C. David Higgins

Tribute to a Master
“It is not in the stars to hold our destiny but in ourselves.”

—William Shakespeare

The bard was partially right: our destinies do lie within ourselves, but along with free will there is also the confluence of time and place.

The fact that David Higgins was born and raised in Bloomington, Indiana, and would go on to become professor and chair of the Opera Studies Program at the Indiana University Jacobs School of Music could be attributed to his will—the decisions he made about his education and career. The fact that he also was blessed with gifted artistic vision and talent and for 40 years would provide opera and ballet patrons, not just in Bloomington but around the world, with visual magic on the stage can only be attributed to destiny.

In the 70-year history of the Indiana University Opera and Ballet Theater there have been seven resident set designers, four from Europe and three from the United States. Each designer brought to the stage his own signature style and feel for color and light. While having had the good fortune to study under the great C. Mario Cristini, David developed his own style. Described as daring, imaginative, and magical spectacle, David’s set designs retained a sense of romantic realism. His scenery captured the collaborative relationships of each opera and established the tone for the productions through his sets, costume designs, and lighting.

In 1970, he became the youngest member of USA (United Scenic Artists) Local 326 to hold a Design Director card, which identified him as a scenic designer, costume designer, scenic artist, and lighting designer. He received his Bachelor of Science in Music, Opera Scenic Techniques from Indiana University in 1972, his Master of Music degree in 1979, and in 1981, he was appointed as a faculty member in the School of Music. Since 2004 he has served as chair of the Opera Studies Program in the Jacobs School of Music.

Dean Emeritus Wilfred Bain once said, “We do opera at Indiana University because we have the horses to do it.”

C. David Higgins was one of those horses.

As set designer, costume designer, master scenic artist, and professor, David contributed 57 productions to IU Opera and Ballet Theater and was a major factor in building its reputation for producing world-class opera and ballet. This book is a tribute to his life of design, his gift of artistic vision and skill, and his dedication and energy, which he has shared with Bloomington and the world.

David’s responsibility has been complex, but he has never flinched. In the 1995 novel Maskerade, the eighteenth book in the Discworld series, Terry Pratchett aptly notes what David has faced. Mr. Salzella, the music director of the Opera House, tells the house’s new owner, Mr. Bucket, how opera runs:

A catastrophe curve, Mr. Bucket, is what opera runs along. Opera happens because a large number of things amazingly fail to go wrong, Mr. Bucket. It works because of hatred and love and nerves. All the time. This isn’t cheese. This is opera. If you wanted a quiet retirement, Mr. Bucket, you shouldn’t have bought the Opera House. You should have done something peaceful, like alligator dentistry.

While David conquered the catastrophe curve time and time again, he comments, “I am ready to leave, but I would be a fool to say I will not miss it.”
over the course of a long scenic design career there will always be those productions that have more meaning and importance than others. When asked to select his personal six favorite productions, David chose the following shows, each selected for very different reasons: Fiddler on the Roof, La Traviata, Das Rheingold, The Nutcracker, La Bohème, and The Magic Flute.
Enjoy the Full Splendor of “Tribute to a Master”

Additional Sections

Signature Productions

Fiddler on the Roof
La Traviata
Das Rheingold
The Nutcracker
La Bohème
The Magic Flute

Design Process

The design process is one of collaboration between the designer and the director. Once the opera has been selected, they come together in a conceptual meeting wherein the director will discuss his vision for the production as a whole.

Mentor and Teacher

The amount of work and expertise it takes to mount a production on the scale to which the audiences of the Musical Arts Center have become accustomed requires an amazing number of personnel.

To purchase this book full of stunning photos and personal remembrances, visit iumusicmarketplace.com.