An Artist’s Farewell
by Timothy Stebbins, IU Opera and Ballet Theater Director of Production

The December 2011 retirement of C. David Higgins, chair of the Indiana University Opera Studies Department and principal designer for IU Opera and Ballet Theater, marked the end of an era in the history of IU Opera and Ballet.

For more than 40 years, Higgins called the School of Music home—as a student, an educator, and an artist.

He was the last member of a team that included George Calder, Allen White, and Harold Mack, which guided the Musical Arts Center for many years, from its dedication in 1972 through 2011. Throughout those years, Higgins was a creative anchor in the design process and brought his talents to bear on hundreds of performances as set designer, costume designer, and scenic artist.

Born in Bloomington and raised in the local community, Higgins could hardly have guessed that one day he would go from being a School of Music undergraduate student to chair of the Opera Studies Department in the world-renowned Indiana University Jacobs School of Music.

He served the school as designer, teacher, and mentor, and gathered a wealth of knowledge about opera history, ballet (having been a former dancer himself), design, architecture, fine arts, fashion, and music—all of which he enthusiastically shared with students, colleagues, and friends.

His skills as a master scenic artist were unparalleled, and The New Yorker magazine hailed him as one of the greatest scenic artists in North America.

Higgins studied under the great C. Mario Cristini, and, at one time, was the youngest member of United Scenic Artists Local 326 to be awarded a design director card. That accomplishment identified him as qualified to be not only a scenic designer and artist, but also a costume and lighting designer.

While a part of the rich design tradition of IU Opera Theater that included Cristini, Max Röthlisberger, and Robert O’Hearn, Higgins found his own unique style, making many of his productions in any given season the most memorable.

His accomplishments include not only a mesmerizing La Bohème—which utilizes three turntables on three moving stage wagons—but also world premieres of The Dawn of the Poor King and Our Town, American premieres of The Devils of Loudun and Jeppe, and collegiate premieres of 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue, The Ghosts of Versailles, and Nixon in China.

He has worked with well-known directors and musicians both here and abroad, and his tenure at IU spans the construction of the Musical Arts Center, four deans of the music school, and hundreds of opera and ballet performances.

Beyond the confines of Bloomington, Higgins has brought his designs to many countries around the world, including South Korea, Brazil, Puerto Rico, Great Britain, and Iceland.

His attention to detail and his sense of beauty and craftsmanship are easily recognizable in the 19 productions that IU Opera currently holds in its inventory. These productions will be cycled through future seasons, so that even though Higgins is now retired, his art will continue to bring IU Opera and Ballet Theater productions to life for many years to come.

In recognition of his many years of dedicated service to IU Opera and Ballet Theater and the Jacob School of Music, the book Tribute to a Master, recently authored by Marianne Tobias, offers a behind-the-scenes glimpse into Higgins’ unique design process.
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(Cinderella)
Nov. 8, 9, 10, 11

Xerxes
Feb. 1, 2, 8, 9
NEW PRODUCTION

Akhnaten
Feb. 22, 23 | March 1, 2
NEW PRODUCTION

Light and Shade
Sept. 28, 29 Fall Ballet
Sweet Fields | Eight Easy Pieces
Eight More | Appalachian Spring

The Nutcracker
Nov. 30 | Dec. 1, 2

Falstaff
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