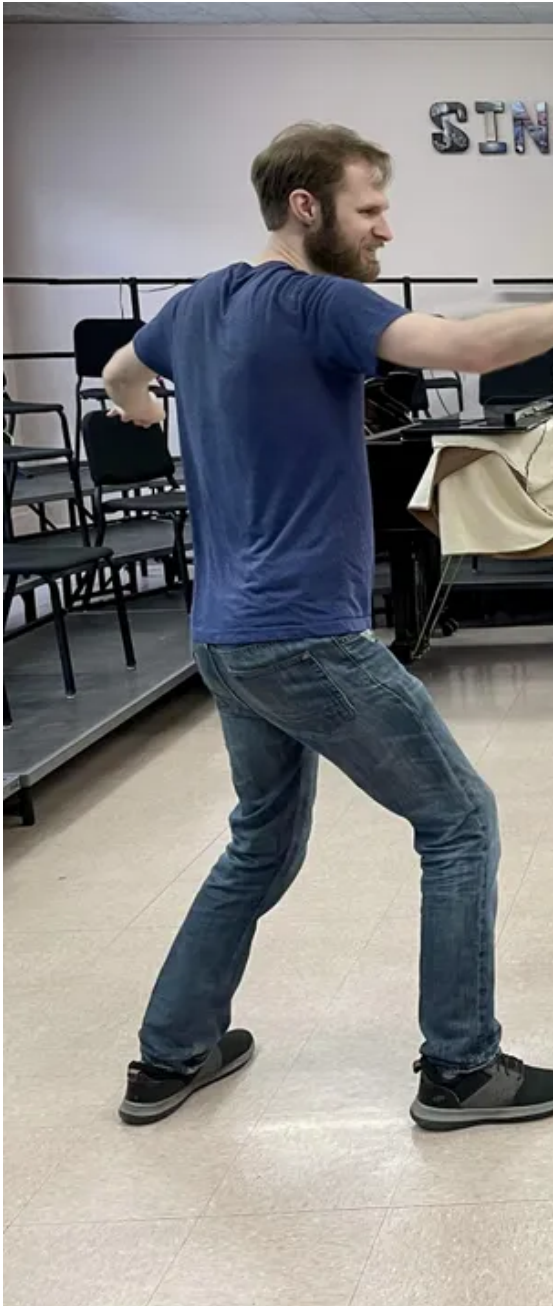


Frustrated by limited opportunities, 3 Seattle friends started own opera company

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1 of 2 | Robin-Wyatt Stone and Jae Bernado during staging rehearsal/fight choreography for Lowbrow Opera Collective's "Achilles & Patroclus." (Eliza Woodyard)

By [Gemma Alexander](#)

Special to The Seattle Times

For opera singers progressing from student productions to major roles at A-list opera houses, the mid-journey job opportunities are limited. A few years ago, three Seattle friends found their own solution in a moment that could almost have come right out of a Judy Garland musical, when they decided to put on a show as their own opera company.

[Lowbrow Opera Collective](#), now in its fourth season, is a nonprofit opera company dedicated to making opera accessible and relevant to younger, more diverse audiences and performers. They present new stories developed in a collaborative process with emerging artists.

“[More Than Friends: A Triptych on Queer Love Through the Ages](#)” is a program of three one-act chamber operas in English. Running May 25-June 4 at 18th & Union, it is the first fully staged, live production of each piece.

The opera company began after recent music graduates Christine Oshiki, Nic Varela and Kate Kelley became frustrated by limited performance opportunities. In 2019, the friends produced “[#adulthood](#),” at 18th & Union. The comic opera about roommates, cellphones and student debt (founding tenor Varela sang the role of an abandoned couch) was so successful, they presented it twice, and commissioned a sequel, “[#adulthood 2](#),” for 2022.

In a garage during the pandemic, Lowbrow filmed “Breakfast” (about running out of juice during an apocalypse). They compiled recordings from singers across the country for “Windows” (unstable characters suffering unrequited love). The following season, they produced Dana Kaufman’s “[Diary of a Madman](#)” with in-person and virtual ticket options, an approach they still follow.

This year’s “More Than Friends” comprises new operas highlighting queer love from LGBTQ+ composers and librettists.

