

Preview: Ohio Light Opera: James Mismas returns for 'Count of Luxembourg' and 'Iolanthe' this season

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Ohio Light Opera opened its 31st season in Wooster on June 19 with the company's first production of 'Kismet', the 1953 adaptation of Alexander Borodin's music into a Broadway musical by Robert Wright and George Forrest.

From now through August 7, OLO will roll out six more productions, including two more company premieres, Jule Styne & Stephen Sondheim's 1959 musical, 'Gypsy', and John Philip Sousa's 'El Capitan'. Broadway musicals were an innovation of the current artistic director, Steven Daigle, in 2000. Harking back to its first two seasons under artistic director John Stuart when the repertory was devoted exclusively to Gilbert & Sullivan operettas, OLO will present 'Iolanthe' and 'Patience'. And then there are the Viennese operettas -- first introduced in 1981, the same year that OLO's orchestra made its debut -- which include Kálmán's 'The Gypsy Princess' and Lehar's 'The Count of Luxembourg'.

Akron University voice professor James Mismas was in at the beginning when James Stuart moved his company from Kent to Wooster, soon after The College of Wooster built Freedlander Theater. We reached him by phone to ask about how he originally got involved and how things have changed over the years.

"I auditioned and got into the company in 1979. I think the season was seven shows long and I had roles in five of them and was in the chorus of the others. It was a fabulous experience, but a bit mind-boggling at first. You read a show in the morning, staged it in the afternoon and within three days it was up and running. I would go home from rehearsal at 10 pm and I would put five scores in

front of me and go from one to the next to the next, just getting myself into a complete dither. Finally, I said, 'Jim, shut four of these books. Tomorrow you're doing Mikado and you've got to make sure Poo Bah is solid. Just worry about tomorrow!' It is a fantastic opportunity to learn what it's like to put something together quickly".

Mismas was in the company for the first five seasons, took some time off, did five more, then rejoined OLO a few more times over the years. "So it's been twelve or thirteen out of the last thirty-one years". Some very basic things have changed; James Mismas recalls the days before the orchestra was added to the company.

"The piano was housed in a thing they called 'The Moose'. It was large enough to hold a Steinway B and the walls were such that the sound would come out. There were stairs up both sides and stairs down the middle, and the whole season was staged around it. It was really something, and of course at that time there was no conductor. You had to pay attention to whatever the pianist was doing, and do it! It was pretty cool. I actually spent a little time playing piano during those first few years. Imagine being inside The Moose and trying to accompany a show when you can't really hear it, and you can't see a thing. I don't know how, but by the grace of God or a miracle, it always worked out".

Being part of a close-knit company is a treasured memory for James Mismas. "When you're in this intense kind of situation, a real sense of esprit de corps develops. Everyone is very, very dependent on one another in a variety of ways for this to be successful. You make good friends over the course of time, and I'm still in touch with people I was in the company with thirty years ago".

And in live theater, there are always some moments that go memorably awry. "One time I had a small part in 'The Vagabond King' and I had to brandish a gun and pretend that I was going to go shoot the Red Shadow. The gun just fell apart in the middle of the performance, so I looked at it and said, 'Well, I guess I won't go get him with this gun', and everybody on stage laughed and the audi-

ence hooted and hollered. It reminded me of moments in The Carol Burnett Show when something would go wrong in a skit and they'd all get pickled. We had lots of those in the course of time”.

This summer, Mismas won't have to obsess over five different scores. “I'm doing a small role in ‘The Count of Luxembourg’ and the Lord Chancellor in ‘Iolanthe’, which is a real hoot! I think of all the Gilbert & Sullivan patter songs the Lord Chancellor's ‘Nightmare Song’ is by far the most difficult -- they even say that in the publicity for this season. It's taken hours and hours and hours to learn and ultimately memorize. It's a bear. Steve Daigle has staged it in a fun way so that I spend my time in the house rather than on the stage.”

Mismas, who is also music director of Akron's Westminster Presbyterian Church and recently developed a chamber choir for Akron Baroque, is looking forward to being part of OLO once again. “I'm so flattered and honored that I was invited to return, and it's really exciting to be back working with everyone”.