

OPERA DEPARTMENT TURNS

# Ordinary Challenge into Extraordinary Innovation

By  
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When describing an opera, you might use words like epic, grandiose, moving or larger than life.

A word you might not use? Recyclable.

But 2017–18 opera season at the UMKC Conservatory of Music and Dance featured costumes and sets that were just that. That's

because nearly everything seen on stage was crafted out of paper. Cardboard, paper mache, even discarded items from people's homes became the dresses, hats, trees, houses and furniture of *Hänsel und Gretel*, *La voix humaine* and *L'enfant et les sortilèges*.

Fenlon Lamb, director of opera and assistant teaching professor, and her team took a very ordinary

challenge — limited resources — and turned it into extraordinary innovation.

## BACK TO BASICS

Our story begins on the UMKC campus — not in 2017, but in 2013.

That's when Lamb met Jeff Ridenour (M.F.A. '14), a student designer assigned to her when she was a guest artist directing

the UMKC opera performance of *Cendrillon*.

Over the past five years, the two have collaborated on 10 other productions and formed an endearing creative partnership. Lamb describes Ridenour as her "spirit animal"; he describes her as his "best friend."

That partnership deepened in the summer of 2014, when the two





After their success with *Hänsel und Gretel*, the team had to tackle a new paper challenge with UMKC's spring opera, *L'enfant et les sortilèges*.

worked together on *La bohème* at the Bar Harbor Music Festival in Bar Harbor, Maine.

Lamb had worked with paper on a few set pieces, but not much else. So when Ridenour started talking about paper sets, she admits her first thought was, "Oh come on, how is this even possible?"

But as Ridenour describes, the "paper opera" concept turned out to be surprisingly practical.

"We discovered that these productions can not only fit any size budget and are less complex in construction, but can still present a grand setting with innovation and magic," he says.

Another UMKC graduate, costume designer Erica Sword (M.F.A. '07), worked with Lamb and Ridenour on *La bohème*, creating costumes out of heavy-duty crepe paper.

"We basically had an artist colony for two weeks," Lamb says. "Jeff

sat and did charcoal paintings on this huge poster party paper that's usually used for proms. Then Erica worked out different silhouettes for all the jackets."

From then on, Lamb surrounded herself with an army of innovators willing to tackle anything.

"I bring my friends up there and I'm like 'Hey guys, welcome to the paper costumes!' And they just look at me and go 'Alright, Fenlon. Fine.'"

**ALL HANDS ON DECK**

Fast forward to 2017, when Lamb discovered the UMKC opera department wouldn't have access to certain resources, such as Theatre M.F.A. students.

Thankfully Lamb is willing to think outside the box.

She and Ridenour started brainstorming what might be feasible in paper, and found what Lamb calls a "perfect match" in

*Hänsel und Gretel*.

"It's a fairytale. It's very organic. It's very rustic," she says. "So when I started talking with Jeff about it he was like, 'Yes!'"

Ridenour immediately started brainstorming how to use paper materials to "create wonder" and tap into a "child-like energy." He and his team used cardboard to reinforce props, created backdrops with 36-foot rolls of paper and formed tissue paper into intricate flower petals and cinnamon buns.

Ridenour also brought costume director Maureen Thomas on board, who was tasked with creating fantastical lederhosen, skirts and hats – all out of paper.

As the costumes and sets came together, Alice Chung (Performer's Certificate '18, vocal performance), who played the gingerbread witch, was amazed by what Lamb and her team were able to create.

"As I saw the costumes come alive, I could not believe how realistic they looked," she says. "The costumes also had textures that you wouldn't find from fabric costumes. It was as if you have paper dolls come to life."

When looking at photos from the production, you may be inclined to ask, "Which parts are paper?" It might be more practical, however, to ask, "Which parts are not paper?" The answer is much shorter – a tribute to how completely the team committed to their concept.

A key part of their success? Taking even the craziest, most far-fetched ideas and saying "let's do it."

"It gets to the point where we all look at each other and go, 'Let's do it! Let's just jump in,'" Lamb says.

