

The Berkshire Eagle

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Charles Caine designed costumes for Berkshire soprano Maureen O'Flynn, above left, as Mimi in 'La Boheme' at the former Berkshire Opera Company. (Eagle file)

LENEX -- International costume designer Charles Caine spent nearly two decades at the Metropolitan Opera draping divas in dresses and tenors in tails, all the while amassing tales of personalities and pitfalls along with souvenirs of operatic creations.

On Sunday at 4 p.m. at Edith Wharton's Lenox estate, the Mount, in "Footlights at the Met -- a Peek behind the Curtain," Close Encounters With Music will take a trip into the rarefied world of opera as Caine shares personal stories and memorabilia -- such as legendary Carmen Emma Calvé's scarf and Zeffirelli's Cleopatra bodice for Leontyne Price.

From his Egremont home, Caine elaborated on his rewarding career. A Manhattan native, he studied theater design at college. When the draft sent him to a television training center in Augusta, Ga., he befriended a local conscript who as a teenager worked backstage whenever the Met toured south.

His friend left the army and joined the Met full time, helping Caine get a job managing the costume shops. "It was the late 60s, the last year of the old opera house," Caine said. On an early assignment, he costumed Maria Callas on her return to New York to sing "Tosca." An incredible lady, he recalled, with the highest standards and always prepared -- unlike the tenors, who often didn't know their music or waltzed in late.

"She became very short-tempered with them," he said. "That's what gave her the bad reputation."

While the new Met took shape, he worked with architects and also prepared eight productions for the first season at Lincoln Center.

"They gave me a week off to get married that summer," he recalled. As resident costume designer, Caine turned concepts by famous designers into costumes and adapted them for subsequent productions. "We ended up having eight or nine different sets of 'Tosca' costumes in different shapes and sizes," he said.

In a career highlight, he worked alongside artist Marc Chagall on "The Magic Flute," "collaging thousands and thousands of little pieces of fabric in all sorts of colors" onto white costumes. "I sat in a studio with Marc Chagall for three and a half months, hand painting along with him all these costumes," he said. He will display two pieces that he framed. "They're a blaze of color -- they are beautiful."



When a warehouse fire destroyed many costumes in the '70s, he made his Met debut designing costumes for a new production of "Don Pasquale." "It opened on New Year's Eve," he recalled.

After 17 years, he left to work for opera companies from San Francisco to Miami and overseas. He designed Berkshire Opera's final three shows, dressing local soprano Maureen O'Flynn in her first "trousers role" as "Cherubino" in "The Marriage of Figaro."

He maintains a long-standing professional relationship and friendship with retired soprano Martina Arroyo.

"I'm just finishing a recital dress right now, because she is receiving one of the Kennedy honors in December," he said.

Twenty years ago, Close Encounters artistic director Hanani performed with Arroyo on a cruise and learned her costumer lived nearby. With current opera interest high, Hanani invited Caine to share his stories and artifacts, "giving us some insight into these legendary singers."

Their paths almost crossed during the old Met's last season, Hanani said, recalling a long-forgotten memory. Recently arrived from Israel, he had no tails to wear for his New York debut concert. A Met manager whose son he coached on cello told him to come to the theater.

"I remember taking an elevator down into the bowels of the building, floors and floors underground and an endless collection of costumes," Hanani said. "A tailor with an Italian accent gave me the tails of a famous tenor; his name was sewn on the back." He wore them with pride.

Sometimes things do fall through the cracks, Caine admitted. When a tenor went down on one knee at a "Carmen" dress rehearsal in front of four thousand people, "all of a sudden I heard krrrk -- the crotch of his pants had split open." "His big blousy underwear started falling out," Caine recalled. "He looked like he was giving birth to white cotton."

Once, during a "Die Fledermaus" fitting, he walked in on a naked Kitty Carlisle. Ten years later, when they met on the staircase at a publisher's party, "she said, 'I know you from someplace,'" he recalled, "'and oh, you know a lot about me, more than most people do!'"

At the Mount, Caine will share some revealing secrets of his own.