

Arts & Entertainment

When Writing Meets Visual Art, 'It's Personal'

By MARYLOU MORANO
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader and The Times

AREA - "It's Personal," a recent exhibit at Union County College's Tomasulo Gallery, put to rest the idea that writing and art are mutually exclusive forms of creativity.

Three artists - Dahlia Elsayed, Jenny Krasner and Amy Wilson - contributed to this exhibit. Each piece of exhibited artwork was composed

not only of the traditional artistic media, like acrylics and watercolor, but also contained the written word as an integral part of its composition.

The incorporation of writing into a piece of artwork creates a dilemma for the viewer, and brings to light questions not normally faced when viewing art.

One of the questions that needed to be answered is how much of the work's impact is due to the writing, and how much is due to the artist's talent, media choice and presentation.

The exhibit also questions if the writing enhanced the quality of the art or detracted from it.

In "It's Personal," evidence of both was found, and it seemed to depend on how much of the writing was incorporated into a particular piece.

Ms. Elsayed's large sweeping pieces contained little writing, save the words, "I'm A Mess" and "I'm A Wreck" swimming in masses of acrylic-produced circles. In this, what the artist defines as an "emotional map," the writing is gigantic as compared to the circles, making each creation more a piece of writing than of art.

The emphasis on art as a vehicle for personal narrative is quite a bit more obvious in Ms. Wilson's work. The tiny and often-difficult-to-read script set in a cartoon balloon fashion takes forever to read. At the same time, however, the writing allows the viewer to experience the multi-dimensional aspect of a piece of art that contains many figures.

This rarely happens in art. Her watercolors explore issues central to women, and many of her pieces are reflective of her own experiences and, therefore, could be considered self-portraits.

Ms. Krasner's acrylic prints are a collage of words and found objects. The dialogue inherent in her work balances out Ms. Wilson's artistic monologue and Ms. Elsayed's paucity of words.

Rocio Aranda-Alvarado, the associate curator at El Museo del Barrio in New York City, curated "It's Personal." Currently featured through April 17 at Tomasulo Gallery is "Playing Politics," a solo show of the work of Susan Hamburger that addresses contemporary social and political issues.

The Tomasulo Gallery is housed in the Kenneth Campbell MacKay Library, located on the Cranford Campus.

For more information, contact the gallery at (908) 709-7155.



Dahlia Elsayed
"Achy Desire," 2008
acrylic on paper
45" x 66"

OH THE LONGING!

OH THE ACHY DESIRE!



Susan M. Dougherty for The Westfield Leader and The Times
CRACKING THE MYSTERY...At the end of Act II, the principal performers get to kick up their heels in Westfield High School's production *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*.

Unfinished Business: WHS Actors Finalize Dickens' Drood

By SUSAN MYRILL DOUGHERTY
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader and The Times

WESTFIELD - If you entered the Westfield High School (WHS) auditorium last weekend, you got a taste of London's Music Hall Royale in the 1890s with the presentation of *The Mystery of Edwin Drood*. Even the lobby was bedecked in a lace-curtained ceiling. Costumed ushers mingled with guests and the actors beforehand to create a comfortable, Victorian-vaudeville atmosphere.

The Mystery of Edwin Drood, a musical with book, music, lyrics and orchestration by Rupert Holmes (see lower right), is based on the uncompleted final novel of Charles Dickens.

The musical utilizes two conventions known well to the author and people of England during that time period. A "Principal Boy" (sometimes called the "Lead Boy") - a young, beautiful female impersonating a male role - and British pantomime were popular styles presented in music halls.

The British pantomime, referred to as "Panto," was a musical theatrical production that used buffoonery, slapstick and audience participation. A night in the Victorian theater meant raucous, risqué comedy usually pulled together by a master of ceremonies.

In Holmes' show, which is really a show-within-a-show, Chairman Cartwright (Garrett Verdone) introduces the supposedly famous British actors as they appear on stage.

The assumption is that the London audiences would know and recognize these famous singers. The Chairman tells the audience who will play what and walks them through the Dickens' plot all the while adding clever improvisational comments.

At first, the audience doesn't quite know what to make of the audience/actor interaction with almost a cabaret-like atmosphere. The show is done tongue-in-cheek with asides and glances to the audience who later get in on the fun by hissing and booing at the appropriate moments when the Chairman and his able assistant Jana Throttle/Stage Manager and Barkeep (Colleen McCabe) give them the nod.

