

Star Power



Opera soprano Cristina Nassif brings her talented voice to Wichita

STORY AND PHOTOS
BY PAUL RHODES

Okay. You can call Cristina Nassif an opera star.

She doesn't care much for the title, and won't use it herself. But Nassif does acknowledge that for many opera patrons, it's a necessary embellishment.

The title implies raw talent. And Nassif has that.

The title implies beauty and grace. She has that, too.

And, it implies a level of dedication to craft and love of the art form that can lift a performer to new heights.

Cristina Nassif has that by the truck load.

"Anyone can be a star," Nassif said during a break from rehearsals for her leading role as Violetta in Wichita Grand Opera's production of "La Traviata," which will be presented at Century II Concert Hall on Saturday, Dec. 2. The young opera singer is a long way from home these days, but as close as she can get to what means the most to her in life.

"I consider myself a singing actress, and if I come off as a star to someone, that's a bonus," Nassif said. She's on a wild rocket ride of success right now, and at age 29 is one of the top young opera sopranos in the country. She found her voice in high school, and after eight years of college and post-college training, quickly started landing roles that have earned her critical acclaim.

"I can't imagine doing anything else," Nassif said. "I feel blessed to be doing this."

Sometimes blessings come from the simplest of sources.

Nassif had the perfect pattern in her mother, mezzo-soprano Cristina Herrera de Nassif, and the daughter's path to the opera stages of America followed some of the same steps taken by her mother.

Nassif spent her childhood swimming in music in her Maryland home. Her mother's singing career was enough by itself, but her father — an anesthesiologist — also was an accomplished pianist.

Nassif, her sister and her three brothers all grew up playing the piano. Family performances were a part of life.

"We grew up like the von Trapp family," Nassif said with a laugh. "But that was a good thing."

"My parents gave me a great foundation for this profession. There's a lot of schmoozing in this business, and I guess I'm comfortable with that."

Cristina Nassif shares a laugh with conductor Ekhart Wycik during rehearsal for Wichita Grand Opera's "La Traviata."



But opera? Nassif and her siblings all vowed they'd never touch it.

"When I got into high school, I started thinking about college and scholarships," Nassif said. She decided to try out for the Maryland Talent in the Arts Competition, which provided the winner with money to study in Maryland, but there was just one catch.

"My girlfriend and I both played piano, and we didn't want to compete against each other," she said. "So I asked my mom to help me with some vocal pieces."

Nassif ended up winning the competition, and it was an epiphany. It also put her squarely in touch with the genetic talent given to her by her mother.

The elder Nassif had won the same competition years before.

"Choosing something like this, it has to be your own way," she said. "You have to get there yourself."

Nassif ended up majoring in vocal music at the University of Maryland, and after college she spent four years at the Academy of Vocal Arts in Philadelphia, where she studied opera exclusively.

She finished at AVA in the spring of 2003 with an artist's diploma, which is the equivalent of a Ph.D. There was nothing left to do but to start auditioning.

"I was so fortunate – I got on with Virginia Opera," Nassif said. She dreads the audition process because so many factors can work against you, but now with the success she's having the roles are coming more effortlessly – some even without auditions.

"I didn't have to audition for the role here in Wichita," she said.

"Should I say that?" she added with a whisper and a smile. "I hope my performances speak for themselves."

At Virginia Opera, director Peter Mark took her under his wing through the company's resident artist program. It was just the polish Nassif needed.

"I got to do Violetta in 'La Traviata,' and it went very well," she said. "I hooked up with an agent, and got an audition with the Washington National Opera."

Nassif caught the eye of none other than Plácido Domingo, and Nassif was able to make her debut on the National Opera stage.

"Things happen for a reason," Nassif said. "Before, I couldn't get an audition there – now I'm hoping to go back, and it could happen."

In the meantime, Nassif is thrilled to be working in Wichita, Kansas. It's her first trip to Wichita – or anywhere in Kansas, for that matter. With the tight rehearsal schedule and single performance, she hasn't had much time for sightseeing.

"I try to blend into my surroundings, and I have to be

prepared to settle into a routine," she said. "That doesn't leave much time for anything else, but in the end I just hope to bring the audience an unbelievable evening of opera."

Nassif considers herself to be among a solid group of young singers who are breaking onto the opera scene.

"There are lots of young singers who are making their mark today," she said. "That's energizing for me, but it's daunting, too."

"We're trying to bring back that 'old school' approach to opera, while still adding something fresh, too. I've got big shoes to fill, but at least my feet are size 10." Nassif answered herself with a boisterous laugh at that point, and was happy and relieved to share a joke. She's as comfortable cutting up with friends and colleagues as she is singing on stage, and the two sides of her personality only add to the emotion of her performances.

"If we're doing what we're supposed to do on stage, we make ourselves very vulnerable, and I think audiences can sense that," she said. "Maybe, just maybe, someone in the audience will awaken to something – every time I get on stage I try to make a new friend or forge a new bond."



Soprano Cristina Nassif has been enjoying her time in Wichita for WGO's production of "La Traviata." This is her first visit to Kansas.

The role of Violetta is a challenging one that makes Nassif emotional just talking about it. She plays a beautiful but sickly prostitute who falls in love with the young aristocrat Alfredo. She gives up the relationship to protect Alfredo and his family.

"You learn she's the one with the biggest heart and so much class," she said.

"It's important to me that people understand the story and how it impacts Violetta – she finally found true love and it was saving her life."

"I think anyone can relate to feeling that kind of love. Having to give it up is a huge thing. It's one of the greatest sacrifices – to love someone enough to set them free."

Nassif's career has forced some sacrifices of her own. She doesn't have much time for relationships, but she believes that day will come, too.

"It's great for me to be seeing that it's not impossible to have a career and a family," she said. "I want that."

For now, though, Nassif is satisfied to focus on her career.

"Life on the road is so worth it," she said. "I'd do twice as much work if I knew I was faithfully telling the story. Working here in Wichita has been great – everyone else (in the production) is giving just as much or more. I feel like we're making history."

"I can't believe I get paid to inhabit these characters," she said. "It's a joy to get in there every day and sink my teeth into a character."

"And when we do it right, we help the audience do the same thing. They can get lost in the story, too."