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Feature

Tales of Brotopia

The Baltimore Rock Opera Society drops Gründlehämmer



PHOTOGRAPHS BY MICHAEL NORTHROP

Gründlehämmer in rehearsal.

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By Michael Byrne | Posted 9/30/2009

Gründlehämmer

October 2-4, 2640 Space

More information at Baltimore Rock Opera Society's website

The floor of the cavernous old church sanctuary space of 2640 is a minefield of under-construction props. A new second stage, lower and forward of the old one, bears a fresh coat of gray paint. The rough façade of a small wooden village sits in pieces around the room. Against the rear wall sit nearly 20 freshly fabricated, badass-looking fake guitars. A handheld saw bleats, and somewhere underneath all of this mess is the titular Gründlehämmer, a massive ax with soon-to-be-functional LEDs that is promised to look very, very cool.

VIEW A SLIDESHOW

It's about two weeks out from the premiere and three-night run of the Baltimore Rock Opera Society's (BROS) first ever production, *Gründlehämmer*. Looking around the space--which has been fully and completely dominated by the production--it's immediately apparent BROS is onto something huge with this; or, more importantly, something that couldn't be huge enough.

The four principles of the production--Aran Keating, John DeCampos, Dylan Koehler, and Eli Breitburg-Smith--seem surprisingly relaxed as they chat with a reporter while overlooking the set from 2640's balcony. Things are running late, injuries have mounted, and *Gründlehämmer* is costing more than double what was originally budgeted, already, but there's no question that the rock opera is going to go off and go off in epic fashion.

And "epic" is really the key here. After taking it all in--the elaborate sets; the immensely talented, diverse cast and band; the painstakingly crafted props; the enthusiastic brain trust at the top--something becomes apparent. *Gründlehämmer* is very much a DIY project, yes, but as much as DIY is a buzz term these days and as many grassroots-theater productions revel in their own grass rootsiness--the cut-and-pasted zines of local theater, say--*Gründlehämmer* is running away from DIY amateurism at the speed of sound.

"This whole thing is like an experiment in trying to do something legit," Keating says. "It's above ground. It's pretty much for the general public. We're trying to make it look as professional as we can."

"I think our vision was epic," Koehler adds. "We thought big, we wanted to do it big."

"It's really about the vision," Breitburg-Smith continues. "It's about making it what we see."

Everything about *Gründlehämmer* has to be over-the-top, the group explains. Bigger really is better. ("I'd spend \$50,000 on [*Gründlehämmer*] if I could," DeCampos exclaims.) From a fake blood pump with 30 pounds of pressure to a looming slug-monster to full-on dance numbers to some seriously impressive stunt falling, after two years of preparation, the production is indeed approaching epic proportions.

"It's completely ridiculous," Keating says. "We strove at every turn to make it as over-the-top as possible. It's kind of like the appeal of a horror movie, or an opera. Or, yeah, death metal or extreme metal. GWAR."

"The only common thread in the show is that we want it to be extreme in whatever it does. If it's going to be corny, we want it to be really corny. If it's going to be cliché, we want to take those clichés completely

over the top. We want to take the costumes over the top. The music, incredibly epic. We want it to be this all-encompassing thing where everything is ridiculous and extreme. And this is our experiment to see if we can make that happen."

Gründlehämmer "takes place in a mythical medieval agrarian society where the power of rock music has the power to grow fruit, to fight enemies," Keating explains in an earlier interview, "where music has mythical, intense powers that will let you smite an enemy or let you . . . you know, like, the power of rock music will do all sorts of things.

"There's a good king, who represents a classic-rock sort of traditional old-time rock 'n' roll who is usurped--he's killed at the beginning of the play. It's kind of a musical progression from classic rock--some of the characters represent more of a power metal [vibe]. The dark king is a black-metal kind of thing. He usurps the throne and the story picks up when the dark king has 17 years of tyrannical reign and a young prince is coming of age in a tiny farming hamlet on the outskirts of the kingdom.

"And that's where the action picks up."

The rock opera is about as epic a form as exists, shy of the Verdi/Wagner-composed kind. Conceived and cultivated in the '60s and '70s by artists such as the Who (*Tommy*, *Quadrophenia*), David Bowie (*The Rise and Fall of Ziggy Stardust and the Spiders from Mars*), and, of course, Andrew Lloyd Webber (*Jesus Christ Superstar*), the form was kinda sorta reinvigorated in the aughties mainstream by the likes of Green Day, R. Kelly, and the Decemberists. In any era, though, nearly every rock opera has started with an album--with a central, character/plot-based narrative--and, later, maybe, a stage show. But there is no *Gründlehämmer* album to pave the way for this week's show--the rock opera was conceived with and only with an actual physical stage in mind.

