

An audience with Jeremy Silver, director of Opera UCT

 By [Terry Levin](#)

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Bizcommunity has always had a Lifestyle & Entertainment portal, but it is becoming increasingly important now, not as a diversion from the business news, but as a key driver of economic and cultural goals.



Jeremy Silver, director of Opera UCT. Image supplied

Bizcommunity spoke to Jeremy Silver, director of Opera UCT, about why the global opera world such as the Royal Opera House, London and Juilliard School in New York, has eyes on South Africa's wealth of operatic talent.

"UCT is a training institution, really the only one on the continent for opera singers to learn all the different skills that opera singers need to have not just training of a voice, but training for languages, training for acting, training for other elements of musicianship.

We recently relaunched ourselves in recognition of the fact that, although we're a training institution, our public face is always performing, everything from huge, full-scale theater productions down to intimate concerts and all sorts of other interesting things. The rebrand is to establish ourselves as that sort of public performing institution as well as a training one," says Jeremy Silver, director of Opera UCT.

What is your background?

I am from the United Kingdom. I've lived in South Africa for the last five years, but before that, for about 15 to 20 years, I was out here as part of my international freelance career every year, conducting opera or symphony concerts or working with singers, mainly in the early days in Pretoria in Durban, but lately in Cape Town as well. And then I was asked if I would head up the Opera School at UCT.

 ***It must be such a wonderful experience just to be surrounded by so much raw talent.***

There seems to be a huge amount of raw talent in this country compared to other countries. There are just so many young singers in this country with great vocal riches, great vocal potential, great instincts for opera, and a love for opera.

And all we need to do is to channel and meticulously train them in many other required skills. But we start off with raw talent. Almost like nowhere else in the world. It's quite extraordinary.

▣ ***Channeling talent is one thing, but marketing is another. I suppose a competition like Operalia is something that can really put us on the map?***

Absolutely. There are, I guess, about half a dozen, maybe a little bit less, really top-flight international competitions in the world. I would say Operalia is at the top of that.

Historically, South Africa tends to have at least one or two finalists in every one of those competitions, and we quite often end up with the top prize winner.

And it's been wonderful that we could have Operalia in Cape Town this year and that five South Africans have gone through to the live final rounds after the international video rounds earlier in the year. All five of them are either current singers with UCT or alumni of our programme.

Despite the fact that there are other programmes around South Africa that certainly train voices, they don't necessarily train in all the aspects that we do. And I think it's quite significant that all five finalists come from UCT.

▣ ***How do students cope with having to learn the Italian, German, and French languages of opera?***

That's another whole aspect. Besides the music, I spend probably at least 50% of my time working on language matters, rather than music matters. I start off usually by giving the students a sense of how English and some of the African languages function. I think quite often young people are not really taught how language works anymore, so I start by doing that.

I eventually branch out into Italian, usually first, German second, and thirdly French, and then we work at it very hard, not only on making sure that they are accentless when they sing, but making sure that they're able to express themselves authentically and that they understand absolutely everything that they're saying at a deeper level. As an artist, you can tell if somebody's simply making the noises or not and making noise just isn't good enough.

▣ ***It seems the singers are super exportable.***

A major international career takes these top singers out of their home country to make a living, so they go away... I think their aim is to become freelance at all the best houses in the world, and that gives them the space to plan their careers so they can come back and do specific things.

And we have many who are doing incredibly well, coming back and saying, either, can I come and give master classes, or

can I come and give a concert, or even sometimes they'd love to be in productions with us. They're very loyal to UCT, which is really quite fantastic.

■ ***I think that makes a good story about why you should actually go to the opera because if you miss them they're gone off entertaining somebody else, somewhere else in the world.***

That's true. Catching them while they're still with us could be the last chance for maybe five, six, or seven years until you get the chance to see them perform again.

■ ***One of the other aspects we're talking about is multiculturalism. How people that come from completely different cultures, completely different frames of reference, just own it.***

South Africans do seem to have a very strong and instinctive concept of the sound world due to the big choral tradition in schools, churches, and elsewhere in their communities. On the other hand, we do often have to counter the charge of being too Eurocentric.

