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Perseverance pays off for opera singer

By Jack Evans

SPECIAL TO THE INTELLIGENCER

Quinte-area professional opera singer Elizabeth McDonald was recently asked to talk to students at Colborne Public School about perseverance.

The talk was part of a new program at the school about values.

McDonald said class lectures are something she has done quite often. She enjoys trying to inspire the children into artistic-creative careers. As a professionally-trained singer, she's even involved in doing some limited vocal teaching herself. "I'm trying not to get too involved in private teaching because it is a commitment that can get in the way of unexpected performance opportunities," she explained.

Now perseverance ... that's a major part of almost any artistic type career, McDonald affirmed.

In her own case, it was years of lessons, from prominent Quinte area vocal teacher Phyllis Antongnini, many hours of practice, local concerts and competitions like the annual Rotary Music Festival ("I never one a major award," she confessed.) and then on to post-secondary studies for a bachelor of music in performance at the University of Toronto and further training at the Eastman School of Music. There, she graduated in May of 2000 with a master's of music in performance and literature. Also while there, she won the prestigious Performer's Cer-

tificate and placed second in the first ever Lotte Lenya Competition in 1998. She has also done studies at the Banff Centre for Arts in the Dramatic Integration Program, the Britten-Pears School in contemporary song literature, the Orford Arts Centre and the Vancouver Early Music Festival.

After all that, she stressed, one still has to attend and perform literally dozens of auditions all around the country, most of which fail to produce any work.

But thanks to perseverance, McDonald hung in, and finally lucked, perhaps skilled, into becoming an "apprentice artist" with the Santa Fe Opera. There, she was recipient of the Judith Raskin Memorial Award for Singers and covered the roles of Prima Donna in the North American premiere of "Venus und Adonis," and the overseer in Strauss' "Elektra." During her time with Santa Fe Opera's Apprentice Showcase Series she was also heard as Musetta in "La Boheme," and in the title role in "Tosca."

For McDonald, it was perhaps a slow start, but a solid one. She then went on to work with the Canadian Opera Company for the 2002-2003

series and with the National Ballet of Canada for the 2003-2004 series.

She has also performed extensively as a solo recitalist and in ensemble situations in recent years, but her career has been temporarily on hold with the arrival of her second child last year.

McDonald has already done extensive performing in her local area, including featured soloist for the Quinte Cabaret as part of the Belleville Festival of Trees, and she is currently booked to perform with the Quinte Symphony for the pre-Christmas concert in December.

"I'd love to do more singing in my own area," she said, suggesting festivals such as the Westben Theatre series at nearby Campbellford as hopeful targets.

Meanwhile though, reviewers of her performances to date have been glowingly kind, praising both her acting and singing skills. Typical was Tamara Bernstein for The National Post: "Elizabeth McDonald sent shivers down one's spine before she even opened her mouth." Another is Urjo Kareda for the The Globe and Mail Opera News: "Elizabeth McDonald ... as Elettra (in Mozart's 'Idomeneo') provided a gorgeous, gleaming tone and powerful colouratura attack."

Several other reviewers have predicted that McDonald indeed faces a sparkling career....one McDonald herself hopes will soon get back on track.

She is one of a surprisingly rich but generally low-profile artistic community throughout the area.

"People don't seem to realize that the creative arts segment of the economy is probably the major single part, generating one-third of economic development," she said.

How does a girl raised on a farm go on to diva status? Arguably, one of the most scenic stretches of road in the region is the North Lakeside along Consequon Lake. Here, gracefully shaded by stately trees in many sections, and running almost within inches of the azure surface of Consequon Lake, McDonald may have soaked up a special sense of beauty and creativity.

McDonald is proud of her modest success so far and insists that she is a professional. That is one reason she is often disappointed when people object to her asking for a professional fee. It is a situation most artists face. "You wouldn't refuse to pay for a dentist, or a lawyer," she argues. "I'm just as much a professional as they are."

While waiting for her next "big" opportunity, McDonald is trying to "keep my chops up" with a new business sideline....a wedding singer. It's a business she has recently launched and she believes it has strong potential.

Meanwhile, she is enjoying the approach of summer and leisure time with her husband, Steve Lippitt, a Belleville chiropractor, daughter Victoria, aged four, and son Simon, aged one.

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