The *Why-a-rock-opera?* question basically answers itself: "It's all-[encompassing]," DeCampos says. "It's long. You can't really ask for anything else. It's going to be in your face."

"For me, the reason I wanted to get involved--we understand how to play live music," Keating says. Indeed, both AK-Slaughter, his hip-hop duo with Emily Slaughter (who's doing costumes for *Gründlehämmer*, along with Susannah Horrion), and DeCampos' video-game-music cover band Entertainment System and horror-film rock homage Sacrifice have chops for miles, without a script. "But what's the next level?" Keating asks. "We need to do something bigger. Music, OK. But add in actors, add in costumes, add in special effects, add in all that other stuff and it's more complete. It's everything. It's not just one piece. It's for your ears, for your eyes."

The sheer novelty of a rock opera--the city's second, at least, behind former *Baltimore* magazine editor Geoff Brown's 2002 production *The Giant Clam*--led to something remarkable happening: the community wanted to get involved. DIY scenes are known for being incestuous, or at least very tight, networks, but BROS found itself working with a number of relative strangers. "Being the Rock Opera Society, we're getting all kinds of people doing all kinds of things," Keating says. "None of us know how to make costumes. [We've found] people that know how to make theater props.

"To be honest, the core of people doing this aren't very connected in the theater world around here," Keating says of the nearly 50-person production, including 25 to 30 cast members and a six-person band. "We tried to cast it as wide as we could so we could try and get some serious talent."

One of those folks was Christopher Krysztofiak, who plays the lead role of the hero, Benedon. "I'd done quite a few musicals," Krysztofiak says, "but I'd never done a rock opera. It's been quite an experience, a lot of fun." At least part of the appeal he explains, was the fact that "it's an original piece of work--every aspect of it is original, from the script to the music. I heard some of the songs and they were outstanding. I talked to the director and some of the other people in the production crew, and they seemed really enthusiastic. And I thought I'd take a shot at it."

"And we have some first timers, too," Keating adds. "We've got this couple, Beverly and Michael, who are both in their 50s and have never been onstage before. . . and they're awesome."

"I did the audition and they liked my singing," Michael Collier says outside of an evening rehearsal. "And my air guitar." (He adds that he has been onstage before, in 1988, as part of a community theater production.)

"I think the discovery process is part of what drew me," explains Beverly Horozko. "It's something completely different."

"They're really good at making people feel comfortable," Collier adds, talking about the BROS brain trust, "at creating community."

The Medieval hallucination that *Gründlehämmer* calls home is known within the cast and crew as Brotopia, a fairy-tale kind of place where, as Keating explains, music is the dominant energy. There are songs to fight wars with, to kill with. And there are songs to woo and grow crops with. Of the production's 20 very real-looking prop guitars, some have been built to look like swords and some to look like plowshares. The role of music in this piece is never explained in blunt terms in the libretto, but by the first time someone gets shot down by a guitar riff, it's pretty clear.

About two years ago, though, Brotopia was the nickname for the house Breitburg-Smith and Dylan Koehler were living in. Both are graduates of Goucher College, as is Keating; if there's a local network that *Gründlehämmer* is most connected to, it's probably Goucher. Together with DeCampos, they come across as

nothing ironic or self-conscious about them. They're dudes who like cheap beer, explosions, and intricate, large-scale stage production.

The original Brotopia was the inspiration/gestational space for a rock opera about dudes living together in a house, featuring a "kind of Middle Eastern theme," Keating recalls.

"We all went to a party at his [Dylan and Eli's] old place," DeCampos recalls. "This was like two years and change ago, and at the time [Keating and Koehler] were sporting insane mullets. They both came up to me with this idea and were like, 'We've got this rock opera--it's set in this place called Brotopia.' I was locked on, I'll do it.

"Another six months passed and nothing happened, and Aran and I had been talking about doing a stage production of *Phantom of the Paradise*--the outré 1970s Brian De Palma-directed movie rock musical--"and we kind of merged those two ideas and came up with this thing."

