

Theater

Welsh bass Gwynne Howell, who turns 70 in June, makes his Houston opera debut this week.

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OPERA

Two singers, two different paths to *La Bohème*

By CHARLES WARD

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Gwynne Howell, the distinguished Welsh bass who makes his Houston opera debut this week, was 30 before he finally got his first major opera audition.

Joshua Hopkins, a Canadian baritone, is returning to Houston Grand Opera at 29 to sing his first major role here since leaving the HGO Studio in 2005.

Both will be appearing in HGO's revival of Giacomo Puccini's *La Bohème*, opening today. Howell will sing the cameo roles of the landlord Benoit and rich gentleman Alcindoro for the first time. Hopkins will be the painter Marcello.

Howell, who turns 70 in June, may be an extreme example of someone coming to his career late, but the contrast between how the two singers got into the opera business illustrates how much help young singers can find today in preparing for the highly competitive world of opera.

Howell didn't have obvious role models when he was starting his career.

"I literally just jumped into this profession. I (was) a geographer/town-city planner," he said.

When Howell decided he needed experience in urban planning, he chose Manchester because he could take voice lessons at the Royal Manchester College of Music. He told the headmaster that he wanted singing lessons but didn't want to be a singer.

The college's opera program staged all kinds of works, including several by Richard Wagner. Sadler's Wells Opera, now English National Opera, got wind of Howell's success in the productions and invited him for an audition in London. He took a day off from work and was offered a contract with the opera company.

"I later discovered that was a little unusual. You usually did one (audition) in a room, then one in a bigger room and eventually onstage," Howell recalled.

"On reflection it was amazing. I can't say I was indifferent. I didn't know anything. I just did the next thing that came along."

He made his debut at Sadler's Wells on Aug. 11, 1968, as Count Monterone in Giuseppe Verdi's *Rigoletto*.

RESOURCES

PUCCINI'S *LA BOHÈME*

Staged by Houston Grand Opera

• **When:** 7:30 p.m. Friday, 2 p.m. Sunday with additional performances through May 3

• **Where:** Wortham Theater Center, 501 Texas

• **Tickets:** \$20-\$275; 713-228-6737

"I took two steps on the stage and froze. I could not take another step." Friends in the chorus recognized that he was glued to his spot. Like a rugby scrum, they jostled him toward the right place every time he wasn't singing. "I eventually found myself, after three or four phrases, slap in the middle of the stage where I should have been.

"That really was an initiation."

Major roles didn't come automatically. "You stood in line. You had to sing small roles for up to 10 years. There was no way you'd sing big roles (young). Everyone who tried, failed," Howell said.

Eventually major roles did come, and Howell became famous in a broad swath of opera roles and oratorio parts.

Hopkins hasn't had to worry about the kind of haphazard training in language, movement and voice that Howell and others of his generation received.

A native of Pembroke, Ontario, a town of 15,000, Hopkins earned undergraduate and graduate degrees in music from Montreal's McGill University and then came directly to HGO in 2003. While in school, he participated in summer young-artists programs in New York, at Glimmerglass Opera, in Cooperstown, and Chautauqua Opera.

Those opportunities are what young singers expect today, Hopkins said. He hasn't known anything else.

"As a Canadian, being allowed to come into the United States and get my foot in the door of the American market was a fantastic opportunity," Hopkins said.

In Houston, he got to sing sizeable roles onstage; found sympathetic teaching from Stephen King, the studio's primary instructor; and auditioned for many opera professionals.

"It was the perfect steppingstone I needed to give me more experience, especially (learning how to sing) in a big hall." HGO's immigration lawyers also helped Hopkins and his wife, mezzo-soprano Zoe Tarshis, get green cards.

Hopkins emerged from his two years in the studio with a manager, whom he had met at Glimmerglass in 2002, and a full season of work. He picked up European management in fall 2006.

Like most singers, Hopkins has received plenty of advice. He's chosen carefully.

Though HGO Studio officials urged Hopkins to move to New York to be in the center of the music business, he stayed in Houston.

He said he's found that auditions aren't the prime way of getting jobs. Finding how to get a foot in the door or having impresarios and managers hear him perform onstage is much more effective.

But he listened carefully to esteemed British tenor Philip Langridge when he went to study the role of Billy Budd with Langridge last fall (Hopkins is covering the role here; Howell will portray Dansker).

Hopkins said he's always been obsessed about impressing people to get ahead in his business, but Langridge urged him to jettison that need — a very hard thing to do, the baritone acknowledged.

"He said to me, 'It's not about wanting to impress or please. It's about you as an artist finding your own path.' "

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