



Features

June 2008 — Vol. 72, No. 12 (http://www.operanews.org/Opera_News_Magazine/2008/6/SUMMER_MAGIC_KELLY_KADUCE_AT_OTSL.html)

Too Darn Hot

Teddy Tahu Rhodes, the buff baritone who sings the title role in Santa Fe's *Billy Budd* this summer, tells BARRY SINGER why he's tired of being promoted as Teddy Bare.



Teddy Tahu Rhodes

Teddy Tahu Rhodes is hard to miss, even at a distance. Perched on a fake wooden parapet in a drab Metropolitan Opera rehearsal room, he gazes down on the sporadic doings of this very preliminary *Peter Grimes* rehearsal in February, one of a number of principals scattered by director John Doyle here and there on high - a Greek

[View More Images](#)
[As the Pilot in the 2003](#)
[world premiere of](#)
[Rachel Portman's *The*](#)
[Little Prince at](#)
[Houston Grand Opera](#)

chorus far above the action. Rhodes is preparing to make his company debut as Ned Keene in this new Met production, but today he is merely part of the scenery, though at six foot five inches, impossibly fit, fair-haired and finely chiseled, he cannot help pulling focus.

At forty-one, Rhodes is hardly a kid. Yet he is clearly one of opera's sexier artists, with a physique that is drooled over in opera chatrooms and a baritone voice that can be voluptuous, visceral or just plain manly, top to bottom. His resumé, though relatively brief, is already studded with *Almavivas* and *Don Giovannis*, but it also features an extraordinary quotient of marquee lead roles for the twenty-first century - Stanley in André Previn's *A Streetcar Named Desire* (for Washington Opera and Theater an der Wien, among others), the Pilot in Rachel Portman's *The Little Prince* (during its world-premiere run at Houston Grand Opera, and later as filmed by the BBC) and, perhaps most significantly, Joseph De Rocher, the protagonist of Jake Heggie's *Dead Man Walking*, a role Rhodes understudied and eventually performed to great acclaim during San Francisco Opera's 2000 world-premiere run. Toss in the James Dean-style diffidence Rhodes manages to project, while still singing with fearsome ardor, and you're left with someone legitimately traffic-stopping.

So what is Teddy Tahu Rhodes waiting for now? A cue from his director, obviously. The question, though, also echoes the haunting refrain of his exasperating early opera career. That is because Rhodes, until fairly recently, really could not decide whether he wanted this career at all.

"Honestly, it happened just by default that I became an opera singer," he says over coffee after the rehearsal. He is a New Zealander through and through, with the aw-shucks heartiness of a true Kiwi bloke. Yet there is watchfulness underlying the easy nature, and one senses something sweetly tremulous about Teddy Tahu Rhodes.

"I'm playing Ned Keene, for heaven's sake," he mutters, wondering unassumingly why anyone would even want to write or read about him at this juncture. Google the name Teddy Tahu Rhodes, though, and it becomes instantly apparent how much interest there is, at least in certain circles. The long list of hits his name generates are linked to panting phrases such as "hunk du jour," "not too hot to Handel," "the best abs in opera," "everyone's favorite shirtless baritone," "the next barihunk," "that big lumberjack of a sek-say baritone" and the

© **George Hixson/Houston Grand Opera 2008**
<http://www.operanews.org/uploaded/image/article/littleprincehdl6108.jpg>



© **Dario Acosta 2008**
<http://www.operanews.org/uploaded/image/article/rhodestoclg6108.jpg>
 © Dario Acosta 2008



Photographed by Dario Acosta in New York's SoHo
<http://www.operanews.org/uploaded/image/article/rhodesportraitlg6108.jpg>

"buff surfer dude with rock-hard abs and a penchant for wearing too-tight wifebeaters."

Photographed by Dario Acosta in New York's SoHo

Rhodes, it would seem, is fast becoming a kind of operatic Anna Kournikova. That this is both flattering and demeaning is not lost on him. Yes, the current opera worldview is crying out for beautiful forms and faces that will register on simulcast screens. In that sense, Rhodes's future seems secure. But what he really wants to be is much more than opera's current pinup blonde.



