

Opera for kids

'Prairie Dog' shows that opera is for young, young at heart

By Kathryn Stevens
FOR THE COLLEGIAN

Penn State Opera Theatre promises to entertain the young and young at heart with the premiere of *The Prairie Dog that met the President*, a children's production that appeals to all ages, Wednesday at 10 a.m. and 12:30 p.m. in Eisenhower Auditorium.

The 45-minute, one act opera tells the story of a lonely prairie dog that dreams of bigger and better things until an unexpected adventure takes him on the trip of a lifetime. The production appeals to children, but college students and adults can appreciate the colorful storytelling and musical ability *The Prairie Dog that met the President* presents.

In the show, the audience meets many unique animal characters. The main role is, of course, the prairie dog of the title, but it is a diva-like magpie who serves as the audience's guide.

The story truly begins when the team of Meriwether Lewis and William Clark (yes, the historical duo) come across the prairie dog and takes him to Washington, D.C. to meet President Thomas Jefferson.

Along the way, the prairie dog encounters flamingoes in Florida, pelicans in New Orleans and an oriole in Baltimore (pun fully intended).

This production is the first of the company's spring shows, and holds several challenges for the performers.

For one, several singers with a mix of vocal parts play over twenty characters. A unique costume and prop such as a saxophone or scarf distinguish each character. Each character addition requires a quick change, sometimes over the course of a few bars of music.

"It's a definite challenge," Helen Comber (sophomore-music education) said. "For example, I get to be both the good guy and the bad guy. It's operatic schizophrenia!"

The production is a labor of love, according to composer Bruce Trinkley.

Trinkley, with lyricist Jason



Adam Piorkowski/Collegian

Penn State Opera Theater will present *The Prairie Dog that met the President*. Cast members have been busy rehearsing the children's opera.

"It's certainly entertaining, but it's really an educational piece as well."

Bruce Trinkley
Composer

Charnesky, decided to compose the piece after receiving a commission from the Southern Illinois University at Carbondale in 2002.

"They were willing to pay someone to fill a void and create a real young person's opera," Charnesky said.

Trinkley and Charnesky

looked to the 1800s adventures of Lewis and Clark for their concept.

One story detailed how the explorers gathered various animals to transport back to the nation's capitol.

To appeal to young people, Charnesky decided to tell the story a bit differently, from the

animals' view. While there may be comical aspects of the opera, those behind the production have several goals.

"It's certainly entertaining, but it's really an educational piece as well," Trinkley said.

Susan Boardman, Penn State's Opera Theatre director, mentioned another goal — breaking down stereotypes young people may have about opera.

"Most people who balk at opera have never seen one; operas aren't just heavy, 17th century pieces," she said.

Some perfectly legitimate operas, in fact, may come in the form of a dancing pelican with a saxophone.

If you go

What: The Prairie Dog that met the President

Time: 10 a.m. and 12:30 p.m.

Date: Wednesday, March 23

Place: Eisenhower Auditorium

Details: Tickets are \$6 and still available. Call 863-0255 for more information.