The show is named for young Edwin Drood (Sarah Szollar), but also recounts the tale of his uncle, John Jasper (Peter Surace), who is an opium-den-frequenting choirmaster with an unhealthy lust for his pupil Rosa Bud (Catalina Gaglioti).

Since their births, Rosa and Edwin have been betrothed, but she has caught the eye of a hot-tempered man named Neville Landless (Daniel Berman), who comes from Ceylon with his twin sister, Helena (Olivia Ryan).

They are chaperoned in this country by their guardian, the Reverend Crisparkle (Chris Morrissey). After Neville Landless and Drood have a heated exchange on Christmas Eve, Drood disappears under mysterious circumstances, and his bloodied coat is found. Charles Dickens died before the story could be finished, so the intended ending remains a true mystery.

This is where Rupert Holmes, the author of the Tony- and Drama Desk-award-winning show, lets the audience decide upon three aspects of the ending: the culprit, the sleuth and the lovers. By audience vote, two of the three are selected at the end of Act II.

Director Daniel Devlin has assembled a stellar cast of incredible triple threats: actors who can sing, dance and act. Under the baton of conductor/music director Kenneth Horn, the symphony-like orchestra is comprised of mainly students of All-State caliber.

Choreographer Samantha Hahn

keeps the dozen or so dancers lively and spry. "Jasper's Vision," a visual ballet, is especially well done with the hallucinations in black wispy costumes. The scenic design by Roy Chambers, as usual, is Broadway quality.

Each voice in this production is as special as the next. Peter Surace's stirring rendition of "A Man Could Go Quite Mad" is a portent of things to come with his character.

"Moonfall" tops the list of dramatic numbers, with spectacular vocals by Ms. Gaglioti and later in the reprise with Helena (Olivia Ryan), Wendy (Melissa Riegel) and Evelyn (Amelia Morabito).

Princess Puffer (Rebecca Skowron) plays her role with a tinge of "Sweeney Todd's" Mrs. Lovett - wonderfully wielding her fan like Lovett's rolling pin. In "Puffer's Revelation" and "The Garden Path to Hell," she offers an emotional range of hate and poignancy.

When Sarah Szollar (as Drood) and Catalina Gaglioti (as Rosa) join voices in "Perfect Strangers," the audience is spellbound. Likewise, "No Good Can Come From Bad" is a harmonious delight by Neville, Rosa, Helena, Drood, Crisparkle, Jasper and Bazzard.

On opening night, the audience was especially fond of Chris Morrissey as Reverend Crisparkle and Adam Ziering as Durdles The Gravedigger, as well as with his sidekick Deputy, played by Chris Mench. A delightful surprise of the show was Matt Lynn's poignantly played Bazzard, whose ballad portion of the song "Never the Luck" could be a theme of anyone who has longed for an elusive spotlight.

The talented ensemble gets to wow the audience by spilling into it and onto the roundabout, the ramp around the orchestra, in "Both Sides of the Coin" and "Off to the Races," which was a takeoff on a favorite of the London audiences.

Even during intermission, the cast members juggled and entertained the audience with their interaction. Supporting the adage, "There are no small parts," Director Devlin has given all cast members their much deserved moments to shine.



Courtesy of Elizabeth Ryan
Rupert Holmes chats with WHS thespians at intermission.

A Tale of Two Towns and One Author

By SUSAN MYRILL DOUGHERTY
Specially Written for The Westfield Leader and The Times

AREA - Rupert Holmes, writer of both *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* and *Curtains*, two musicals presented by Westfield High School (WHS) and Scotch Plains-Fanwood High School (SPFHS), got to see both productions this past weekend and was able to speak to both student drama groups.

Before that, however, he had a phone interview on Saturday afternoon with *The Westfield Leader* and *The Scotch Plains-Fanwood Times*, while he was being driven to Westfield for their evening show.

Mr. Holmes' link to the Scotch Plains/Westfield/Fanwood area is through Judy McNickel and her husband Jim, his accountant and longtime friend.

In fact, Mr. Holmes said, there is a reference in *Curtains* to a "Detective McNickel" as a shout-out to the three McNickel children: Maddie, Carlie and Jimmie.

"I'm their honorary 'Uncle Rupert,'" Mr. Holmes said. "I've known the kids since they were born, so I've always had an interest in things in Scotch Plains. It's a town I care about," he explained.

Additionally, Teressa Jennings, his associate, is from Cranford, so he has visited this area repeatedly.

