



Beth Maskey and Carolyn Greco with Dorian Balis as "Gabriel von Eisenstein."

## Singing Strauss

### **Music theater students stage the waltz king's party, the operetta, *Die Fledermaus***

A young man fakes right, then left and then down through the middle. With a triple spin, he begins waltzing and toasting and singing.

"The timing of this is more complicated than a football play," says JMU voice professor Dorothy Maddison during one of the rehearsals for *Die Fledermaus*, the fall 2002 student opera.

In a circular motion, students whirl around the practice room in the Music Building. Their singing crescendos, as students become a blur of colors and sound. Then - a crash. Silence. The cherub statue situated to indicate the location of the set's stairwell has taken a tumble and broken cleanly in half. "It's the same as drilling for football plays, except cherub heads can be broken," Maddison laughs.

The creation of an opera is more than a well-choreographed effort; it is a team coordination that requires students to be at the top of their game on every level. Maddison, who joined the JMU faculty last fall, says her students are well equipped for the challenge. "If you are in music theater, you need to be a triple threat - dancing, singing and acting skills have to be balanced," she says.

The November production of *Die Fledermaus*, a collaboration of the music and theater and dance schools, "was a wonderful opportunity for students to work as a team," Maddison says. "You can't have opera or music theater without collaboration. If everybody was the world's best singer, we'd never get a lighting design done. The second chair clarinet is just as important as the lead soprano."

*Die Fledermaus*, set in Vienna in 1890, is considered the most operatic of all operas. Written by the waltz king Johann Strauss, the story follows Dr. Falke (played by sophomore Justin Leighty), once tricked into walking the streets of Vienna dressed as a fledermaus (a bat). He realizes his revenge by inviting philanderer Gabriel von Eisenstein (played by junior Dorian Balis) to a party attended by lots of beautiful women and a disguised Mrs. Eisenstein (played by junior Jessie Sutherland).

Leighty says, "This was hard work, but it was a great experience - very much a team effort. This is a fine example of what JMU is capable of. Dr. Maddison is an awesome music director. She knows her stuff."

Sutherland agrees, "*Die Fledermaus* was one of the greatest experiences of my life. Working with Dr. Maddison was a highly educational process. Because she has worked so much in the real singing world, she emphasized the need for vocal health and proper vocal production. She gave us tips on how to get our sound over the orchestra and to the back of the hall. And she taught us how to save our voices in the rehearsal process so as to be vocally healthy for the run of the show.

"Earning a lead part was a bit more than I had anticipated, I must say. Fitting a role into one's

voice takes time and practice. The music becomes somewhat like a good wine: the voice has more color and body the longer it is in contact with the music. It was amazing how all of our voices grew into our character's music. Rosalinde is the largest part I have undertaken. The opera was my first taste of the stamina and energy required to perform such an exhilarating show night after night. Actually, it helped solidify my goals. I now know that this is what I want to do. Opera is one of the most challenging forms of performance. I am blessed to be able to be a part of it."

Music, theater and dance students also work together on the annual spring musical, which in April will be a production of *Pippin*. "Having the theater and dance and music students work so closely teaches them to respect each other's disciplines," Maddison adds. "That division [between music and theater in academia] is sort of artificial. In the real world, it doesn't exist."

Maddison, whose soprano voice earned acclaim in European opera houses for 20 years, came to JMU, in part, because of its new emphasis in music theater. A music theater concentration, first offered in 1994, has since been transformed into a Bachelor of Music degree with an emphasis in music theater. The concentration "received full accreditation from the National Association of Schools of Music in 2001, following the re-accreditation evaluation of the entire School of Music," says music professor John Little. "As an emphasis program, it is one of two interdisciplinary major programs in the School of Music, with a curriculum that includes courses from both the School of Music and the School of Theatre and Dance."

Maddison began her academic career in 1995 after receiving her master's and doctorate degrees from Arizona State University. She started her musical career as a child violinist. "Because my mother was a voice teacher, I was bound and determined not to be a singer," she says. Her mother taught choral groups for many years in Minnesota. But an inspiring college teacher changed Maddison's musical aspirations. "In a way it was a natural transition," she says. "In another way it was a complete surprise."

A concentration in music theater prepares students to be in musicals and operas, "a powerful combination," according to Maddison. "Because opera singers' voices don't reach maturity until age 28, music theater gives students the background to work in musicals and music theaters until they are ready for opera."

Shannon Dove ('96), scenic designer for the opera, says the collaboration of theater and music was a positive experience for him as a student. "When I was here, the theater and dance departments weren't as big, and everyone had to do everything. I thought that was a really good thing for me."

Dorian Balis, who portrays Gabriel von Eisenstein, adds, "*Die Fledermaus* was such a great experience. Everyone was constantly having fun, both on stage and off. The jokes that we started on stage just seemed to carry over into the dressing rooms, each night a little bigger than the last. All in all, everyone seemed to really enjoy each other and were happy to be there."

"Working with Dr. Maddison was really great, too. JMU is lucky to have a professor with her credentials, her career and her knowledge of singing. She constantly motivated me to be the best I could be. I learned so much while doing this show. I really wouldn't trade the experience for the world. Well, maybe if the world came with a role at the Met. Then I might have to reconsider. I hope everyone who came to see it had as much fun as I did. It meant so much to me to hear them laugh."

Stuart Holt, visiting faculty member and stage director for the opera, says that JMU students demonstrate the versatility needed to perform in music theater. "I think JMU students come with a really well-prepared palette for something like this."

Directing the students' voices to enunciate, illuminate and entertain, Maddison coaches the students to a musical triumph. "No one person can do it. It's a team activity," she explains. "The kids - I can't tell you what a joy it is to work with them."

- Donna Dunn ('94)