

ULM Presents Miss Saigon

by Keli Jacobi. ULM Staff Writer

June 1, 2009



Some people are natural-born sprinters. Propelled by bursts of energy, they deliver high athletic performances even as they seek those crucial restive moments to renew and refresh themselves in preparation for the next big race.

And when Franc D'Ambrosio - whose vocal performances are reminiscent of a gold medal sprinter in training - brings his Olympic-sized talent once more to Northeast Louisiana, he will likely witness the same standing ovation he has experienced in venues across the country since he was last here.

D'Ambrosio's appearance this time is for a long-awaited performance in the musical mega-hit, "Miss Saigon." The story is an adaptation of Giacomo Puccini's opera "Madame Butterfly." His return is courtesy of the Louisiana Lyric Opera, the resident professional company of the School of Visual and Performing Arts at the University of Louisiana at Monroe.

The role of the Engineer is a departure for the accomplished film and stage actor, who is perhaps best known as the lead in "The Phantom of the Opera." In fact, his long-running performance in that musical ...might indicate D'Ambrosio also packs a hint of marathoner into his compact frame.

Interestingly, the role [Phantom] was offered to D'Ambrosio after he had actually auditioned for "Chris," the young male lead in "Miss Saigon," back in 1992.

"Yes, I've come full circle now," he said. "Years later, I finally get cast, but in a much more interesting role."

As the Engineer, D'Ambrosio tackles an unflinchingly unsympathetic part, that of a sleazy Saigon club owner who encourages young American military men to pay for the "favors" of Vietnamese bar girls. Asked how such a likable actor was able to channel the Engineer's smarmy and self-serving spirit, D'Ambrosio joked that he modeled the character on "every agent I've ever had in my life!"

While D'Ambrosio admitted most of his agents have been very good to him, one New York agent from his past, who shall remain anonymous, served as a perfect role model for how to dehumanize others.

"In life, we always come across these people that are pretty sleazy," said D'Ambrosio. "You have to figure out how to make your characters human as well ... by living truthfully underneath imaginary circumstances."

...The collaboration between career professional and young, up-and-coming talent is central to the mission of the LLO, and is at the heart of what motivates D'Ambrosio to bring his skills to the ULM campus. For D'Ambrosio, who has honed the art of professional performer to perfection, an opportunity to pass along his craft is all about infusing students with the knowledge that "adversity breeds compassion."

D'Ambrosio/Miss Saigon Con't.

"I recently got an e-mail from the students saying they were excited," he said. "So I'm really looking forward ... to being a good example to them."

The musical will be directed by Mark Ross Clark, Department Head for VAPA's Division of Music, who first met D'Ambrosio four years ago when they taught together in Tuscany, Italy.

"I knew of his performing reputation," said Clark. "Everyone did. He became a good friend first, so I invited him to come to ULM to teach a master class and give a concert."

Clark and others were "blown away" by D'Ambrosio's ability to draw people in.

"We all realized that we were in the presence of great, great talent," Clark continued. "I vowed to bring him back, and what a great opportunity! To perform a great role he has never performed before, and to work with our students, and for LLO to have such promising young talent, from so many places, is quite remarkable."

...As much as his peers may admire D'Ambrosio, he too, has admiration for those rare performers in the business who demonstrate not just talent, but longevity.

"Because I know how hard it is," he explained. "Unless you have done eight shows a week for six-and-a-half years, you just don't know how exhausting it can be. I know what it's like to be exhausted and still find that everything else falls second to your opening," said D'Ambrosio.

And just as a sprint can be a very unforgiving race - perfection must be achieved to win the gold at the end of the run - so, too, does a true artist make similar demands on the body and soul each time the curtain goes up.

Though the rigors of show business are demanding, the audience shouldn't have any difficulty watching D'Ambrosio, surrounded by the other LLO cast members, as he delivers another stellar performance at the university this June.
