

The Big Show

By Nancy Squires

I arrive at the theater, enter through the stage door and go downstairs into the dressing room. A few of my choir mates are there, in a room cluttered with stage paraphernalia: a couple of full-length gowns on a rack, metal cabinets holding beards, fake hair, and all kinds of makeup, boxes on the floor holding more of the stuff of illusion in the footlights. Along one wall a sign above the mirrors proclaims: “There is no such thing as natural beauty.”

One of my fellow singers is seated in a barber chair, having her makeup assessed by another singer, who has just helped her apply it. “What do you think?” they ask me and I answer it looks good... Ryan, our director, bursts in and starts rummaging in the cupboard for an eyeliner pencil, and then a sharpener. He finally finds one, puts a point of sorts on the crayon, and sits down in front of the mirror to outline his eyes. When he’s done the woman beside him says he’s better at makeup than she is. I think his eyes, accentuated by the pencil line, look good.

Meanwhile more of us are arriving. The room becomes really lively, and crowded – we can barely move, with all the clutter. We keep having to squeeze past each other to get to the bottled water, or the restroom doors. The plan for our costumes is to rotate three accessories of different colors, and people are pulling these out for comparison. Lots of the guys, and some of the women, are sporting bright neckties. Hecate has three bands of color wrapped around her arm. “I see you have a system there, Hecate,” I remark and she explains she’s going to keep two under her sleeve while displaying the third – an easy costume change. “Thank God for the dollar store,” she remarks, fingering the bands, which are a little like decorative bungee cords. I giggle at her completely sensible, laid-back approach to show biz, and she smiles.

Some of us gather around the charts that our crew has taped to a pillar. There are a half-dozen of these, on which each of us is indicated with a number. They look a little like pages from a football playbook, but without arrows. The discussion becomes intense as we try to remember the various configurations. “When do we move to ‘home’ in this piece?,” someone asks. “It’s during Angie’s solo,” someone else answers. “Where are we for ‘Canada in Springtime’?” The questions keep popping up; finally someone has to go and ask Ryan for confirmation on a few points.

More people keep arriving, and even some of the veteran chorus members admit to feeling a little nervous. Over the past few weeks as we doubled our rehearsal time and preparations intensified, I’ve been thinking that it reminded me of a Little Rascals episode, in which Our Gang is putting on a show. During rehearsals I’ve had the kind of anxiety that’s reflected in those old films: what if Alfalfa loses his voice? What if the goat starts eating the scenery? But those fears are banished now. We’ve done the prep, and tried to anticipate – and solve – any issues. Now we’re in the moment.

It's time to warm up. We move into the adjoining room – which is even more cluttered – and Ryan gets us started singing exercises. He's about to pull a pitch out of his head when he realizes there's an old upright piano against the wall, next to him. It was so buried in junk that he didn't see it. He clears enough to get to the keys and starts plinking out scale patterns for us on the old thing - it sounds a little like a wheezy old person, humming slightly off-key.

After we've warmed up he gives us a pep talk – what a great time we're going to have, what a great show it's going to be. Then he directs us to spread out around the perimeter of the room and hold hands to form a chain. He asks us to bow our heads and, when we feel the person on one side squeeze our hand, to pass it along by squeezing the hand of the person on the other side. I bow my head, noticing how reverent I feel, and when Marie squeezes my left hand I give Brent's a squeeze with my right.

Minutes later we're onstage behind the curtain, which is down. I restlessly circle the green tape x on the floor in front of me – my mark. We can hear the emcee out in front as she makes announcements, cracks a few jokes, talks about our choir... To my left I see Laura doing stretches; behind me whispering keeps breaking out. I turn my back to the curtain and look at the choir on the risers behind me. I can't stop smiling, they look so beautiful.

Then the emcee has finished. We're announced, the curtain goes up in darkness, the music starts. As we begin singing the lights come on, and they're blinding – I can't see a thing, at first. A few seconds later, my eyes adjust a bit and Ryan's hands materialize, above the pit. They appear disembodied, floating in the dark, in front of his black shirt. That's all I can see: his white hands, moving, keeping time and shaping the sound that's now pouring forth from our mouths, from our souls.

The next two hours seem to pass quickly, and yet occupy more than their share of time, so intently focused am I. I have a moment of panic when “Canada in Springtime,” which is a cappella, starts without me, because I forgot it was next on the program. We forget a few words, but not too many. We miss a cue here and there, but not too often. (Ryan is still awfully hard to see, from our vantage point under the glare of the lights). One of the tunes starts too fast – we can barely get the words out – but we hang in there, and the applause and whistling after every piece is more than enthusiastic. Clearly the audience is with us.

The soloists sound great. When we get to the Webber love song trio the rest of us stand in the wings, captivated as always by the voices of the young men on stage, three of our best singers. I'm more aware than ever that change is happening, a kind of history is being shaped, right now, in this moment, as Ryan the baritone sings “I Don't Know How to Love Him” with Brent and Karl beside him, weaving the threads of their melodies in and around his voice.

The finale is next. While we're singing we spread out along the edge of the stage in two long lines. The lighting shifts and for the first time I see the audience, appearing as blobs of varied

color. A sea of variety, they are intent and focused with us as we sing: “Bring on tomorrow, let it shine...” I feel Angie beside me swaying to the music, and I start to sway with her.

When we finish there’s thunderous applause – a standing ovation. Bouquets of flowers are presented to Ryan, and to Linda, our choir President. Ryan addresses the audience with a brief thank you, we take another bow together, and then we move to the back of the stage and the curtain comes down. Behind it, we are all giddy. Every face is wreathed in a smile, and there are hugs all around. “I just love everybody,” Marie says when I give her a hug.

I reflect now, as I’m writing, that nothing can detract from that moment – not even the recording we will listen to the next day at the wrap-up barbecue, during which we will express thoughts like: Wow, I didn’t realize we were out of tune on that number... I can’t hear any altos... Boy, we really missed that entrance...

No, not even the recording – which I admit is documentation of a kind – can take away from the experience of the night before. While the recording has some bits of truth embedded in its digital sequences, the experience of the performance itself is its own truth. We had, as Ryan promised we would – a great experience, and the audience was in it with us.

Bring on tomorrow. Let it shine.