Pulling Back the Curtain on Roméo et Juliette

Roméo et Juliette: 40 singers, 50 orchestra members, 120 costumes, 2 casts, 5 acts, 3 hours. Those numbers barely begin to describe the extraordinary amount of work behind the staging of the BU Opera Institute’s spring production, which was nearly a year in the planning. Auditions for Gounod’s classic were held back in September and production meetings began a month later, and it all culminated in the April 21 opening at the BU Theatre.

In choosing operas to stage, says William Lumpkin, institute conductor and musical director of Roméo et Juliette, “we think about what repertoire will best serve our students from a pedagogical point of view.” Operas are selected with an eye toward giving students an opportunity to work in a number of different styles, languages, and time periods during their two years in the program. “We also have to think about what will fit in the BU Theatre,” says the College of Fine Arts associate professor. “We can’t choose something that has six tubas and four harps, because it won’t fit.”

The orchestra for Roméo et Juliette, which does include one harp, struggled to squeeze into the theater’s narrow pit. In the end, the harp had to be moved out of the pit and placed next to the bass drum at the edge of the stage.

French composer Charles Gounod’s opera differs from the Shakespeare tragedy that inspired it in several respects. “The way it flows is so different from what Shakespeare wrote,” says scenic designer Christopher Dills (CFA’12). “The political overtones of the rival families are practically gone.”

“We like to joke that this is a French opera based on a story by an English guy about a bunch of Italian people,” says Dills. “So it’s a big amalgamation of ideas and people and for my purposes, architecture.”

Dills incorporated visual elements inspired by postwar Paris, Elizabethan England, the photography of Richard Avedon, and even local architecture into his set, built over four weeks by the Huntington Theatre Company’s scene shop.

MITCHELL ZUCKOFF knows a promising story when he sees one. But he concedes that his latest book is an embarrassment of narrative riches, a platter heaped high with heroism, history, human pathos and pluck, and nail-biting adventure. Lost in Shangri-La: A True Story of Survival, Adventure and the Most Incredible Rescue Mission of World War II (HarperCollins, 2011) chronicles the May 1945 crash of the Gremlin Special, a plane carrying 13 U.S. servicemen and 11 members of the Women’s Army Corps on an R&R sightseeing flight over a valley frozen in time in the wilds of New Guinea. The wounded survivors were stranded among an isolated tribe, unable to gauge the potential dangers they faced.

Zuckoff, a College of Communication professor of journalism, former Boston Globe reporter, and author of several books, including Ponzi’s Scheme: The True Story of a Financial Legend, ventured deep in the equatorial rain forest to report the tale, which was widely covered at the time, but all but forgotten now.

The story is verifiable thanks to a trove of sources, from the recollections of a living survivor to a declassified U.S. Army report to a diary scrawled