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Chelsea Whelpley

Ouachita Baptist University

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Jon and Glenda Secrest wrap up 21 years as opera co-directors



By Chelsea Whelpley

November 19, 2014

For more information, contact OBU's news bureau at newsbureau@obu.edu or (870) 245-5208.

ARKADELPHIA, Ark. -- Ouachita Baptist University professors of music Jon and Glenda Secrest have directed the school's opera production for the past two decades. But when the final curtain falls on this year's production of *The Mikado*, it also will mark the end of the Secrests' roles as co-directors since 1994.

After 21 years of building the opera program, the Secrests have decided to hand over this responsibility. David Stanley, instructor of music and a former student of the Secrests, will take over direction of the opera productions after this year. Stanley will be assisted by John Alec Briggs, adjunct instructor of music.

“Through the dedication and commitment to training professional singers, the Secrests developed the now renowned opera program at Ouachita Baptist University,” said Dr. Scott Holsclaw, dean of OBU’s School of Fine Arts. “Ouachita is one of the few universities in the region to produce a fully staged opera each year. A program of this caliber does not just happen but is nurtured by committed teachers and professionals in the field. Dr. Jon and Dr. Glenda Secrest embody this in their work with students.”

“We’re looking forward to seeing the evolution of the students’ characters and the culmination of their work,” said Dr. Jon Secrest, reflecting about his final opera production. “This process of growth is what has kept us excited about teaching and directing together over all these years.

“Our enthusiasm for opera is not going to change because we aren’t directing anymore,” he added. “Now we’ll get to come and watch the efforts of our colleagues and be a part of the group that appreciates the final product.”

Noting the dedication and hard work the Secrests have given the opera program, Stanley said, “OBU is an institution I wanted to return to and influence the next generation of performers. I believe much of this is owed to my mentors having such a profound influence on me during my time as a student.”

The Secrests will continue to teach both in the classroom and in the applied lesson setting.

“In our private lessons we get to see a transformation that occurs in our students’ musical lives and in their performing abilities,” said Dr. Glenda Secrest. “This period of growth is so important to them. The evolution they go through is incredible.”

In two decades of teaching at Ouachita, the Secrests’ impact on the lives of students has been profound.

“The Secrests mean the world to me,” said Todd McNeel, a senior mass communications major who performs the title role in *The Mikado*. “They have really invested in me during my time at Ouachita and have always been encouraging to me. They truly care about the opera department and invest a lot ... to make sure we put on professional quality productions.

“I am honored to have worked under them these past four years and I am so happy to have my last opera ever at OBU be under their direction,” McNeel added.

Affirming the support that the Secrests have given him over the years, Jacob Watson, a 2011 Ouachita graduate, said, “They push you to be your best, to be professional, all while maintaining an atmosphere of creativity and fun.

“Dr. Jon Secrest never wanted me to sound like someone else,” added Watson, who recently performed in the Broadway musical *Violet* and is now on the Broadway National Tour of *Chicago* as Amos Hart. “The Secrests always believed that I could make an impact, not only at OBU, but in the professional world as well. They made it clear to me what I am capable of, but also how much hard work and dedication it really takes.”

“We are so blessed to be available to work with these students during such an important time in their life,” Dr. Glenda Secrest noted. “We will continue this work even though our time as directors of opera is coming to a close.”

The Secrests said they feel a sense of fulfillment in how they have been able to lead the opera program’s growth. Their first opera production at Ouachita was *Amahl and the Night Visitors*, with a cast of six students. Two performances were held in Verser Theatre with about 100 people in attendance. By 2010, the Secrests were producing operas that were fully staged and costumed with audiences totaling more than 1,000.

They have even staged productions with lyrics sung in Italian such as *Don Giovanni*. Dr. Jon Secrest described that production as “the mountaintop experience that we’ve had here.”

Caitlin Secrest, who grew up with an insider perspective as the daughter and student of the two directors, said, “The level of professionalism, passion, care and outside time that they put into their successful productions is shown in every last area of consideration: musicality, acting, staging and more.”

Describing her parents and voice instructors as “selfless and generous,” Caitlin Secrest, a 2014 Ouachita graduate with a major in vocal performance, said, “They have sacrificed so much of their lives to build the opera program from the ground up.”

She added that “the legacy of what they have created, along with the help of all the musicians, accompanists, technical directors, assistant directors and students of the past 20 or so years, will live on in an ever-inspiring way.”

Their final opera production, *The Mikado*, will be presented Nov. 20-22 at 7:30 p.m. as well as a matinee performance on Nov. 23 at 2:30 p.m. in Jones Performing Arts Center. Tickets are \$12 each and may be purchased at www.obu.edu/boxoffice.