

Greater Worcester Opera virtually back on stage with livestreamed musical

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When Elaine Crane started going over blocking notes for the musical "A Gentleman's Guide to Love and Murder," the normally rather pedestrian task drew out an unexpected reaction.

Blocking notes detail the exact positioning of the cast on the stage and where they should move in a given scene

"I hadn't written blocking notes in almost a year," said Crane, executive director of Greater Worcester Opera, as COVID-19 has made stage productions impossible. "I almost cried. It's been rough, not just financially but emotionally."

But now Greater Worcester Opera has carved out a special block of time to again be on stage in its production of "A Gentleman's Guide to Love and Murder" May 7-16.

This isn't yet a return to how things were before the COVID-19 pandemic, although the production is a spirited step in and of itself.



The musical has been recorded live on stage, adhering to strict protocols including no audience, and will be available for livestreamed viewing for six performances to be shown at 7:30 p.m. May 7, 8, 14 and 15, and 2 p.m. May 9 and 16.

"Watching a video is not the same as being there live, but it's better than nothing — which is the alternative," Crane said.

Actually, the production features "singing actors, costumes, sets, props, and even some of the foibles of live performance — everything but the in-person audience," Crane noted.

The principal cast features Crane, Taylor Lawton, Ben Morse, Paige Fowler, Martha Warren, Jeanine Went, Connell Benn, Travis Benoit, Brad Amidon, Kevin Dibble and Brawley Fowler (with cameo appearances by Jacqueline Haney and Mark Leibold). The musical is directed by Aldo Fabrizi, with sound engineering and editing by Charles Crane, and filming and editing by Ryan Malyar.

"A Gentleman's Guide to Love and Murder," which won the 2014 Tony Award for best musical, is based on English writer Roy Horniman's Edwardian novel "Israel Rank: The Autobiography of a Criminal," which also inspired the wonderfully darkly comic 1949 British movie "Kind Hearts and Coronets."

In 1909, Lord Montague "Monty" D'Ysquith Navarro, Ninth Earl of Highhurst, is in jail writing his memoirs on the eve of his execution. Monty recalls how two years earlier he was living in a shabby London flat in Clapham when he learned that the aristocratic D'Ysquith family disowned his recently deceased mother after she had eloped with a Spanish musician (long deceased). His mother raised Monty while she worked as a washerwoman. Still, he is ninth in line to the Earldom. What if the eight members of that wretched family ahead of him were to meet untimely demises?

"It's a great story. It's so much fun," Crane said of the musical, which has a slightly different ending than the movie.



"A Gentleman's Guide" has "a darkly clever book" by Robert L. Freedman and a "fabulous musical score" by Steven Lutvak, Crane said. There's "an array of colorful characters" and "singing at its finest."

Greater Worcester Opera, which dates back to 2003, has been exploring adding certain sophisticated modern musicals to its extensive opera repertoire. In March last year it put on Stephen Sondheim's "A Little Night Music" with Stageloft Repertory Theater in

Sturbridge. The March 6, 7 and 8 performances in 2020 had gone well but then COVID put the lights out for the March 13, 14, 15 shows.

Other activities went dark as well. GWO had presented a popular series of summer concerts at Briarwood Retirement Community in Worcester for several years and often used its theater as a home base, but it has not been there in a year-and-a-half because of COVID, Crane said.

Still, last year, GWO got out of the block and put on a summer series that included a Zoom play reading, and two concerts and a dramatic reading on Facebook Live. The concerts — "Music from Italy" with art songs and arias from the great canon, followed by "Gilbert and Sullivan" — and the dramatic reading were taped and edited in a barn adjoining Crane's home.

The concert series was free, but donations were welcomed. Unfortunately, they did not bring enough in to cover costs, Crane said, but GWO will have another summer series this year.

In December GWO presented "A Gilbert and Sullivan Christmas Carol Radio Play," also pre-recorded.

"That turned out great. That was really fun. People were so happy to come out and sing something," Crane said.

The barn was back in use during the winter as the cast started socially distanced rehearsals for "A Gentleman's Guide" leading to pre-recording all the musical numbers there.

