesta*, in Gershman Y, before it leaves for Italy.

summer she will unveil a new operatic production of *Romeo and Juliet* by Emily Wong, a Chinese-American composer who holds a doctorate from the Juilliard School. *Othello* will follow.

Why Shakespeare and only Shakespeare? Saillant is asked. “Why not?” she replies. She loves Shakespeare, she feels his plays are relevant to every culture, and she feels it’s more interesting to create a new work based on his plays than to reinterpret existing ones. Saillant is not out to create a masterpiece—i.e., to challenge Verdi—but rather to introduce new ideas that might inspire others to their own creativity.

She hires professional singers, many of them newly embarked on careers, from auditions in Philadelphia and New York and from a vocal competition she holds every year in Città della Pieve. This walled medieval Italian town on the border between Umbria and Tuscany is the setting for every one of her productions. How Saillant ever got to that remote spot is another story.

A foster child separated from her brother, Saillant was designated by the state of Pennsylvania as an “emancipated minor with no assets” and considered a ward of the state until she was fifteen. Her fine soprano voice earned her a scholarship to the University of Indiana, but she left there to care for her foster father in Philadelphia, later attending and graduating from Temple University. After five years of a promising career in Europe, Saillant found herself thinking more and more of motherhood (she kept buying postcards depicting the Madonna and child), and so she returned to Philadelphia where

she married her childhood sweetheart. Saillant’s husband, Bernard Bygott, was a truck driver and devoted family man. The two opened what she refers to as “a shot and beer” bar to provide more support. Theirs was a life of work—all day and pretty much through the night.

Disaster struck when, after having previously had two open-heart surgeries, Bygott suffered a heart attack after trying to protect his wife from an intruder. He fell into a vegetative coma from which he never recovered. Saillant insisted on taking care of him at



*Prospero freezes his enemies—Left to right: mezzo Melisse Weber, baritone John Andrew Fernandez, bass Paolo Valenti, baritone Bernard Bygott, bass Rolando Burks. Photo: Alejandro Toyofuku*

home, a twenty-four-hour-a-day job, with help from her sons. Sixteen months later Bygott died, leaving his wife emotionally and physically exhausted. Where could she go to recover?

The answer was Città della Pieve, where a friend from her days as a singer was similarly recovering from a personal tragedy, the loss of a daughter.



*Ippolyta, American coloratura Charity Sunshine, sings to Cantore (The Heart of Teseo) Japanese mezzo Yui Horio, as Teseo, Italian bass Alessandro Avona, muses.*  
 Photo: Ornella Tiberi

It didn't take Saillant long to figure out what she would do next. One day she happened on the town's exquisitely renovated theater, the Teatro Avvaloranti. So overcome was she by its history and beauty (it was the artistic home of soprano Marietta Piccolomini, who sang the first Violetta in Verdi's *La traviata*) that she found herself standing on the empty stage and saying out loud: "I'm going to create operas in Italian based on Shakespeare and perform them here!"

And so she did and still does—with a shoestring budget and some support from businesses and from such organizations as the American Composers Forum, which paid for the chamber orchestra in *The Winter's Tale*. Saillant's son Bernard is assistant director of the company as well as a playwright. His first play was presented at the 2007 Philadelphia Fringe Festival, with his brother, Christian, a professional actor, taking on one of the roles in a two-person cast.

Singers, conductors, coaches, and musicians in the International Opera Theater productions are remunerated for their work, but the fees are modest. Saillant's personal warmth and commitment are so contagious that she has been able to attract gifted set and lighting designers willing to travel to Philadelphia from other states at their own expense. She also finds volunteers among her friends, some of whom host the singers because funding doesn't allow for hotels. And, of course, she has those wonderful fiber artists who, at only the cost of the materials,

produce such marvels as a gown fabricated entirely of tissue-paper roses. Every summer Saillant leaves Philadelphia for Rome's Fiumicino airport with costumes and stage sets weighing as much as two hundred and fifty pounds.

The singers engaged by Saillant are from around the world—she holds auditions in Philadelphia and New York and has a competition each year in Città della Pieve. Nothing is too far or too near. Once she cast in a role a young boy she saw walking with his mother on Lombard Street, singing. He ended up being perfect for the character Mamilio in *The Winter's Tale*. Saillant's small orchestral forces also are far-flung. She is now in touch with ensembles located in Acapulco, Russia, and Malta.

But these activities are not enough for the driven Saillant, whose schedule would exhaust someone far younger. Active in Philadelphia theater since the



*Lisandro, Mexican tenor Rodrigo Trosino, under the influence of the love potion, swears his love for his fiancée's best friend, Elena, Italian mezzo Letizia Dei. Photo: Ornella Tiberi*

days of the Painted Bride, Saillant has delved into one art form after another. She created a new theatrical interpretation of Stravinsky's *Pulcinella Suite* for a Philadelphia Orchestra children's concert. She directed and wrote a script for a production of the children's opera *Brundibár and the Children of Terazin*, composed during World War II; it was featured on a PBS special. She created a show for the Rosenbach Museum called *The Wild Things Whirligig*, celebrating the life and work of Maurice Sendak. Saillant even held a poetry competition for young people in Città della Pieva, from which several poems were chosen and developed into a song cycle by Philadelphia composer Kile Smith.

This past summer Saillant was invited to create a theatrical work in the Italian town of Acquiola. The actors would be seven residents in a rehabilitation home for the severely autistic. Their ages ranged from thirteen to twenty-seven.

Saillant approached this with her customary passion and unique vision. She decided to write a fairy tale. But instead of developing her characters

and then choosing the best actor for each part, she would base her characters on the skills, behavior and movements of each of the seven actors. Thus, if they exhibited a habit of smelling objects or walking in circles or repeating a hand gesture, their character would be conceived as logically exhibiting this behavior. This, she says, gave meaning to what previously had been considered meaningless activity, thus helping to build self-esteem.

Saillant refers to one of the young people, David, who was the only cast member able to speak. He had four words in the play: "The flag is coming!" But the flag didn't arrive on cue, so David, increasingly anxious, kept repeating the words. When the flag finally appeared, the relieved audience shouted in delight.

"David's facial expression," remembers Saillant, "changed from one of fear to the joyous realization that an action requested had been fulfilled."

"It was," she says, using a favorite word, both in a religious and secular sense, "a miracle." 🎵



*Alessandro Avona, Bass, brings Karen Saillant forward for a bow after the final performance in Teatro Avvaloranti, Città delal Pieve, Italy, August 23, 2007*