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His center stage? The background

Civil rights lawyer finds his musical niche as
CBA orchestra percussionist, Lyric Opera extra

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Imagine going to a Bears game and, instead of sitting in the stands, standing on the sidelines in uniform. Or tossing towels to Mick Jagger backstage at a Rolling Stones concert. Or taking a punch from Will Smith in a summer blockbuster while wearing a rubber alien suit.

That's what Edward A. Voci does when he goes to the Lyric Opera of Chicago. Voci, a civil rights attorney and adjunct professor at The John Marshall Law School's Fair Housing Clinic, is an extra, otherwise known as a supernumerary.

These are people who populate the fringes of an opera stage, filling in around the principals and playing roles like soldiers, servants and townsfolk.

They add texture to the stage. And they get people like Voci closer to the action than is otherwise possible.

"I love the opera because it is so unique and involves so many forms of artistic creation and performance," Voci, 62, said. "Staging, costumes, people in motion, dancing, orchestration — and then, the singing. And involved in all of that, of course, is acting. Singers just can't sing. They must also act."

After one conversation with Voci, it's easy to see why he embraces the opera.

How the opera came to embrace him is more complicated.

Voice of the people

Voci's love for the opera came from a pair of uncles. On his mother's side was Artie, a man who fell in love with the opera when he saw "La Boheme" as a young man. On Voci's father's side was Sammy, a custodian and tenor who sang "O Holy Night" every Christmas at church.

"I can remember as a child the goose-bumps from that, knowing he was my uncle," Voci said. "And his voice was so incredible."

But rather than pursuing the arts himself, Voci took to law and went into practice

To see video of Voci playing the bass drum part in "Carmina Burana" with The Chicago Bar Association Symphony Orchestra, visit chicagolawbulletin.com.

litigating civil rights cases.

Whether discussing the law or the opera, enthusiasm flows from Voci as naturally as song from Pavarotti. He has defended black people who were discriminated against at a Pizza Hut; protesters arrested for wearing bandannas over their faces on the basis of a 1922 ordinance designed to prevent Ku Klux Klan members from wearing their hoods; and defended a melange of people aggrieved in housing and immigration cases.

He sees civil rights work as part of his family heritage. His father's side gave him the name "Voci," or "voice," while his mother's maiden name is "Popolo" or "people."

"Voices of the people," Voci said. "Civil rights lawyer."

He clasped his hands together. "It fits."

From spectator to stage

In 2003, Voci took to the stage.

He was sharing office space with Jon Allan Duncan, director of the percussion section at The Chicago Bar Association Symphony Orchestra (CBASO). The orchestra was performing "Scheherazade" by Nikolai Rimsky-Korsakov in three weeks and they were missing the cymbalist.

Who could Duncan get on such short notice? Ed Voci, of course — the man who spent more time hanging out at the Lyric Opera and talking about music than anyone Duncan knew.

"He actually had no musical background at all," Duncan said. "The cymbal part is really exposed, and it's an important part in that particular piece."

Since the CBASO practiced once a week, Voci had only two rehearsals with the full orchestra.

"About three nights a week, I went to his home and was working with him with the sheet music and a recording by the Chicago Symphony of 'Scheherazade,'" Duncan said. "We must have listened to that thing 75 times



Edward A. Voci in action, teaching at The John Marshall Law School's Fair Housing Clinic (above) and in costume (below) as an extra for "La Traviata" at the Lyric Opera. Mike Kelly, Kenneth Giambrone



so that he could memorize the cymbal part.”

From then on, Duncan called Voci for any additional percussion work. Voci has now played in about 30 CBASO performances, handling the bass drum, cymbals, triangle, wood block, sleigh bells and brake drum.

As the years went on, Voci earned the respect of his peers as well as David Katz, the CBASO's conductor.

“He brings to it a lawyer's tenacity to play at the top of his ability,” Katz said. “And he brings an art-lover's love of the music. That's just about the perfect combination for anyone who plays in this orchestra.”

Voci's percussion career reached its peak in June 2011 when Voci played the bass drum in “Carmina Burana” at Orchestra Hall.

“When you're playing cymbals or you're playing solo bass drum, it's different than if you're one of 12 violins,” Voci said. “You're there by yourself, and if you mess up, everyone knows it. But if you hit it, it's exhilarating.”

A face in the crowd

Still, nothing gets Voci as

excited as opera. When a CBASO colleague informed the group in 2011 that the Lyric Opera was holding a massive audition for supernumeraries for “Aida,” Voci was in.

A year later came his breakout performance, if one could call it that, in “Simon Boccanegra.”

“I had seven entrances, two costume changes, swordplay and held a live torch at the curtain call,” Voci said.

In Act II, he had another opportunity to grip an important piece of the opera: New York tenor Frank Lopardo. Voci played a soldier who prevented Lopardo's character Adorno from murdering Simon Boccanegra, played by world-renowned tenor Thomas Hampson.

“I get to hold (Lopardo) at center stage,” Voci said. “He charges through the crowd with a sword to kill Simon Boccanegra and ... I arrest him and then hold him in custody while he and Thomas Hampson are singing back and forth.”

Like every part of the opera, the supernumeraries are given the Lyric's utmost attention.

For Voci's costume for “La Traviata,” his wig is custom-made to fit his head. He undergoes a 33-minute costume and makeup process, takes the stage as a servant, exits, changes into a bull costume with another man who plays the back of the bull and then has another costume change later in the show.

Now that he has his opera sea legs, Voci is pursuing a new venture — writing a libretto based on the song “The Night They Drove Old Dixie Down” by The Band.

He does not yet have a composer, though he does have the support of one key player: Robbie Robertson, The Band's lead guitarist and the writer of the song. Voci acquired the song's rights by cold-writing Warner Bros., then did a test recording by writing an aria with the help of a composer friend and 30 local musicians.

After he told Warner Bros. about his recording, he received a supportive e-mail. It was from Robertson: “Edward, I would be very curious to hear the music that's been written

and recorded. You guys are either on to something brilliant or completely mad. I'm rooting for you either way. Robbie.”

Voci does not call himself crazy or brilliant. He is merely a man who wanted to give back to the opera.

“You do all of this preparation, you do all of this rehearsing, singers go over their score, the orchestra members rehearse. That would be like the attorney going over the deposition taken during discovery,” he said.

“When it comes time for trial, it's not like a video or a movie where you can go back and edit,” he said. “It's people on stage and they perform. There's no rewinding. You do it or you don't. If you are properly prepared, the end result is a successful trial or a work of art.”

The only difference for Voci is casting. In court, he is a lead actor, the Thomas Hampson in front of the judge.

What would a supernumerary be in a trial?

“A minor witness,” Voci said with a smile. “Or maybe an exhibit.”