"At least we stayed mentally healthy over the winter," Crane said.

But finding a venue to perform in and videotape this spring proved to be more difficult than expected, even though there was to be no in-person audience for "A Gentleman's Guide," Crane said.

"We actually had a really hard time. We approached several theaters and no one would let us through the door. They were so afraid of liability that no one would let us use the space."

Coming to the rescue was Theatre III in Acton, a nonprofit volunteer organization that was established in 1955 in the former West Acton Universalist Church.

The singing was pre-recorded because "singing is a little more dangerous than speaking (on stage)," Crane said.

GWO's production is presented through special arrangement with Music Theater International, which licenses production rights. MTI provided pre-recorded orchestra tracks that "sound like we're singing with an orchestra," Crane said. "We had to get special permission" from MTI to use the tracks for the show, she said.

For songs that include dialogue being spoken, the dialogue had to be pre-recorded as well.

It helped that Crane's husband, Charles, is a recording engineer.

Then it was time to load up the sets, props, scenery and costumes and take them to Theatre III earlier this month. The short time there (with the blocking in place) would culminate in the live nonstop filming of two full performances.

The cast was also its own stage crew — "one of the many measures we took to keep the number of people in the theater as small as possible during filming," Crane said.

All the cast had to have COVID tests before going to Theatre III and their temperatures taken there daily. Masks were worn at all times except for the two full performances that were filmed.

"We agreed as a cast we'd be careful what we did. We were unmasked for the actual filming. We got our test so we could take our masks off," Crane said.

"We took all the kissing out of the show for obvious reasons. This is going to be a non-kissing show."

For the dialogue filmed on stage, "we had to body mic for everyone to record dialogue straight to video," Crane said. Rather than lip sync the songs, "we sang along with ourselves quietly." The tricky element was the pre-recorded dialogue in the songs, she noted. "That was the hard part, to do it exactly the same way."

The filming involved four cameras, and videographer Ryan Malyaris editing the video footage from the two full performances to produce a final version.



The production of "A Gentleman's Guide" is a much more complex undertaking visually than last summer's series, where singers sang individually for safety reasons in Crane's barn facing a camera. "The Gilbert and Sullivan Christmas Carol," meanwhile, just had photo images to accompany the singing. The new production is a lot more expensive as well.

It's been noticed already that a coat is buttoned incorrectly in one of the scenes.

"Costume issues issues were part of the editing process. We didn't have a bunch of people helping us. The quick changes were really quick. But this is kind of what happens in live theater. It gives you the feel of a live performance because it's not perfect. We didn't have the money or luxury of six performances to get it all right. It was two and we got we got," Crane said.

"We had talked about re-filming but that would mean more COVID tests so we just said 'OK, we're gonna go with what we've got' — just like in real life."

Rather than have "A Gentleman's Guide" On Demand for a lengthy time period, GWO decided to schedule it "the way we schedule any performance," Crane said.

That's to say, have people attend one of the six livestreamed performances that are scheduled.

"It's a better choice for us because it's kind of what we would have done anyway," Crane said.

With the filming done, Crane said she's "still cleaning costumes, putting away props. Everything takes tons of planning."

Looking ahead, GWO might do even more musicals like "A Little Night Music" and "A Gentleman's Guide."

"We feel like there are certain musicals we're just kind of suited to."

GWO was also looking to present an outdoors production this summer of Puccini's one-act opera "Suor Angelica" ("Sister Angelica") in English, but at the time of writing the outlook due to lack of a performance space was rather doubtful.

However, "I will do another summer concert series," Crane said.

"Summer concerts for sure. But I'm not exactly sure what will come next. It's hard when you've been isolated for so long. If you can fill only 25% of your seating (in-person due to restrictions), it's very difficult," Crane said.

"But there will be something. I can't not do anything."

Tickets for "A Gentleman's Guide to Love and Murder" are \$20 for 1 to 2 adults; \$30, 3 to 5 adults; \$25 one family (parents and children); \$15, 1 senior; and \$20, 2 to 5 seniors. Donation options are available. For tickets and more information, visit www.greaterworcesteropera.org.