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## Opera Up Close and Personal

Vertical Player Repertory Brings Storefront Opera to Brooklyn with Puccini's 'Il tabarro'

by Julie S. Halpern

*A small opera company in Brooklyn, started by singer Judith Barnes, is finding great success and devoted audiences. Julie Halpern attended a performance of Il tabarro and reports on the reasons this company is flourishing.*

The February afternoon was raw, but warmth and anticipation pervaded the crowded-to-capacity converted factory/sculpture studio in downtown Brooklyn. Enthusiastic supporters of VPR (Vertical Player Repertory Opera) crowded in to enjoy a performance of *Il tabarro* by this company that is rapidly becoming a local institution. A mostly young cast of professional principals and volunteer chorists took the stage and charmed the audience with Puccini's masterpiece. *Il tabarro* is generally performed as part of a *Triptych* (group of three) with *Suor Angelica* and *Gi-*

*anni Schicchi*, but the highly dramatic, longish one act makes an affecting stand-alone piece.

How did opera find its way to Cobble Hill? This particular neighborhood has always had an Italian population that is knowledgeable and sophisticated regarding opera. But the company also attracts audience members from Manhattan and beyond.

Artistic Director Judith Barnes started the company in 1998. A young soprano with an actress's sensibilities and a painter's attention to detail, Barnes's background in art, sculpture, and painting informs every project she

undertakes. Barnes is one of the few opera producers who actually designs, builds, and paints her own sets. This production's design was a collaborative effort by her and Director Peter Szep, and it brought new meaning to the term *verismo* with "boats" appearing to be moored to a stage "pier" which, when walked on, seemed to have water under it.

Barnes graduated from Indiana University with a major in vocal performance. As a young singer, Barnes found herself attracted to off-off Broadway productions and the artistic attitudes of places like the Brooklyn Academy of Music. She is interested in site-specific per-

Opposite page left: Aram Tchobanian and Judith Barnes, as Lingus and Lady Katherina Kaiser, Vertical Player Repertory, Yoav Gal's *The Dwarf*, 2003

Opposite page right: Val McDaniel (center left, beard) and Noah Stewart (center right), as Arbace and Idamante, with chorus members, Vertical Player Repertory, Mozart's *Idomeneo*, 2003

Top right: Dauri Podenski Shippey and Michael Scott Harris, as Kostelnička and Števa, Vertical Player Repertory, Leos Janáček's *Jenůfa*, 2004

Bottom right: Peter Ludwig (left) as Talpa, Judith Barnes as Giorgetta, David Schnell (center right, hat) as Tinca, and Noah Stewart (far right) as Luigi with chorus members Donald Grove (center) and Randy Petsche (seated) in *Il tabarro*, 2006

formances and plans to bring *Il tabarro* to the docks in Brooklyn later this year.

In addition to VPR's artistic success, Barnes and company are also a marketing phenomenon. Despite an out-of-the-way location and limited publicity, VPR's performances consistently sell out the house. Barnes believes the enthusiasm of performers and audiences who enjoy VPR's intimate environment are the key to audience retention. Nestled in the inviting confines of the performance space, audience members experience the theatrical immediacy and subtleties that can only be hinted at in larger venues. VPR also presents a concert series throughout

the year highlighting members of the company who also excel in non-traditional repertoire, which has proved as successful with audiences as the standard repertoire. Recently programmed works feature Mendelssohn, Poulenc, Schumann, Purcell, and most recently, Schubert's *Winterreise*. Upcoming opera productions include *Duke Bluebeard's Castle* (in Hungarian).

Thanks to the leadership and entrepreneurial spirit of Judith Barnes, opera not only grows but thrives in Cobble Hill, Brooklyn.

VPR will be doing six performances of *Darius Milhaud's MEDEE*, November 9-11, and

16-19, 2006. Reservations can be made at [VPRtickets@aol.com](mailto:VPRtickets@aol.com).

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