

Ready For The Big Time

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Published on 4/14/2008 in [Home](#) » [Features](#) » [Features Main Photo](#)

John Waller knew the Connecticut Lyric Opera — a grassroots company he created five years ago with three others with the goal of making opera more accessible — was on its way when the group opened an office in January in downtown New London.

During Christmas break from his job at Ortronics in New London, where he is Web application developer, Waller helped repair drywall and paint.

"It was a great moment when we moved the filing cabinet from my basement to the office," he says.

It was also in January that Waller stepped down as director of day-to-day operations. He is the only one of the four founders who is not a theater professional, and he says he has taken the company as far as he can.

"I've devoted so much of my time over the last four years," says Waller, who estimates he has spent 20 hours a week arranging practice and rehearsal space, keeping track of funds and even printing up tickets for each performance on his home computer.

The CLO was formed by Waller, his wife, soprano Jurate Svedaite-Waller, and their married friends, Monika Krajewska, a mezzo-soprano, and Adrian Mackiewicz, founder of the New Britain-based Connecticut Virtuosi Chamber Orchestra. Together they nurtured it through nine productions. Their first show, "Carmen," was performed at the First Congregational Church in New London and at the Trinity-on-Main Performance Hall in New Britain.

On Friday, the company debuts at the Garde Arts Center with a production of Strauss' operetta "Die Fledermaus."

The entire company is looking forward to performing at the Garde. There, for the first time, they will be on a real stage, the orchestra will be in a pit, and professional lighting will be in place.

"To get to the Garde is like graduating from high school and going on to higher education," says Peter Strand of Montville, a founding board member and technical director of the company.

"My goal was to grow the company and perform at the Garde," says Waller. "I always believed it would work out. My belief was if you put your heart and soul into it, be honest and do your best, it's going to work."

Strand, who along with his wife, Rhonda Strand, also sings in the chorus, says that Waller "has been the long-range vision. John really was the one (who) opened his checkbook up to get things started."

Waller has turned over his duties to Mackiewicz.

"Adrian has the experience and the time," Waller says. "He has what the company needs to get it to the next level of professionalism."

Mackiewicz, who is artistic director now in addition to directing his chamber orchestra for each performance, says it has been a remarkable experience teaming artists, singers, stage crew, musicians and technicians to create a company from nothing.

"We have learned a lot," he says.

The nonprofit company, which receives funding from a variety of foundations and businesses, raises about \$20,000 for each performance.

Mackiewicz hopes to continue to build the group into a provocative and innovative regional opera company.

"This will take work," he admits, "and most of all, more experience. I want us to get better at what we do, but also I want to bring to New England new faces and new ideas."

Waller says he will remain involved with the company, which has been a family affair. In addition to his wife, his two daughters perform, and his father is head of the Board of Directors. Friday's performance falls on his mother's birthday. He's told her he's invited the whole community to help celebrate.

Waller says one of his goals from the start was to enlighten the public about the beauty of opera.

"It's the pinnacle of the performing arts," he says.

"Die Fledermaus," or "The Bat," will be performed Friday in English, with super-titles shown above the stage. It includes waltzes, arias, mistaken identities, flirtations and a masked ball.

"People are afraid opera is boring," Waller says. "People don't understand that the stories are about love, lust and revenge."

He admits he was never much of an opera fan himself. But he became an "opera evangelist," after he met his future wife. Opera, he says, is the culmination of all different artistic endeavors. There's singing, music, dancing literature, drama, and theater.

"All I can say, it's been a passion," he says.

Regional

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•Members of the Connecticut Lyric Opera rehearse. Left to right are John Swanson and lead singers Sol Kim Bentley and Victor Khodadad.



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John Waller during a rehearsal for a performance of Johann Strauss' "Die Fledermaus" in the Harris Building Atrium on State Street in New London. He has taken on a more supporting role with the Connecticut Lyric Opera group.