“As someone who is part of the queer community, to be able to tell those stories unabashedly is really exciting,” said Oshiki, Lowbrow’s president. “Going back to our mission of bringing in people who maybe have not heard opera before, or who thought, ‘No I don’t like opera. I don’t want the lady in the Viking hat,’ we’re very intentionally thinking about pieces that speak to those members of our audience as well.”

Only 10 minutes long, the magical realist “Thirst,” prompted by the nursery rhyme “Jack and Jill,” was created when composer T.J. Rubin and librettist Laura Barati were New York University students. In the story, one person in a relationship is thirsty, and can’t get a drink.

“Obviously a metaphor for something a little bit larger than just a glass of water,” said Oshiki. “It’s certainly not Mozart. It’s more contemporary and plays with crunchier chords. We’re playing with a bit more chromaticism and distorting the rhythm.”

“Achilles & Patroclus,” by composer Erika Meyer and librettist James T. Washburn, was developed through the Seattle Opera [Creation Lab](#). Set to piano, the 25-minute chamber opera takes place after Patroclus’ death. Tenor Trevor Ainge, Lowbrow’s director of development, sang an aria from the opera at Lowbrow’s community engagement event in February.

“One of the things that struck me with the aria was feeling represented like my voice was captured at high fidelity. I could see myself expressing these feelings and emotions, and in the same language. That’s an experience as a performer I’ve never had before,” said Ainge.

“‘Emily & Sue’ is a ‘popera,’ so kind of a [Pentatonix](#), a cappella vibe,” said Oshiki. Commissioned and [recorded](#) by Amherst College, “Emily & Sue” explores Emily Dickinson’s relationship with her sister-in-law, Susan Gilbert. Aiden K. Feltkamp drew directly from Dickinson’s correspondence and poems for the libretto, which the cast performs accompanied only by percussion.

“I was excited by how much of a challenge ‘Emily & Sue’ looked like it would be to direct, in a fun way, because there isn’t an explicit narrative. It’s not a story the way that ‘Traviata’ is a story,” said Eliza Woodyard, the director of “Emily & Sue” and a soprano in the chorus for Seattle Opera’s recent “[La Traviata](#).”

“It feels like such a luxury to be able to do new work that feels relevant to people right now, and then also to be involved in tradition,” said Woodyard. Although Woodyard is used to juggling multiple projects — including currently developing a June double-bill at Olympic College in Bremerton and preparing for a summer residency in London with Epiphany Parish Choir — working on “La Traviata” at the same time as “Emily & Sue” has been enlightening.

“It’s reassuring to me to see that there is still a lot of trial and error, even within a big production that’s been very dialed in. But a production that is being created organically with people in real time has a different feel to it. Generally, we don’t get so many opportunities to collaborate with quite the flavor that Lowbrow has,” Woodyard said.

Lowbrow’s emphasis on breaking conventions on and offstage creates paid opportunities for emerging artists to grow, while opening the art form to new audiences.

“People think you have to wear a ballgown, you have your monocle or your binoculars or whatever, and I don’t think it needs to be that way,” said Oshiki.

Other companies are addressing problematic elements in the classics and expanding to include new perspectives through stories like Tacoma Opera’s “[Tacoma Method](#)” and Seattle Opera’s chamber productions “[The Falling and the Rising](#)” and “Bound.” Oshiki hopes that with their pay-what-you-can ticketing, free online [performance archive](#) and nontraditional stories, Lowbrow can serve as a gateway to the wider opera world.

“I want to continue to pave a new way for opera to be seen, to expand what people think opera can do, and what it means to go to an opera performance,” Oshiki said. “There’s a quote on our ‘about us’ page that says we’re removing the monocle from opera’s ... rump, essentially. I think that’s perfect because so many people don’t allow themselves to explore opera because they have a certain perception of what it is or that they have to have a certain level of musical experience, or money, or class, or what have you. And that’s just not the case. Opera is not for one select group of people. It is for everybody.”

“More Than Friends: A Triptych on Queer Love Through the Ages”

In person and streaming May 25-June 4; 18th & Union, 1406 18th Ave., Seattle; \$10-\$50; 206-937-6499, lowbrowoc.org

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