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NEWS

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Ouachita Theatre Arts to present “Billy Blythe” modern folk opera Nov. 17-20

By Katie Smith

November 4, 2016

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ARKADELPHIA, Ark.—Ouachita Baptist University's Division of Music will present “Billy Blythe,” a modern folk opera featuring music written by Bonnie Montgomery and libretto by Britt Barber, both Ouachita alumni. The opera will be performed Nov. 17-19 at 7:30 p.m. and Nov. 20 at 2:30 p.m. All performances will be held in Jones Performing Arts Center. Tickets are \$10 each, and admission is open to the public. Tickets can be purchased at www.obu.edu/boxoffice.

“Billy Blythe” is a modern folk opera written about the early life of Bill Clinton. The title of the production comes from Clinton's birth name, William Jefferson Blythe. The opera focuses around Clinton's growing-up years in Arkansas in the 1950s.

“It's the story of a young man's formative years in our state,” explained David Stanley, instructor of music and the show's faculty director. “The opera examines his relationship with his community and family, particularly with his mother, Virginia.”

The composer of “Billy Blythe” is 2002 Ouachita alumna and Arkansas native Bonnie Montgomery. She graduated from Ouachita with a bachelor's degree in music education and earned her Master of Arts in Music at the University of Missouri-Kansas City Conservatory of Music. While at Ouachita, Montgomery was involved in Concert Choir and Ouachita Singers.

“Bonnie was one of my best friends here at Ouachita. We were involved in numerous Ouachita ensembles and productions,” Stanley reflected. “It's great to be able to collaborate on a production with an old friend!”

Montgomery is now a singer, composer and songwriter. She has released two EPs and has toured the country extensively. The opera will reflect her music style, which draws its roots from country and traditional Ozark folk song.

Barber earned her Bachelor of Arts degree in English from Ouachita in 2001 and went on to earn a Master of Science degree in child counseling and psychology in Georgia, where she still lives. She was a Pew Younger Scholar during her time at Ouachita.

The pair's work in “Billy Blythe” has earned coverage in publications such as *The New Yorker*, *Huffington Post* and *Time* magazine.

The opera is written “in a certain folk style that sets up the time period and location of the opera very well,” said Esther Atkinson, a senior musical theatre major from Rogers, Ark., who will be playing Virginia. “Also, the set-up of the opera is in little vignettes, so instead of being an ongoing uninterrupted stream of events, it's little flashes of images of Bill Clinton's childhood.”

Montgomery has included distinctive modern twists in the opera's music composition, which causes the music to veer from the traditional classical style heard in most operas. These changes have presented challenges that require the actors to learn a new way to perform operatic music.

"I've been wanting to do Bonnie's opera for a while, and this year, it just happened to work out!" Stanley said. "It really is just a glimpse of history of one the most well-known Arkansans."

"Since this story ends when Clinton was 19, we don't delve into anything political," explained Will Stotts, a junior musical theatre major from Jonesboro, Ark., who will be portraying Bill "Billy" Clinton. "We are merely telling the story of a young man standing up for his family and becoming a leader at a young age."

This opera will be different than previous operas performed by Ouachita. Because it is a modern folk opera, the music will be different than the style of music heard in most operas. The production will also be a much more intimate one for the audience. In fact, audience interaction will be one of the focuses of the production.

"The audience will be onstage with the performers," Stanley said. "This is a very intimate story, and we're going to perform it in such a way to highlight that."

This intimacy has presented a unique challenge to the actors in the show because they won't be separated from the audience by a stage.

"The audience will be within feet of the vocalists, so the big challenge for us will be to be completely engrossed in the story, and act as if the audience isn't within spitting distance," Stotts said.

"I've definitely grown from this experience," he added. "Portraying a young Bill Clinton has been challenging, especially due to the fact that I'm singing extremely low notes that I never thought I could hit."

"It was slightly challenging in that we had to incorporate a southern accent into the classical style of singing, which is very different," Atkinson emphasized. "But it was very intelligently written with where the words lie in the musical score, so every note is very intentionally placed to communicate some emotion."

This unique opera has provided students seeking professional careers in performance with a challenging and rewarding learning experience. The students can use this production to diversify their skills and apply them to future roles.

"Opera performance is what I want to do as a career, so the fact that this is my first opera as a lead is such a great opportunity," Atkinson explained. "It really gives me a great taste of what I have to look forward to, and it pushes me to work harder so that I will make it in the opera world."

Tickets for "Billy Blythe" are \$10 each. Tickets can be purchased online at www.obu.edu/boxoffice or at the Ouachita Box Office from 1-5 p.m. Students may receive one free ticket upon presentation of their student ID. For more information, call the box office at (870) 245-5555 during business hours.

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