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A successful season and new plans for Townsend Opera Players

By LISA MILLEGAN

lmillegan@modbee.com

Townsend Opera Players is making sweeping changes next season to ensure its long-term future.

For the first time, the 26-year-old Modesto company will:

- Have a permanent principal conductor
- Collaborate with California State University, Stanislaus
- Rent rather than build sets.

Founding director Erik Buck Townsend, who is receiving chemotherapy treatments for lung cancer, will step back from dealing with many details and will move into more of an oversight role.

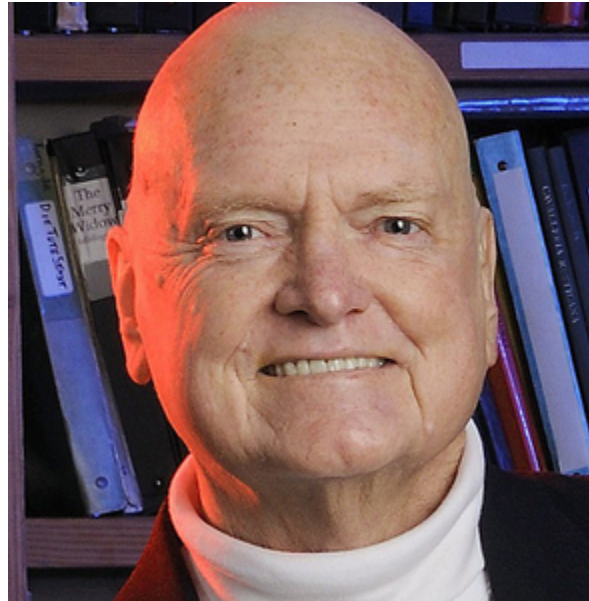
"It's important to know that none of the changes are a result of Buck's health," said Matthew Buckman, TOP's executive director. "It's to make a more sustainable organization that doesn't rely on one person or position."

In the past, Townsend, 71, has directed, conducted, designed and built sets for all shows, but this year, he has started collaborating more.

Ryan Murray, who served as assistant conductor for TOP's "Porgy & Bess" earlier this year, has been hired as principal conductor. He will conduct this fall's opera gala, "Cinderella" and a double bill of Leoncavallo's

"I Pagliacci" and Menotti's "Amahl and the Night Visitors." All the shows will be in the 444-seat Foster Theater at the Gallo Center for the Arts.

Murray, 22, a recent music graduate from California State University, Sacramento, has Townsend's full approval.



Erik Buck Townsend, founding director of Townsend Opera Players - Unknown - Unknown

"He is an excellent musician with strong piano skills, he has experience preparing choruses and soloists for operatic productions, and he has a lot of experience conducting both the operatic and symphonic repertoire," Townsend said in a written statement. "Our productions will be much stronger dramatically and musically with the two of us working together to present each opera."

CSU Stanislaus will take control of next season's remaining production -- Mozart's "The Magic Flute" (Jan. 18-25). Faculty members will run the show, with Joseph Wiggett serving as music director, Drew Sutherland as stage director and Dustin Soiseth as conductor.

"The best thing is that it's going to offer our students an opportunity to perform at the Gallo Center," Wiggett said. "They're going to be working with professional singers who are doing the lead roles. The students will cover the smaller roles."

The partnership fits in with TOP's mission to help young talent get started in opera.

"This collaborative production is the first step in what I hope will be a strong relationship with the CSU Stanislaus department of music," Townsend said in the statement. "This is the beginning of a lifelong dream of mine to establish an opera company that can serve as a bridge for young talent looking to start a career."

TOP won't stage any musicals because it wants to stick to its core opera repertoire, Buckman said. The company is renting sets from other companies and will bring in guest lighting designers. Financially, the company is in good shape and can afford the expense, Buckman said.

All three mainstage shows this season -- "Die Fledermaus," "Porgy & Bess" and "Miss Saigon" -- sold out, and the last two shows each added two extra performances. TOP attendance has gone up from an average of 600-800 per production to 1,800-2,400 per production.

"The Gallo Center works," said Erika Townsend, Townsend's wife and a TOP administrator.

Townsend hasn't been as involved this season with the company as he has in the past because he is weaker from his chemotherapy treatments. But the good news is that his cancer is shrinking.

"The doctors are ecstatic right now," his wife said.