



Durkin's progress

Rachelle Durkin has gone from WAAPA reject to international opera star.
William Yeoman reports.

It's midnight and Rigoletto is preparing to throw a sack containing a body into the river. Suddenly he hears the voice of the supposedly slain Duke in the distance and hesitates. Confused, he opens the sack to reveal an unexpected sight — his mortally wounded daughter Gilda. His confusion quickly gives way to anguish as she breathes her last.

"It's all right, Mum — I didn't really die!" says soprano Rachelle Durkin as she afterwards comforts her still-tearful mother, who was in the audience for a recent Adelaide performance of Verdi's opera.

Opposite page Rachelle Durkin performs in a dress rehearsal of Handel's Rinaldo at the Sydney Opera House.



Recalling this moment, Durkin laughs. "It's so cute," she says. "My mum really loves it."

The statuesque 33-year-old singer from Maddington is now based in New York but she manages to travel to Australia on a regular basis. And while she's here, her family makes the most of it by attending all her performances.

"I'm so lucky to have a fun, loving family who are so supportive," Durkin says. "Actually, my sister Kim is really funny. She'll text me sometimes after a performance and say 'I love that bit where you're on your knees singing to the man'. And I know that when I'm on target, and doing really well, she can hear it — as well as when I'm off. It's really good to have her out there in the audience."

Her family have every right to be proud of Durkin, who will soon be returning home to sing the role of Kumudha in the Australian premiere of American composer John Adams' latest opera *A Flowering Tree*: she's gone from being a WA Academy of Performing Arts music theatre reject to performing regularly at the prestigious New York Metropolitan Opera after being accepted into the Met's Young Artists program in 2001.

"I really wanted to sing musical theatre but didn't get into the course on account of my dancing, which was pretty dismal," Durkin says, who as a child always preferred to sing, often with her two younger sisters. "So I auditioned for the Conservatorium instead, having learned a couple of little ditties, and got in on the basis of my singing voice."

Durkin still didn't think classical music was something she wanted to do until near the end of her first year, when she heard a recording of the great Australian soprano Dame Joan Sutherland.

"It was overwhelming. I thought that if I could sing like this, I would really love opera. From that point on I was determined to pursue it."

Five years later she got into the WA Opera Chorus and things started to take off. Before she knew it, Durkin was winning competitions left, right and centre. But the best thing was winning the Met scholarship. "It was beyond anything I could ever have imagined," she says.

Durkin made her Met debut in Ermanno Wolf-Ferrari's opera *Sly* before appearing in a broad range of productions, including Schoenberg's *Moses und Aron*, Mozart's *The Abduction from the Seraglio*, Tchaikovsky's *The Queen of Spades*, Rossini's *The Italian Girl in Algiers*, Wagner's *Parsifal* and Phillip Glass's *Satyagraha*.

And yet Durkin still gets more nervous singing for her peers in Australia than she does singing at the Met. "I think it's because I'm still one of the babies there in a way. And there's something about that theatre that really allows you to sing to your full potential. Maybe it's because you know that if you don't, you're fired."

"But the pressure isn't as much as when I'm singing in Australia, definitely. I know that a lot of people I've gone through the ranks with are watching and I don't want them to think I've gotten too big for my boots. I still want to be that



little girl from Maddington who doesn't want to be alone."

One Met project that has got Durkin worried, though, is a forthcoming season of Rossini's opera *La Cenerentola*, which will be broadcast to cinemas around the world as part of the Met Live in High Definition series. Worried, because of the frequent close-ups.

"That's going to be funny. I'll be making sure that I have a facial each week and no humongous zits on my nose. Mind you, I am singing one of the ugly sisters, so I guess it won't matter too much," she says.

"I think my parents are going to put their heads in their hands when they see me in it because I really ham it up on stage. We're in cartoon-like costumes and there's a lot of mugging and face pulling. I haven't been told off yet but I'm waiting for the director to say, 'Rachele, tone it down, tone it down!'"



Durkin shares an apartment with another opera singer, husband Matt Morgan (the two were married at Margaret River in 2006), whom she met in a non-Met production. “He’s from Louisiana, and we were performing together in Mozart’s Don Giovanni. He was Don Ottavio and I was Donna Anna, and we had a lot of singing and flirting to do on stage, so ...”

She admits that with both of them being professional singers, life can be difficult. But the benefits far outweigh the disadvantages. “There’s a lot of sacrifice but the good thing about it is that the other person understands exactly where you’re coming from,” she says. “And if one person’s not working they can travel with the other and vice versa.”

Starting her own family has crossed Durkin’s mind but there are no definite plans. “I’ve got too much of a geeky, comical side to not make more use of it with kids,” she says, “but I haven’t felt clucky yet. Kids really love me when I’m with them but when they cry it’s nice just to give them back.”

Talk of children brings us to the topic of opera singers as originally being your stereotypical kids-as-attention-seekers. Surprisingly, Durkin agrees. “Yes, growing up I was a little bit of an attention-seeker,” she says. “I would cry and cry and mum just knew I was going to be an actor or something.”

She also agrees that singing and acting can be a cathartic experience, one in which sublimated emotions are given free rein. “It’s nice to remember each emotion you’ve had growing up and want to portray them, emotions that you’ve collected along your way,” she says.

“I’ve had a lot of emotions going to and fro with relationships and all that. I keep them close to my chest and use

Rachelle Durkin stars in A Flowering Tree at the Perth Concert Hall on March 6 and 7.



them whenever I want. Unless there’s something extremely hard you have to sing. Then the acting goes out the window and you’re thinking ‘Oh God, I hope I get this!’”

Might A Flowering Tree, the magical opera dealing with physical and moral transformation that’s going to be performed as part of the 2009 Perth International Arts Festival, fit into that category?

“It’s been difficult to learn, and it sounds a lot easier than it actually is,” Durkin says. “But musically speaking, it’ll be one of the best things that’s ever been put on in Perth. I think it’s an incredible piece — romantic, erotic and dream-like. It’s going to be beautiful.”