Creepy-crawly performance might make kids opera bugs

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By Channing Gray
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Karen Vincent is Mosquito in The Bug Opera, which plays Friday in the Columbus Theatre.

Mosquito (Karen Vincent) sings "Follow Me," her aria that tells the Caterpillars (Nik Nackley, Aaron Theno, Matthew DiBattista and Janna Baty) how her friend died, in The Bug Opera.

In Geoff Hudson’s opera, there are no dashing tenors, no consumptive sopranos, just a caterpillar who doesn’t want to grow up and a mosquito who won’t suck blood.

That’s because Hudson’s Bug Opera is for kids — well, actually, the whole family.

The show makes its debut here Friday night, at the Columbus Theatre on Broadway in Providence.

“It’s like classic children’s literature,” said Hudson, of Cummington, Mass. “Adults can like it, too.”

Hudson and collaborator Alisa Pearson, who was a biologist before she was a singer, got the idea for an opera about bugs about five years ago. He wrote a bunch of songs about insects for a concert Pearson gave. But the songs never drew much of a following.
Pearson, who wrote the libretto for The Bug Opera, also moved to Vienna, Austria, for a while, where she found the state opera commissioning operas for children. Musicians she knew said their kids loved them, and ran about all day singing the songs.

She and Hudson decided they’d try their hand at their own children’s opera using their interest in insects as a jumping off point.

“Insects, if you look at them closely,” said Hudson, “are like another world right underneath us. They are like bizarre science-fiction characters from another planet.”

Hudson said he has known people who have written operas that never went anywhere. He wanted to make sure he had the organizational underpinnings in place before he started to compose. So he and Pearson linked up with Indian Hill Music, a nonprofit music education and performance center in Littleton, Mass.

(Locally, Friday’s premiere is being sponsored by Opera Providence and Community MusicWorks, which teaches and performs in Providence’s inner city. Community MusicWorks has handled much of the arrangements for the Providence performance.)

About a year ago, Hudson and Pearson sat down to compose. She fed him the text, he wrote music, and then the two of them revised as they went along. The production has been in the workshop stage for months, as they tried to pick the right voices for the right bugs: Just because someone is a good singer doesn’t mean they are right for the part.

Here’s the buzz

The 90-minute opera stars a reluctant caterpillar who doesn’t want to become a moth, and a mosquito who doesn’t want to drink blood. There are also a bookish paper wasp, a jovial dung beetle, and a glamorous but dangerous spider.

Eventually, the caterpillar and mosquito learn to become the bugs they were born to be. The caterpillar, for example, meets a Luna moth (played by Pearson) and decides becoming something like that isn’t half bad, said Hudson, 39.

In all, there is a cast of 7, plus a 10-piece chamber orchestra made up of professional musicians from the Boston area. Hudson said he felt it was important that he use an orchestra, and not just a piano. Without an orchestra, it just isn’t opera, he said.

When he finally began to write, Hudson tried to think of the music he liked as a kid. The satirical songs of Tom Lehrer came to mind. But there are also strains of blues, doo-wop, Italian opera and Indian music of the Bollywood ilk.

“It’s a very colorful piece,” said Hudson, who has written music for singers, chorus and chamber groups.
Costumes debugged

At first the company went with pretty elaborate costumes, but found during rehearsal that they interfered with the singing. The caterpillar could not be heard through his mask.

Now the fancy costumes are being used for promotional purposes (they were seen at a recent Waterfire lighting), and have been replaced by more basic garb that suggests the character’s “bugginess,” said Hudson.

There are seven performances of The Bug Opera planned, in Littleton and Amherst, Mass., as well as in Providence. And Hudson said he is talking with 8 or 10 companies about doing future shows, including the Vienna State Opera, which is waiting to see a final version before it decides. “That would be our dream,” he said.

The Bug Opera is Friday at 7:30 p.m. at the Columbus Theatre, 270 Broadway, Providence. Tickets are $15 to $100, $5 for children and $10 for a limited number of family passes for those in need. Call (401) 621-6123 or go to www.arttixri.com. For complete details, visit www.bugoperaprov.com.

Online at: http://www.projo.com/kids/content/artsun-bugopera_11-12-06_IR2KU5N.27adce9.html