"Instead of trying to adapt a copyrighted film, we decided to write our own musical," Keating adds.

"I remember--I might be making this up--but we had been watching *Apocalpyto*," Breitbart-Smith says. "And afterwards, we decided we had to make something as epic as *Apocalpyto*."

"It was [a] pretty cold [start] for all of us," he says. "Everybody that was in that core group of people had either done lots of amateur theater--college, high school, or community--or had been in bands. Personally, I did a lot of acting in college. I had one experience directing in high school. My most relevant experience to what I'm doing right now is doing freelance video work."

From those first conversations, *Gründlehämmer* spent nearly a year as mostly talk, as big plans have a way of doing. "For about a year it was just like 'I got this riff--it's going to be a cool song,'" Koehler says. "We talked about how all of this stuff was going to happen and how great it was going to be and we set our sights really high."

"It seems like the turning point was when we started calling ourselves BROS," DeCampos says. "As soon as that got locked in, everybody started piling up and we started developing the idea more. It's such an awesome acronym."

With the help of Jared Marguiles, one of the project's original collaborators, BROS was able to secure a small grant from Baltimore Office of Promotion and the Arts of \$500, "which seemed like a big deal when we got it," Keating says. "Back then we were talking about putting on a show with a budget of, like, \$2,000." The budget has since ballooned to nearly \$6,000, with incidental and unforeseen expenses--like insurance for rental microphones, say--adding to the tab like planets being sucked into a black hole. Save for a pair of successful fundraisers, the difference is largely coming out of DeCampos and Keating's savings (leveraged against ticket sales).

"We really didn't even get the word that we were going to be able to put it on until July," Keating says. "It took us a long time to nail down 2640 as the performance space. They were kind of hesitant about having something this large scale.

2640's organizers came around. "It's been amazing to see the [space] transformed from a giant hall with a few sofas and folding chairs scattered about to the fairytale landscape the BROS created," says Tiffany DeFoe, a member of the collective that runs the space. "They've constructed an incredible set from the roughest materials, plus a ton of work from a crew that seems somehow more like an extended family than a theater group."

"I don't think we knew how difficult it was going to be," Keating says. "Not to say that it's more difficult, just that we didn't know what the hell we were doing. It got to the point where we were writing all of this music, we had the script, and we were psyched to do it. We were getting to the point where we were done doing it or we needed to keep going and put it on. The rest got figured out along the way."

To hear the former Brotopians tell it, *Gründlehämmer* is just the start. Eventually, BROS wants to take on a board of directors and apply for non-profit status (making it easier to get grants and such). As for *Gründlehämmer* itself, well, it's hard to say. "For me, success for me would be that something happens next," Koehler says. "We're kind of breaking the tip of the iceberg with something cool here." Baltimore Rock Opera Society members have talked about taking the show on the road--difficult for a massive production like this--to do another run in another city, or possibly doing another set of shows in Baltimore.

But, in the meantime, back at rehearsal, the BROS players are pantomiming an impromptu Cesarean section performed by a blade-tipped guitar to rescue the still in-utero hero of *Gründlehämmer* from the womb of his murdered mother. Save for the guitar, it plays like a gnarly Shakespeare scene. And, well, save for the songs, too--that's a whole new kind of magic. Tender folk ballads, hard rock, extreme metal--in Brotopia, this is how things are brought forth. Back in the real world, plants grow with sunlight and water, and rock operas grow with dogged determination, meager savings, unfettered enthusiasm, and an idea that can't be big enough.

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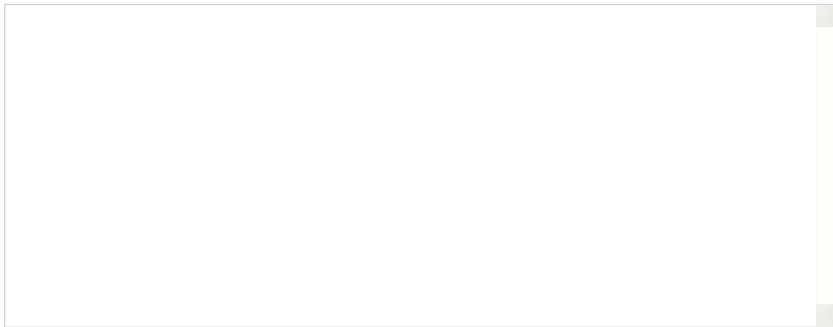
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