Curtains was originally conceived and written by Peter Stone, but he died in 2003 before the music and lyrics with John Kander and Fred Ebb were

completed.

Similarly, Dickens died before the completion of his last novel, *Edwin Drood*, which was serialized in magazines. Mr. Holmes rewrote that mystery adding lyrics and music to transform it into a Victorian-vaudeville musical set in London.

At the renowned musical duo's request, Mr. Holmes rewrote *Curtains*. "When I was privileged to be asked to rewrite *Curtains*," Mr. Holmes said, "there were a few unfinished lyrics, and it was my good fortune to be able to collaborate with John (Kander)."

A favorite song of his in that show is "I Miss the Music, I Miss the Song." He wrote the introductory lead to that special song that really "is John's song in honoring the memory of his collaborative partner Fred (Ebb) [who died in 2004]."

From *Drood*, the song "Moonfall" he feels, is one of his best art songs. "A thrill of mine was hearing opera star Renee Fleming sing it in Carnegie Hall. She knew I was in the audience and had me stand to be recognized."

In conclusion, he explained, one of his favorite songs in *Curtains* is "Show People," which he said is "an anthem that sums up why actors realize 'the show must go on.'" He explained, "It's my love letter to musical theater."

And the performances of the two high schools were their love letters right back at him.

WHS Chorale Entertains In 3/24 Musicales Finale

WESTFIELD - The First Congregational Church of Westfield, located at 125 Elmer Street, presents the last of its Mid-Day Musicales concerts for Lent at noon on Wednesday, March 24, with a concert by the Westfield High School (WHS) Chorale.

These free, half-hour concerts are presented in the church sanctuary, and followed by a soup-and-sandwich luncheon in the church's social hall for \$7.

The WHS Chorale, under the direction of William Mathews and Sharon Reynolds, is a 27-voice ensemble specializing in chamber music.

The Chorale has performed in past Mid-Day Musicales at First Congregational, in "Sunday Serenades" at the Presbyterian Church of Westfield, at the Julliard School of Music and as a guest ensemble with the Choral Arts

Society of New Jersey.

As members of the WHS Concert Choir, they sang in Carnegie Hall as part of the Continuo Arts Symphonic Choir last November.

On March 24, the featured music will be madrigals and folksongs sung in large and small groups from Thomas Morley to Billy Joel to Mother Goose nursery rhymes. Under student direction, the 2010 directors include: Sarah Szollar, Jane Braun, Keith Hurt, Julian Seltzer, Sarah Glickstein, Richard Barber, Michael Eilbacher, MJ Donohue, Calvin Antonowicz, Justin Rosin, Melissa Riegel, Garrett Verdone, Michael Rosin and Michael Ruschmann.

For further information, or to make optional luncheon reservations, contact the church office at (908) 233-2494.

WF's Wicke Announces Young Artist Competition

WESTFIELD - Candace Wicke, executive director of The Continuo Arts Foundation of Westfield, announced the "Young Artist Debut Series." It is designed to promote and present one of the nation's finest young artists in his or her Carnegie Hall debut on November 29, on the "Christmas Time in the City" concert series.

Outstanding young artists, either vocal or instrumental, may apply. Application forms and competition details may be found at continuoarts.com.

From the applications received, the top 10 finalists will be invited to perform live at the Historic Twin Maples Estate in Summit before a judging panel

that will include Ms. Wicke and other professionals of note.

The winning artist will be a featured soloist on November 29, in the second "Christmas Time in the City" concert in Carnegie Hall. Early registration deadline is April 30, and the submission deadline is June 15.

Last November, the Continuo Arts Symphonic Chorus and Orchestra ushered in the holiday season with the world premiere of "A Carol Fantasy" by Stephen James Edwards.

For information about the Young Artist Competition or upcoming events, visit continuoarts.com or call (908) 254-5324.



Photo courtesy of Joan Barron
'HIGH SCHOOL' DRAMA...High School Musical 2 arrives at Mother Seton Regional High School in Clark. Pictured, standing, from left to right, are: Anthony Green, Joseph Ventura, Carlo Austria and Paul Rosato. Below, kneeling and sitting, from left to right, are: Megan Garbarino, Lauren Mateo, Soley Esteves and Takisha Pierre.

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Programming at the UCPAC is made possible in part by funds from the New Jersey State Council on the Arts, Department of State, a Partner Agency of the National Endowment for the Arts and by funds from the National Endowment for the Arts.

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