

Ashley Marie Robillard, a soprano in the opera program, is also an Emerging Artist at Opera Philadelphia. She holds the Arthur Tracy Fellowship at Curtis. PHOTO: ANDREW BOGARD



Tools of the Trade

The Curtis Opera Theatre prepares singers for the professional world.

BY ASHLEY MARIE ROBILLARD

I'll never forget how beautiful it was on the morning of my first rehearsal with Opera Philadelphia. The sun was beaming down and a gentle breeze was swirling about—a picture-perfect summer day. Meanwhile, my entire body was pulsing with nerves, excitement, and a weird feeling that was either total fear or utter elation. It was hard to believe that I was going to be performing with a company so dear to me, in a cast filled with friends and colleagues from Curtis, and while I myself was just a student finishing her undergraduate studies. It all felt like some wonderful, crazy dream.

Then I entered the rehearsal hall and was promptly overwhelmed. I was struck with the realization that I had no idea what these rehearsals would be like. This production of *The Magic Flute* was my professional debut. I'd never worked in a professional opera house before and felt like I didn't know what to expect.

Within the first week my fear totally dissolved. With each rehearsal, each coaching, each new scenario, I found I was far more prepared and secure than I could have ever imagined. It all felt surprisingly...familiar. Somehow in the thrill of it all I had forgotten the obvious: Curtis had spent the last four years preparing me for this moment.

The Curtis Opera Theatre experience is incomparable. When they say “learn by doing,” they are not joking. By the time I began work with Opera Philadelphia I had already performed in twelve productions, singing everything from chorus to principal roles. And thanks to that, I walked into my first professional experience with the experience I needed to succeed.

JUMPING IN

While every moment performing with the Curtis Opera Theatre has allowed me to grow, three experiences in particular provided me with some of the tools to thrive in my first professional opera.

I was not supposed to be in the final opera of the 2013–14 season. It was my first year at Curtis, and little nineteen-year-old me was looking forward to finishing her finals and watching her older colleagues conquer the stage in Rossini's *La cenerentola*. Then suddenly I was assigned to cover Tisbe, Cinderella's mezzo-soprano stepsister. It was a shock as I'm



PHOTO: KARLI CADEL

EMERGING ARTIST

As an Emerging Artist at Opera Philadelphia, Ashley Robillard will sing the role of Musetta in the company's production of Puccini's *La bohème* next spring. She first sang the role at Curtis in 2016 (above, with Doğukan Kuran as Marcello). Also featured in Opera Philadelphia's cast is recent Curtis graduate Evan LeRoy Johnson, who sings Rodolfo. ◊



Working on *Manon* taught me that you must create a compelling interpretation, no matter the circumstances.



a soprano, used to singing the top line of music, and I had zero experience with Rossini. Tisbe sang right in the middle of the harmony and had a very active, comedic presence on stage. Regardless, I jumped into ensemble coachings and learned the role in the month before stagings began.

I thought I knew what it meant to be prepared for an opera: Know your music, know the translation (not just for your part but for everyone else on stage as well), know what every marking in the score means, and above all, be respectful of your coaches' and colleagues' time. But I soon learned that there was even more to consider: the source material for the opera, performance practices, historical context, and countless further details. Studying a principal role as such a young singer afforded me the opportunity to learn from my extremely generous older colleagues. Their guidance and support provided a brilliant example that I do my best to emulate now that I'm an older singer at Curtis.

The day before stagings began, I found out I'd actually be performing the role of Tisbe. Thanks to the support and structure my department gave me, I felt over-the-moon excited, and more than ready to take on the role.

One of my favorite things about the Curtis Opera Theatre is that we do many non-traditional productions. Our directors and creative teams love to push the envelope of convention and create some truly provocative and thought-provoking art. It's essential to know how to approach productions of all kinds, as I learned performing the role of Pousette in *Manon*.

The production concept was very futuristic, with a super-cool *Hunger Games-meets-Mad Max* vibe. The three actress characters, of whom Pousette is one, wore very restrictive costumes that made movement difficult. Either we couldn't bend at the waist, or we couldn't lift our arms, or we wore clunky high heels. The set, too, was rather wild: The three of us, along with two other male characters, spent the first act fooling around on top of a six-foot pedestal. And finally, this opera also has a huge chorus present for most of the opera. So we had to stand out amongst many, and truly had to present ourselves with the confidence and vitality that these actresses embodied.

Working on *Manon* was a total joy, especially thanks to the lesson it taught me: You must create a compelling interpretation, no matter the circumstances.

BLENDING IN

Surprise! The final role that prepared me for the professional world was not a principal role at all. It was singing in the chorus of *Doctor Atomic* during my fourth year at Curtis. This modern masterpiece was the hardest thing I've done yet, and one of the most satisfying.

Chorus work in general is a humbling experience. You serve as the support and heartbeat of something far greater than yourself, while very rarely getting to be the center of attention. Not only must you do all of the things required to prepare a leading role, you must also focus on blending and being energized in a way that adds to the thrill of the piece without overpowering the principals. At Curtis you are almost guaranteed to sing in a chorus of at least one opera. Our *Doctor Atomic* chorus included singers who had already performed *Manon*, *Musetta*, *Susanna*, *Lucretia*, and *Anne Trulove*; or who would soon sing *Pelléas*, *Mélisande*, *Magda*, *Tatyana*, and *Lensky*.

Whether you're in the chorus or the main character, you're there to tell a story. And unless you're singing *La voix humaine*, that story isn't always going to be about you. There'll be moments when you are not the most important thing that's happening on stage. Sure, sometimes everyone has equal importance, and moments of brilliant tension can bloom. Sometimes it's all about one person or a pair of people. If singing in the chorus has taught me anything, it's to keep giving energy to your colleagues while being conscious of your part of the narrative.

But that's not to say it's all about giving! In fact, if you're lucky, you'll have colleagues who don't just take what you're giving them, but who give that fervor right back to you. They'll breathe the same unbridled energy into you as you breathe into them, and then you will have something truly magical on your hands: art. ♦

Ashley Marie Robillard received her bachelor's degree in voice from Curtis in 2018, and is studying toward a master's degree in opera. She is in her second year as an Emerging Artist at Opera Philadelphia.

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Opposite, clockwise from top left:

Ashley sang the role of Papagena in an Opera Philadelphia production of Mozart's *The Magic Flute*, with baritone Jarrett Ott, an alumnus of the Curtis opera program, as Papageno. PHOTO: KELLY AND MASSA PHOTOGRAPHY/COURTESY OPERA PHILADELPHIA

Ashley's first role at Curtis was Tisbe (center, at steps), one of Cinderella's evil stepsisters, in Rossini's *La cenerentola*. PHOTO: GHENADY MEIRSON

The Curtis Opera Theatre production of *Manon* placed singers, including Ashley, on a pedestal. PHOTO: CORY WEAVER

In the Curtis Opera Theatre's *Doctor Atomic*, the chorus drove much of the drama. PHOTO: KARLI CADEL