**KEEPING IT LIGHT**

Crafting an opera almost entirely out of paper required lots of hard



Alice Chung's Gingerbread Witch costume took on a chicken-like quality — an idea inspired by characters in Russian and Slavic fairy tales.

work and innovation, but also created some fun moments for the team. Lamb recalled one such moment when Thomas was using her office for costume design.

"I walk into my office one day and there is paper everywhere and she has this huge teapot on her head, and she looks at me and goes, 'I don't know. I think the teapot's too big.'"

One resource Thomas used to create the costumes: Tyvek paper, the slick, durable kind used in post office envelopes.

Other pieces were made out of materials you'd least expect.

Hansel's lederhosen, for instance, was created using cardboard from a case of beer – a detail that provided plenty of entertainment for the cast and crew.

"One of the first dress rehearsals, Hansel sits down and the thing pops open and it says 'Coors Light,'" Lamb says. "Maureen

said her house was a wreck the whole time because she just kept stockpiling paper goods."

Chung also ran into some hiccups with her costume. Lamb and Thomas imagined her character not just as a witch, but as a "chicken witch," often found in Russian and Slavic fairy tales.

Chung's wrap dress was crafted from Tyvek that had been laundered many times to make it softer and more relaxed. Then it was hand painted and padded with pillows, and paper feathers were attached to the gloves, wig and dress.

And then there were the chicken feet: clawed, branch-like extensions made out of – you guessed it – paper. The idea made for a fantastic costume, but some extra maneuvering for Chung.

"The only challenge I experienced was climbing a ladder with my chicken feet attachments," Chung says. "They were incredible, but it

was such a hassle when one of my big chicken toes would get stuck on a rung while I was trying to go up and down the ladder for my chimney appearances."

**A NEW CHALLENGE**

After the triumph of *Hänsel und Gretel* and *Gretel* came the inevitable thought: "What now?"

As Lamb and her team began crafting their spring operas — *La voix humaine* and *L'enfant et les sortilèges* — they began to realize the challenge ahead.

"*Hänsel und Gretel*, we all were like, 'Yes, this is absolutely the bomb,'" she says. "And then we were all sitting in the theater like 'oh no' for spring. We knew we could pull it off, but it was harder!"

Like *Hänsel und Gretel*, the spring pieces were French, but differed in about every other way. As Lamb put it, "One is about a young child in a country house ... the other is about a woman committing suicide in a Paris apartment."

Somehow, Lamb and her team made it work.

They crafted French country wallpaper, etched paneling, wigs and even a wedding dress out of paper. The result was a production that, while maintaining the epic nature of opera, was also incredibly accessible to the audience.

**THE YEAR AHEAD**

Lamb estimates they saved \$20,000 to \$30,000 in materials alone using their innovative techniques. So, of course people want to know, will the 2018–19 season feature paper as well?

Lamb's simple answer: "You would drive yourself crazy if you always did it in paper."

"It was a very cool, innovative way to get us through, but in reality,

you need to do some solid stuff," she says. "You want to be able to push the limits on very little money, but you also want to be able to push the limits on a good budget."

This year's opera season features what Lamb calls a "big bang" show — Mozart's *La finta giardiniera* — in the fall and a festival-like program in the spring, incorporating students from across all disciplines, such as first-year costumers and designers.

One thing that will remain the same: Lamb's incredible team of inventors.

"I can't bring together a production without these amazing artists that just go there with me," she says. "My team is just — they'll go the distance. I'm lucky that we've built up a relationship over the years."

Chung was amazed by the sheer number of hours it took to create such intricate pieces, and the commitment by all involved.

"If you wanted a design on a costume, or a certain texture on the witch's house, everything had to be drawn, cut, and built by hand," she says. "You can imagine the extraordinary amount of time and creativity it took to get the effect you want so that these details can be seen by the audience."

But Lamb isn't done with paper forever. She and Ridenour are forming their own company, Papermoon Opera Productions. Because, as Lamb puts it, being an artist is all about challenging both yourself and the industry.

"If you didn't do that as an artist I feel like I would just crumple up and die," Lamb says. "I'd rather be pushing boundaries and trying stuff that makes people go, 'Holy cow, how did you achieve that?'"