As Ned Keene in *Peter Grimes*, his 2008 Met debut role, with Jill Grove (Auntie)
© Beth Bergman 2008

"What can I say? It's taken on a life of its own," he concedes with discomfort. "The roles I've become known for *have* tended to show me in undershirts. And I do spend a lot of time in the ocean back home, though I'm not a surfer, trust me. I also work out a lot - more than most opera singers, I suppose. Ultimately, though, you've got to be able to sing."

The choir of a Christchurch, New Zealand boys' school was the first place Teddy Tahu Rhodes sang. There was no singing in his family at all, he insists, and no early opera exposure whatsoever. Rhodes was born to a British mother and a New Zealand father. (The Maori word "Tahu" - meaning "to set on fire" - was attached to the family name "when they first arrived.") Rhodes's parents divorced when he was two. The son barely knew the father, who died before Rhodes was out of his teens.

"My parents did have a farm together, but my upbringing was not rural, though I did work on the

family farm during school breaks," he volunteers somewhat cryptically. "Look," he adds, with a laugh, "I was a sports fanatic. I really can't remember the first opera I ever saw. I was probably in one before I ever saw one." Selected for the New Zealand Youth Choir during his final year of private school, Rhodes had to be pushed toward music. "The Youth Choir insisted I take lessons," he shrugs. "After six months, I was entered into a music competition - the Dame Sister Mary Leo Scholarship competition. And I won it."



As Stanley Kowalski in Previn's *A Streetcar Named Desire*, Opera Australia, 2007
© Branco Gaica 2008

He was twenty years old. The late Sister Mary Leo had taught Kiri Te Kanawa, among many others; Rhodes was suddenly in company with New Zealand's most august opera export. Still, he continued to focus his university studies on becoming an accountant. "I even applied whatever music-class credits I received toward my commerce [accounting] degree. The only option a New Zealand university really prepared you for in those days was commerce or to become a farmer."

After graduating as an accountant, Rhodes - again like Te Kanawa before him - won the Mobil Song Quest, New Zealand's biggest singing competition. This facilitated a year of study in London at the prestigious Guildhall School of Music and Drama. The school offered Rhodes a further two-year scholarship to stay on, but he turned it down, returned to New Zealand and actually became an accountant.

"Purely personal reasons," he smiles abashedly, anticipating the astonished question, *Why?* "I was married at the time, and we decided that the life we wanted was back in New Zealand."

So his wife wanted him to be an accountant, not an opera singer? "No, no! It was *my* decision!" Rhodes cries, then quiets, sheepishly. "There was no conflict. It was a decision for us as a couple. Let's leave it at that."

For the next seven years, Rhodes stuck to accounting. "I continued to do the smallest of small things in opera, mostly with Canterbury Opera, my local company - Second Armed Guard in a *Magic Flute*, that sort of thing. I still took voice lessons, but very erratically. Do I think it cost me at all? I did kind of miss my whole apprenticeship. Was I conflicted about an opera career? Absolutely. I felt really uncomfortable onstage. It's quite hard to do it in your home town. When I stood up, I had this terrible fear of exposing myself, of making a fool of myself. I never allowed myself to just *be*. Look, I also married a hometown girl. She was a singer as well. The marriage

lasted seven years - until I was thirty. Haven't been married since."

In 1998, Rhodes sang Marcello in a local *La Bohème* for Canterbury Opera. The man singing Rodolfo got sick, and a ringer of sorts was brought in from Opera Australia in Sydney. When the ringer returned home, he told the powers that be in Sydney about Teddy Tahu Rhodes. They immediately flew over to hear this baritone phenom. Rhodes never turned up for the audition.