I think the trend everywhere in the world is to make sure that the actual productions on stage have relevance to the audiences that they're serving. Essentially, there's a huge amount of innovation in staging all around the world.

■ ***I suppose the point about the diversity within the arts is making it available to a broader, more diverse audience.***

In 2021, we were co-commissioned with Cape Town Opera to do a piece called *Amagokra* about gender-based violence in South Africa. It was very hard-hitting. And then last year, we did a commission based on the story of Sara Baartman. So we're doing new, as well as the core repertoires.

■ ***What has the response to those sorts of things been?***

Slightly different audiences, but on the whole, the same people will come to everything. We do find that new commissions attract a younger, more curious audience, who discover that opera is for them after all, which is wonderful. Earlier this year, we went on a country-wide preliminary auditions tour and were astounded by the sheer volume of young singers wanting to study and pursue opera.

■ ***What would you like to see more of, besides obviously more funding? What would you like to see happen?***

At the moment, we very much have the eyes of the global opera world on us, particularly in the UK.

Next week, I've got the Royal Opera House coming out. In three or four weeks' time, I've got people from Juilliard coming. They're all looking. They're all wanting to see who we've got next, and I think we're very fortunate that we're in that sort of spotlight; it's fantastic.

Not only are they responding to the great talent here, but of course, they also want to expand their own diversity. It's a point in time, which I think is very useful for all of us.

■ ***Win win?***

You know, it's not all about bursaries; people all want to be the funder of the next Pretty Yende because it feels good to say that I was associated with such and such. But actually, what we need to be doing is expanding (our possibilities) the scope of our offer to the young singers by matching the frequency and variety of contact with expert practitioners, which are so much more easily accessible abroad, and maintaining the level of professional productions, which are such an integral part of our young singers' development.

■ ***And here we have Placido Domingo live at Operalia in Cape Town. What can people expect?***

It's fantastic. Domingo has always conducted alongside his singing career, so he heads the thing, conducting at least 50%

of the finals.

The first part of the first two days is just with piano, but the finals are with our Cape Town Philharmonic Orchestra, and he will conduct at least 50% of that. He's very vibrant and passionate about it. So that's like a big star that people are going to be able to come and see, besides all the rising stars.

Obviously, I'm particularly interested in our five, but there are rising stars from all around the world.

The first three days, Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday of that week are all the piano rounds, where you've got absolutely every finalist from all the countries. And then it's narrowed down to the grand finals on Sunday.

🎪 ***So it's quite nice for people - quite bite-size in a way. You don't have to be a huge opera buff to enjoy it, right?***

Finalists are singing arias, like five minutes long. Maybe two or three at a time, but yes, it's not like you're sitting there thinking, when is this act of Wagner going to finish? Operalia publishes an enormous list from which they allow the singers to choose, they specify they want a variety of languages, and different periods of music, to make sure that everybody presents a little bit of variety.

🎪 ***It seems like a really fertile time now with all the international interest. Would it be accurate to say there's a whole new kind of energy in the arts in South Africa like we're more on the map?***

I think the audiences are coming back, and we're more vibrant than we've been for many years, with wonderful opportunities for fusions of creativity as well.

🎪 ***You're very busy preparing for the opening night of La Traviata at Artscape next week, so I'll let you get on. Do you have any parting shots about why people should attend Operalia?***

It's important for the Cape Town scene, and it's just as important to celebrate all these extraordinary young people who are making waves internationally. And I think that puts not only UCT or Cape Town but South Africa on the map internationally as well, in America and Europe, if they're interested in the arts at all. They know Pretty Yende comes from South Africa, and that's a big deal.

🎪 ***It is a big deal, and it's something to be as proud of as our Springbok rugby players. I think it's important that people know that we're also winning and celebrating world-class excellence in other areas, especially in the arts! Thanks, Jeremy!***

ABOUT TERRY LEVIN

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