

Premiere in the Prairies

*Patrons battled blizzards
to attend*

*Elizabeth Raum's
The Garden of Alice*



Tracy Dahl as Alice and Don McManus as The White Rabbit in premiere of Raum's *The Garden of Alice*. Photo: Richard Gustin

by Denise Ball

No matter how you looked at it, the January production of Elizabeth Raum's *The Garden of Alice* at The Globe Theatre in Regina was an unusual event. First, this musical adaptation of Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* was premiered by a theatre, not an opera company, and it was done in Regina, a city with no recent history of producing opera. Secondly, it was the first professional production for the composer and it was mounted at a time when most prairie residents are unlikely to battle blizzards to experience the unknown.

In spite of the mid-winter prairie weather and the fact that the word "opera" carries intimidating connotations in Saskatchewan, more than 4,000 patrons, from punks to the patrician set, came out to experience *The Garden of Alice*.

The situation was unusual, to be sure, but Raum found the response to *Alice* painfully predictable. Although the production was a hit at the box office, the critics – and what Raum calls the "officials" of the music world, including representatives of the Canada Council – found it all a bit old-fashioned. One reviewer on CBC-Radio called it "conventional," while *The Financial Post* found it "thin". Singable songs, Raum laments, remain out of style among the musical elite.

The offer to produce *Alice* came about after a concert version of the work was mounted at a Regina art gallery as part of a contemporary music series. Ken Kramer, artistic director of *The Globe*, happened to hear the performance.

"I was simply enchanted by the music and the inventive way she (Raum) had dealt with the story," Kramer says. "There wasn't anyone else in town in a position to produce *Alice* so I jumped at the chance. It simply had to be done."

"The audience liked it, regardless of how old they were or what they did," Raum says. "These were people who felt no obligation to 'appreciate' Canadian music, or contemporary music, or even opera. In fact, many of these people came fully intending to hate the work, or at least be bored by it. But these people, some of whom had never listened to 'serious' music before, enjoyed *The Garden of Alice*."

Raum's adaptation of the Carroll classic follows Alice, sung in Regina by Tracy Dahl of Winnipeg, through her familiar adventures. She encounters the White Rabbit and drops in on the Mad Hatter's Tea Party. She plays croquet with the Queen of Hearts and learns how Old Father William should be sung from a caterpillar lolling on a mushroom and smoking a hookah pipe. But gradually Alice's dream-world becomes a nightmare; the menagerie becomes a Kafkaesque collection of menacing creatures.

The elements the audience welcomed were the music's tuneful, tonal quality, the lyrical arias and the often eclectic references to composers of the past – the same aspects of the score the officials deemed unadventurous. For Raum, the dichotomy in the response reinforced her belief that there's a serious flaw in the system that determines which composers receive official sanction.

"I'm tired of the kind of intellectual elitism that says anything that's tuneful is unsophisticated," she says. "I'm not just a neophyte with a gift for melody, someone who writes nice tunes. I want to learn from all ages, today's composers as well as music of

the past. Unfortunately, in Canada the official position is against what I'm doing."

An active champion of contemporary music, Raum graduated from the Eastman School of Music in 1966. She is currently an oboist with the Regina Symphony and has performed with major orchestras throughout North America. A founding member of Regina's Contemporary Directions Ensemble, she frequently performs the works of avant-garde Canadian and international composers.

Raum's eclectic musical interests are evident throughout *Alice*. One aria parodies Handel; the end of the work quotes from Berg's *Wozzeck*. Even "tone rows," the form most highly regarded by Canadian music officialdom, find their way into the score in the overture for the Queen of Hearts and the White Rabbit theme.

"These rows were used in such a way as to keep the singer's part tonal while the accompaniment wove about, coloring the mood of the arias while leaving the singers with music that they could sing comfortably and expressively," Raum explains. "If that's old-fashioned, to hell with it."

Raum says experimentation for its own sake has alienated Canadian audiences. And she believes a number of other contemporary composers share her view.

"You need experimentation and it's necessary for government to support innovation. But it's obvious that a lot of the music that's being written today isn't liked by most people. Nor should audiences need advanced training to understand what's going on so they can begin to enjoy it."

There are no immediate plans for future productions of the complete opera, but several members of the original cast plan to include *Alice* arias on their recital programs. Raum believes that accessibility of *The Garden of Alice*, for audiences and performers alike, represents the next wave in contemporary music. If she's right, this "old-fashioned" opera may in fact be on the cutting edge of the avant-garde.

The cast for the world premiere of *The Garden of Alice* consisted of Tracy Dahl (Alice), Don McManus (White Rabbit), Elizabeth Mawson (Duchess/Queen), Avo Kittask (Mad Hatter), Henry Ingram (March Hare), Steven Beamish (Caterpillar), Barry Stilwell (Knave of Hearts), and Kristine Anderson (Dormouse). The production was conducted by Fen Watkin, staged by Ken Kramer and designed by Marian Buller. ■

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