

ABOUT THE VOLUNTEERS FOR VERDI PRODUCTION



TRAVIS EDWARD PIKE



JO CHRISTENSEN



JEFF BERGQUIST

When Jeff Bergquist, Artistic Director of the New Playwrights Foundation, began taking roles with the Casa Italiana Opera Company, he was struck by the many colorful characters and diverse backgrounds in the group. After singing in a few productions, Jeff approached Maestro Mario Leonetti, director of the opera company, to pitch his idea for making a film about them. With their 30th anniversary coming up, and the company planning to celebrate with a performance of Giuseppe Verdi's grand opera, *Don Carlo*, the Maestro agreed.

Jeff recruited Danish-born director, Jo Christensen, with whom he had worked on previous New Playwrights Foundation productions, to produce and direct the project and she began videotaping rehearsals, interviews and finally the performance, itself. But after completion of principal photography, the production stalled for lack of funds and it became clear that what was needed was an old pro with the equipment, time and commitment to see it through to completion. So, Jeff approached fellow New Playwrights Foundation member, Travis Edward Pike.

Travis had the hardware, the software, the talent and the time, but was wary about committing to a feature film about the inner workings of a community opera company — until Jo explained her concept for the movie. It wasn't about the opera. It was about the people. And she didn't want him to write a narrative. She wanted the principals to tell the story through their actions and in their own words, culled from the 55 hours of interviews and rehearsals already in the can. Jo's approach made it an enormous undertaking, but Travis liked the idea. The music might be different, but the problems and personalities were certainly familiar. Jo was describing the same sorts of characters Travis knew from his years in rock 'n' roll!

Jo and Travis reviewed the original digital video of the interviews, rehearsals, behind the scenes activities and the actual *Don Carlo* performance, taped the year before. Then, over the next year and a half, meeting once or twice a week, they logged all the footage, captured and transcribed all the elements they hoped to use in the final cut, and managed to hone the material down to just over six hours. Finally, settling on simple chronology for the spine, they began crafting the movie, discarding mismatches and weaving together those special audio and visual elements that were to become their engaging 86-minute documentary, *VOLUNTEERS FOR VERDI*.

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