

# Grandparents' home movies inspire opera

By Michael Toscano

When 87-year old Robert Massey decided to clean out his closets about two years ago, he never imagined that this mundane act would result in the premiere of not only a new opera this month in Alexandria, Va., but a new form of opera at that.

Massey, now a resident of Hanceville, Ala., came across boxes of eight-millimeter color films, a record of his life with his late wife, Margaret, beginning with their honeymoon in 1941 and spanning the next 45 years.

These films became the centerpiece of an opera called the *Nitrate Hymnal*, which will be presented by the Washington Performing Arts Society January 23 through 25.

The earliest films show a young couple frolicking in the enjoyment of new love, the camera often focusing on their smiling faces. Silent images, the films capture a world on the brink of change.

It is the summer of 1941, the final months of innocence before Pearl Harbor and the trials of real life would intrude on

their idyllic existence. Before long, young men in new uniforms are seen strolling with their gals in the background as the Masseys visit Central Park in Manhattan.

Robert himself soon appears dressed in the dark blue of a Navy uniform. Later images focus less on faces and more on wide shots of family activities.

The couple rolled their camera a lot in the early years of their marriage, gradually shooting less and less until finally putting the instrument away for good in the mid-1980s. Margaret died three years ago.



PHOTO COURTESY OF BOB MASSEY

David Wilson (left) and Bob Massey collaborated to create an opera based on films of Massey's grandparents' life.

## Seeing grandparents in a new light

Robert decided to give the old films to his now 33-year old grandson, also called Bob Massey, who eventually took a look at them. It was a revelation with far-reaching consequences.

"It was a great surprise to see my grandmother at the age of 20, splashing around on the beach with her new husband," he said, sitting in the living room of his home in Silver Spring, Md.

"They're totally flirting with each other and they're younger than I am now, young and attractive and in love, and that's mind-blowing. I never saw my grandparents like that. My earliest memories of them are from their mid-50s on."

Massey, who describes himself as "a

writer by trade, a musician by calling," has long been a regional leader in alternative forms of contemporary music, including running a prominent series of bi-monthly salons at his former home in Arlington, Va., that brought together musicians from the local punk rock scene with classically-trained musicians.

Viewing the home movies and seeing a long-gone world for the first time sparked a creative urge. "As I was watching them, I began wondering what impulse makes people film their whole life together," he said. "It's immortality, it's thinking of the grandkids."

"But then I realized it wasn't pictures of their whole life I was seeing, it was just little slices, like little postcards of happy moments. But there are grittier, real-life moments between those images, and I thought it would be cool to stage some of those moments and get the 'back-story' to these films."

## Creating an opera

Massey decided opera was the only musical form with the sweep to tell an emotional story spanning decades in the lives of a fictional couple.

And he wanted to incorporate the films themselves into the presentation, so he

See **OPERA**, page 45

## Opera

From page 44

began to collaborate with Missouri filmmaker David Wilson, 28, on what has now become *The Nitrate Hymnal* — nitrate referring to a chemical agent used in photography.

Both contributed to the story line, but Massey wrote the book and score, while Wilson concentrated on the visual aspects. Experienced opera director David Schweizer was brought in to run the stage.

It's an opera, but one typical opera patrons might not recognize at first.

"We like the idea of opera," Wilson said. "We like the idea of something which is sung through, which tells a story and deals with, like, big ideas and grand actions and passions. But we think that has the potential to be made contemporary."

Working with music director David Durst, Massey and Wilson forged an orchestra of two electric guitars, three violins, viola, cello, keyboards, bass and percussion.

They cast classically trained singers who can also incorporate a more intimate, natural style of modern singing. Massey blends haunting melody with unique pairings of instruments, such as the raw, coarse power of electric guitar in counterpoint to the sweet tones of violin. He uses dissonance and silence as tools.

But he is quick to say *The Nitrate Hymnal* is not a "rock opera." "We don't have any point to prove about avant-garde music or anything," he emphatically stated. "It's pretty sweet sounding."

### Exploring memories

The opera's theme centers on what Massey calls "the fragile nature of memory, a fragility that comes not only from age and dementia, but a life lived in Hollywood reverie."

The story opens with Mimi, an elderly woman, in a hospital room. Her memory is rapidly disintegrating, and she is waiting for

her grandson to arrive to show her home movies from her life with her husband.

The films spark the elderly woman's fading memories, and the storyline explores issues, some dark, of their life between the happy moments captured on celluloid.

Mixing live action and projections of live performers on screens, along with the authentic filmed images of Massey's grandparents, the story goes backward through time, ultimately reaching the couple's honeymoon in 1941.

The old home movies are startling in their clarity, the color and sharpness restored with state-of-the-art technology. Using multiple screens to project various images, Massey and Wilson hope to take the audience inside Mimi's mind as she shifts between fantasy and reality.

While Massey's grandmother did suffer from the same memory problems afflicting Mimi, he makes it clear this story is fiction and not based on the experiences of his grandparents.

And while the plot may be relevant to older audiences, the artists are aware the music might be challenging for some.

"There's not a lot of loud guitars and crashing drums," Wilson said "The music is unusual and it's not Mozart, but I think it has the potential to speak across generational lines."

The *Nitrate Hymnal* will be presented by the Washington Performing Arts Society at 8 p.m. on Thursday, Friday and Saturday, January 23, 24, and 25 at the George Washington Masonic National Memorial Auditorium, 101 Callahan Drive in Alexandria, Va.

The Thursday performance is "pay what you can." Advance tickets for Friday and Saturday night are \$12 from WPAS if you call (202) 785-WPAS (9727) and mention the Nitrate Hymnal Web site ([www.nitrate-hymnal.net](http://www.nitrate-hymnal.net)). Tickets purchased at the door Friday and Saturday are \$15.

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