"I was just too nervous about it," he remembers. "Two days later I phoned them to ask for another chance. They agreed. I flew across, sang. They gave me the job on the spot." The role was Dandini in Rossini's *La Cenerentola* at the Sydney Opera House. "I was such a huge risk," Rhodes groans. "They didn't know whether I could sing coloratura, and I didn't know either. I only had three weeks before the first rehearsal. I was working as a trust accountant for a law firm in Christchurch, where I gave my notice. When it was over I didn't know if I was an opera singer or not, but I hadn't another job. I had a car back in Christchurch, and that was about it. So I decided I'd give myself five years."



As Don Giovanni to Jud Arthur's
Commendatore at Opera Australia, 2007
© Jeff Busby 2008

Among those who caught Rhodes's Dandini was Patrick Summers, who, as principal guest conductor of San Francisco Opera, was about to lead the world premiere of *Dead Man Walking* and was looking to put together a second cast for the production. Summers telephoned SFO and urged them to fly in Rhodes to audition for the lead.

"That was the most nerve-racking, horrifying audition I've ever endured," Rhodes recalls. "I can honestly say that I had listened to no contemporary opera at all before that. I only knew three roles in the standard rep - Dandini, Marcello and the Count [Almaviva] in English! Jake Heggie's music, to me, was very difficult. I was sent my first scene - I had ten days to learn it - and it was in 5/8! I didn't know what 5/8 was! Not a clue. It was ridiculous.

"I just gave it everything I could. I didn't even get to the end. I stopped and said, 'I'm sorry, that's all I know.' Heggie later told me, 'You really didn't sing anything resembling what I'd written. There were so many mistakes. But you were so ... so ... convicted. We all just thought, he could do this.'"

Rhodes wound up going on three times during *Dead Man Walking*'s legendary San Francisco run. The response was extraordinary. "I received interest from virtually every opera company in America after that. I was invited back to San Francisco immediately. I signed to sing at Houston Grand Opera, where Patrick Summers is the

music director. I've since done *The Little Prince*, *Manon Lescaut*, *Figaro* and Jake Heggie's *The End of the Affair* there, which Jake says he wrote with me in mind. I sang at Dallas Opera, at Cincinnati, Philadelphia, and at Washington Opera in D.C. I also got lots of work in Europe, though not in London, where I've only sung with the London Philharmonic. I guess they don't like me in London. I have sung with the Scottish and the Welsh National Operas, at Munich, Paris, Hamburg, Leipzig."

Peter Grimes opened at the Met on February 28. "It's a big deal for me to be singing here," Rhodes admitted on the eve of that performance. "I just want to do a good job. I'm well covered up in *Peter Grimes*," he added. "No T-shirts. We're all wearing a lot of costume."

Rhodes is booked solid now for the next two or three years. He will make his debut singing the title role in another Britten classic, *Billy Budd*, for Santa Fe Opera in July, and immediately reprises the role for Opera Australia.

"I find the way Britten wrote incredibly right for me," acknowledges Rhodes. "He must have had a great understanding of the baritone voice, because all of the music of his that I sing lies in just the perfect place vocally. The drama in both *Budd* and *Grimes* is so real and immediate, it's a pleasure to act it. But I'm especially drawn to the way Britten painted drama with music.

Next year, Rhodes will sing Escamillo in *Carmen* for Opera Bilbao, concerts of *Antony and Cleopatra* for New York City Opera and the Count in *Nozze* for Cincinnati Opera.

"I'm also doing *Streetcar* soon in Vienna, but I think I'm too old now for that part," Rhodes adds, ruefully. "*Dead Man Walking*, too. I feel too wise to play those guys. Plus, the T-shirts don't quite fit as they once did." He sighs. "Which is fine. I'm kind of waiting to get to the point in my career when they say to me, "*Don't take your shirt off. Please.*" □

BARRY SINGER won a 2007 ASCAP Deems Taylor award for his most recent book, *Alive at the Village Vanguard*.

Send feedback to [OPERA NEWS \(mailto:onlineinfo@operanews.com?subject=Website Feedback\)](mailto:onlineinfo@operanews.com?subject=Website%20Feedback).