

'The Old Mezzo': WAM Theatre sings new tune

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Susan Dworkin, Playwright, with Kristen van Ginhoven, Director (Photo: Joe Schuyler)

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PITTSFIELD -- A master class by an aging opera diva turns into a reflection on a life spent in music as well as a lesson in political awakening in "The Old Mezzo," a play by Susan Dworkin that is having its world premiere at Berkshire Museum beginning with a preview Friday and running weekends through Oct. 28. Press opening is Saturday.

The production is the first world premiere mounted by WAM Theatre, whose shows are performed by professional actors from the Berkshires and the Pioneer Valley, and New York's Capital Region. Twenty-five percent of the box office of each production is donated to a worthy non-profit devoted to women's issues. The "Old Mezzo" beneficiary is Shout Out Loud, an organization devoted to combating sex trafficking.

Dworkin -- a Berkshires-based author, playwright and one of the original writers and editors at Ms. Magazine -- says the idea for "The Old Mezzo" began perking while she was at the 42nd Street Workshop in New York.

She had been reading Thomas Mann and, she said, "I began wondering how people in the arts function under a government that deprives them of their freedom."

The idea retreated to the back of her mind and sat there quietly for about seven years before it began taking hold again, this time for good.

"It's hard to put your finger on how an inspiration takes hold," Dworkin said during a recent pre-rehearsal interview in the auditorium at the downtown Pittsfield museum.

Impressed by a production she had seen by WAM, Dworkin submitted the script of another play of hers to founding co-artistic director, Kristen van Ginhoven, in the hope WAM would produce it. Van Ginhoven turned it down but asked to see something else. That something else was "The Old Mezzo."

The cast is headed by stage veteran Eileen Schuyler, who's been seen at Stageworks Hudson, Capital Repertory Theatre, the now-defunct New York State Theatre Institute and a variety of other theaters in, around and beyond the region. Also in the cast are Ryan Winkles, Elizabeth Donnelly, Rylan Morsbach and Erin Ouelette. Van Ginhoven is directing.

The music is by, among others, Bizet, Handel, Bach, and Gershwin.

"What Alyssa (the old mezzo of the title) has done is written an operatic play which she has her students perform in the master class," Dworkin says.

Over the course of the master classes, Dworkin tracks the arc of Alyssa's life and career.

It's a challenging role -- 85 minutes on stage without a break, carrying a full load of lines and emotions in a role that ranges in age from about 11 years to considerably older than Schuyler.

"It's been an exciting process," Schuyler said, "especially working with all these talented young actors. There's been no drama, no melodrama and Susie has been tremendously responsive to whatever changes we've needed to make."

Those changes were considerable at first, Dworkin acknowledged. But, she said, "you can't finish a play alone in a little room. I believe in being responsive to people who are working with me on my play. So, with all the rewriting, we have a play that is much larger, not just in size but in depth."

Van Ginhoven recognizes that for a company as young as WAM -- she and Leigh Strimbeck founded WAM in 2009 and presented its first season in 2010 -- taking on a new play is something of a risk. But, she says, "it's always the thing that scares you the most that turns out to be the most rewarding."