



## Press Release

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### **MJC, Columbia ties strong to Opera Modesto production**

MODESTO, CA. – Two of the key people involved in the local movie production of a musical opera that is generating a lot of buzz have connections to Modesto Junior College and Columbia College.

Carolina (pronounced Caro-LEE-na) Stevens is the director of [“The Race,”](#) a 45-minute film based on five of Aesop’s Fables. Shay Russell is one of the talented members of the ensemble cast; she plays Aesop.

Stevens, 24, is enrolled in online science classes at MJC as well as Columbia, plus a sign language course at MJC. She already has a degree in theater arts from Southern Oregon University, but now wants to pursue a master’s degree in speech pathology and has been accepted at seven different universities. The science classes are needed before she can transfer.

Russell, 19, is in her second year at MJC and was drawn to the school by its impressive musical reputation. When in-person classes resume next fall, she looks forward to working one-on-one with vocal instructor Catherine Tortell. In addition to her college courses, Russell works full-time at the J.C. Penney store in Modesto. Her goal is to major in vocal performance and pursue a career in professional opera.

“The Race” is a product of [Opera Modesto’s](#) Summer Opera Institute, which focuses on introducing that form of music to teens while allowing them to showcase their talents. The original opera was written by local composer Deborah Kavasch and librettist Linda Bunney-Sarhad of CSU Stanislaus and is a whimsical mash-up of five popular fables, including “The Tortoise and the Hare,” from which it derives its name.

“The Race” will premier via two invitation-only screenings Thursday night at Modesto’s State Theatre, where because of the COVID pandemic the audience in the 550-seat facility will be limited to 100 cast and crew, family members and friends, and local arts supporters.

Originally, “The Race” was intended to be performed on stage by last year’s Summer Opera Institute students. The pandemic changed all that. When it became clear that a live performance wasn’t realistic, Modesto Opera leaders wondered if a movie was possible. Mike Everett of the [Creation Lab](#) in Turlock – which specializes in film production – was brought on. And Stevens – who had directed the opera’s “Mansfield Park” before the pandemic and has experience with the Gallo Repertory Company and the Prospect Theater in Modesto as well as outfits in the Bay Area and Seattle – was named director, though she had never before worked on a movie.

“The ramp up was pretty wild,” Stevens admitted. “I had to get up to speed and learn the piece very quickly. By comparison, I had about a year before ‘Mansfield Park.’ That’s more typical for a direction. With this one, I read the play on a Monday morning and had to pitch the project to our Creation Lab partners on a Wednesday.”

It was on the way home from that meeting in Turlock that Stevens begin casting the parts. One of her calls was to Russell, who had played Aesop prior to the pandemic as part of a student workshop that performed the first act of “The Race.”

“We didn’t do auditions,” Stevens said. “Instead, we pulled from a group of wonderful young performers who have been part of Summer Opera and we were familiar with. People who could learn this difficult music quickly and do it well. We were so lucky to be able to pull from this phenomenal group. We also could cast from family pods, which was so key to making the movie happen because they could be closer to each other.”

Rehearsals occurred via Zoom in August and September, and filming began in October at three family farms just west of Modesto near the Tuolumne River. There was a brief delay when one cast member had COVID symptoms, which turned out to be a cold and not the virus – but all the shooting was done by early November. The audio was recorded in Turlock.

“My challenge was to take this piece intended for the stage and transform it,” Stevens said. “Film is a completely different medium. I was trying to focus on what I could do, what the opportunities were compared to stage. I feel we were able to do a lot of interesting things.”

Showing off the Central Valley's beautiful fall scenery was one of Stevens' goals. The cast, including Russell, frequently romps through orchards, vineyards and canopies of mature trees near the river. As Aesop, Russell is often the narrator of scenes and interacts with virtually every other character – meaning she had to learn every song in the opera.

"I had to know what everyone else was doing because each song is its own scene," she said.

All the songs are in English, though Russell has experience singing in Italian, German, French, Latin and even some African languages. Those are languages sometimes heard as Russell practices her vocals for an hour or more in her east Modesto backyard.

"Everybody within half a block can hear me," she said. "I prefer to do it early afternoon so I'm not waking anyone up. ... I try to be considerate of people living nearby. Occasionally, I'll get a 'shut up' and, sometimes, applause."

Russell described her experience working on the film as "so much fun," but not the same as performing on stage where there is "instant gratification from the audience."

"My music was pretty easy to memorize and learn and to get lost in," she said. "Most of my focus was on bringing my character to life. How I raise my eyebrow. How I walk – fluid or quicky or graceful? How I would gesture my arms. I put a lot of thought into what kind of version this of Aesop should be, since it's usually a male character."

Russell said she is eager for Thursday's premier because she hasn't seen the finished production.

"I've seen a lot of pictures," she said. "It looks really good, like something I'd see in the theater. I wasn't sure what to expect, but I think it's really special. We really connected as a cast."

Even before its debut at the State Theatre, "The Race" already has received much critical acclaim. Everett, from the Creative Lab, entered it in dozens of film festivals nationally and internationally.

"It's such an unusual piece because it's neither a traditional opera nor a traditional movie," Stevens said. "It's quirky. I remember when we got an official contest selection, it was mind-blowing. Now, we've got more than 50 wins all over the world. It's so unexpected."

“The Race” will be available for everyone to view via streaming beginning Friday through the end of April on the Opera Modesto website.

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