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## Opera about handling auditions, challenges

By Rich Freedman/

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"Norma" is an opera Teresa Byrne Foss can only dream about. No, really. She dreams about it. Not that she has to. Verismo Opera's Fred Winthrop already gave her the job.

"When I'm doing a piece that has music, whether an opera or musical or play themed around music, at some point, the music starts looping through my head on a constant loop," Byrne Foss said. "It will not stop. In fact, other people's parts will loop through my head constantly, which makes trying to get to sleep really interesting. I've had a couple of dreams this past week involving the music from 'Norma,' which, I suppose, is good because it's sinking into a subconscious level."

That obsession -- "dedication" is perhaps a better description -- is what Winthrop sought in casting "Norma" in association with the Mira Theatre Guild, with the curtain-raiser April 19 at the Bay Terrace Theater in Vallejo.

"Teresa is one of our bright stars who I feel is destined to stardom in the opera world," Winthrop said. "Unfortunately she might have to go to Europe to achieve her destiny. I have encouraged her to do just that because she is simply wonderful."

Europe, perhaps some day. Right now, Byrne Foss is content living in Sonoma which is close to San Francisco, her favorite city, "but still has a small-town feel to it, down to knowing the former mayor on a first-name basis, and enjoying Uncle Bill's giant corndogs at the weekly Farmer's Market in the square," Byrne Foss said. "It feels hidden

in plain sight. Plus, it has some of the best wine in

California."

It's not as if there's a shortage of a vintage offering around the house. The singer's husband, Joseph Foss, is the Northern Regional Hospitality Manager for Foley Family Wines and a former actor.

"I have a very supportive husband, family and circle of friends," said Byrne Foss, who earned a degree in theater from UCLA and drives to San Jose once or twice a week for vocal coaching.

"Fortunately, I have people who help me be disciplined," Byrne Foss said. "I have to sing and practice not every single day, but regularly to make the best use of

my time."

It was mid-afternoon recently when Byrne took a breather for an interview and espresso before a brief photo session at Antiques on Second in downtown Napa.

"In antique stores, everything has a story behind it," Byrne Foss said. "Everything was important to someone and brand new at some point, and you have to wonder what the story is, and what the world was like when that item was new. I wanted to be an archeologist when I was a little kid, and that part of me that loves to unearth hidden treasure gets activated in such places."

It was a momentary respite from singing.

More than a few days without using the pipes "and I get antsy," Byrne Foss said, having to rehearse notes so high "it hurts the ears of small

animals."

Yes, Byrne Foss said, she sings in the shower all the time "which is a nice, close resonance space."

And, undoubtedly, slightly more serene than the anxiety of most auditions, a necessary evil of any singer or actor.

"Auditions are scary for me," she said. "You're under a microscope. People are saying 'Impress me.' Some want to be entertained and involved, some are sitting around a table wanting to pick you apart. So all they see are parts and not the sum of the parts."

A "great performance" in an audition doesn't guarantee anything, Byrne Foss said.

"You may not get the job for reasons completely out your control," she said. "Sometimes you're too tall, you're too short, the tenor is shorter than you or they want a blonde or the producer's sister sings soprano and she wanted your part."

Sometimes, the roll is cast even before auditions.

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"I've gotten jobs that way," Byrne Foss said. "And I've had jobs when they offered me the job while I'm in the (audition) room, which is just the most awesome feeling in the world."

Basically, don't take rejection personally, though there are times "you want to go home and have a big glass of Cabernet," said Byrne Foss, always hoping for the next challenge.

"You get yourself in a situation where you're a little scared. 'Norma' is scary," Byrne Foss said. "Not because of any particular note. I can hit every note. But it's so long, it's literally like a marathon. If you don't pace yourself, you know your throat will close down in the middle of the show in a very public way and that the idea that that might happen if I'm not completely in the zone is scary. But that's the kind of challenge that makes

you grow."

"Norma," by Vincenzo Bellini, an opera in two acts, sung in Italian with English supertitles. The story centers on Norma, a Druid priestess, who falls in love with a Roman Consul during the Roman occupation of the Druid nation, and ends in tragedy with both Norma and Pollione (the Roman Consul), sacrificing themselves to promote continued peace during the occupation.

Byrne Foss appreciates what Withrop is doing with Verismo Opera, where there's no pressure to be perfect.

"You're allowed to fail in rehearsals which allows you to grow," Byrne Foss said.

And, hopefully, it's another production where praise falls her way. And don't think that was always easy to take.

It's about learning two words: "Thank you," said Byrne Foss. No self-deprecation. No boasting. Just a simple "thank you."

"It's something a lot of performers can learn to do better," she said.

And, however good one is, don't start thinking "Everything I do is great. I'm golden, I'm untouchable," said Byrne Foss. "That becomes arrogance and arrogance cuts you off from doing good work. At the same time, you don't want to be too humble. When someone says 'Hey, you were great,' and you say, 'I should have worked harder,' it's another form of being dismissive of whatever gift you have to bring."

A healthy ego, said Byrne Foss, "is about the work and not making yourself 'glam' and fabulous and impressing

people."

#### If you go

**What:** "Norma" by Verismo Opera

**When:** April 19-21; 26-27-28; Fridays, 8 p.m., Saturdays, 7:30 p.m., Sundays, 2 p.m.

**Where:** Bay Terrace Theater, 51 Daniels Ave., Vallejo

**Tickets:** \$12-\$15

**Info:** [miratheatreguild.org](http://miratheatreguild.org)

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