

Comic Opera Based on ‘Dick Van Dyke’ Episode**Paul Salerni gets blessing of sitcom creator Carl Reiner for production**By Steve Siegel <http://www.mcall.com/entertainment/music/classical/mc-joe-coogan-20100918.0.4396782.print.story>

One of television’s most beloved sitcoms, “The Dick Van Dyke Show,” endeared itself to viewers with its clever comedy, three-dimensional characters and realistic situations. Running from 1961 to 1966, the show boasted a peerless ensemble of characters centered on the work and home life of Rob Petrie (Dick Van Dyke), a lovable, if klutzy, writer for a TV variety show, and his beautiful wife Laura (Mary Tyler Moore).

Before “The Dick Van Dyke Show,” suburbia was never portrayed on television as a haven of sophistication. We never followed Ozzie Nelson to work, and we never cared to know what Ward and June Cleaver did behind closed doors. But “Your Show of Shows” veteran Carl Reiner, who created, wrote, and produced the show, broke the staid sitcom mold with the series and its realistic portrayal of relationships.

Underlying Van Dyke’s deft physical comedy, such as his tripping over the ottoman in the classic opening scene, or Morey Amsterdam’s numerous one-liners, is a sophistication rare in sitcom, at that time or any other.

How deliciously clever would it be, then, to take this quintessential pop culture art form — the sitcom — and turn it into the high culture art form of an opera.

“The Life and Love of Joe Coogan,” a one-act opera adapted from “The Dick Van Dyke Show” episode of the same name, does just that. To be presented Saturday and next Sunday at the Zoellner Arts Center, the production, directed by Laura Johnson, was composed by Lehigh University music department chairman Paul Salerni and features a libretto by Kate Light. It will be performed by a stellar cast including members of the New York City Opera with music by the Monocacy Chamber Orchestra, conducted by Salerni.

In one sense, “The Life and Love of Joe Coogan” was spawned by the success of Salerni’s previous one-act opera, “Tony Caruso’s Final Broadcast,” which won the National Opera Association’s one-act chamber opera competition in 2007. In another, it owes its existence to Salerni’s wife, Laura.

“It occurred to me if my first one-act opera was going to have any legs, it would need a companion piece,” Salerni says. “I mentioned that to my wife Laura. We happen to be humungous fans of “The Dick Van Dyke Show,” and own the DVD set of all episodes, which we watch all the time. Laura is a theater director and is constantly learning from the writing and directing of the show. One night we were

watching the episode “The Life and Love of Joe Coogan,” and she turned to me and said ‘That’s it!’ So it was really her idea.”

“The Life and Love of Joe Coogan,” broadcast in 1964 in the series’ third season, offered many compelling reasons to be a Tony Caruso follow-up. In the episode, Rob meets a tall, handsome man named Joe Coogan on a public golf course and learns that Joe was once in love with Laura, courting her with love sonnets. He becomes uncharacteristically jealous and insecure until all is made well in a surprise and, of course, happy ending.

“There’s a very strong element of spiritual redemption in both Tony Caruso and Joe Coogan, and although one is a tragedy and the other a comedy, that makes them good companion pieces. But the most compelling reason to focus on Coogan is that the center of the episode is a sonnet, which is a poetic form you can easily realize musically,” Salerni says.

The show’s theme music, composed by Earle Hagen, provided Salerni with the basis for much of his score. “The premise was to try to generate some organic music out of what’s there,” Salerni says. “The episode itself was just 22 minutes long and the opera runs for about 50 minutes. One of the many challenges was to understand that not everybody today would know that Laura and Rob were happily married — there’s no comedy unless you know that.

“So when Laura first appears she sings an aria about how happy she is. Then there’s a moment where Sally Rogers comes out of her funny mode to sing about how being lonely is not so funny. So there are all these touching vignettes represented by typical operatic soliloquy — there’s a lot of music added to the skeleton of the show.”

Because the basis of the episode was a sonnet, there was no question in Salerni’s mind about whom to call on for a libretto. “I contacted Kate first, because I knew she was one of the greatest writers of sonnets in the U.S., and had been interested in writing musical comedy. She was the perfect person to do this,” he says.

Says Light, “It was an interesting challenge. When I first transcribed the script, I felt, this is perfect, how can I touch it? The progression, the storytelling, the timing, the comedy, were all worked out perfectly for a 22 minute time slot. But what we were doing was a different form, with opera’s own conventions of duos, trio, arias, and moments of repose.”

Light is the author of three volumes of poetry. As a narrator of her pieces, she has appeared with many chamber music ensembles, including the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra, the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, and the Colorado Chamber Players.

Writing the sonnet itself presented some challenges. “We felt badly about replacing Carl’s sonnet — I know he really loved it. I tried to fashion a sonnet that could conceivably be something written by someone maybe 19 or 20. Key to the episode is the sonnet’s duality in its meaning, so it had to be carefully crafted. Also, in the opera, parts are sung by Joe in his more operatic mode and by Rob in his somewhat more musical theater mode.”

Both Salerni and Light had to figure out how to handle the comic timing musically, one of their most difficult tasks. “We decided to go with some dialogue with no music at all. And we left major chunks of original script still there,” Light says.

But the biggest risk they took was to incorporate some more serious moments into the piece. “We didn’t want to lose the spirit of the comedy, but many of the characters do get a little introspective. But I’ve watched a lot of episodes, and have seen many of the characters have their moments. It was really fun to channel these people who I grew up with and really loved.”

Featured in the cast are New York City Opera members Nancy Allen Lundy as Laura, James Bobick as Rob, and Jan Opalach as Buddy, the role played by Morey Amsterdam in the series.

“The casting, I think, is great. Nancy was my first choice for Laura even while I was writing it,” says Light, who’s been a violinist with the New York City Opera orchestra for many years. Bobick turned out to be a great song and dance man, and Branch Fields has the perfect combination of good looks and resonant voice to play Joe.

With the story fleshed out and Salerni confident it was all going to work, all that remained was to get permission from Reiner himself.

Says Reiner in a telephone interview from his Beverly Hill home: “I’ve been an opera fan since I was a kid, so when I got a call about someone wanting to do an opera based on an episode of the show, I thought it was the silliest, craziest, funniest thing I ever heard. I was flattered and excited by the idea. But actually, Joe Coogan is a very good choice for an opera. It has an operatic flavor to it, sort of based on the idea of mistaken identity.”

There was another reason why Reiner liked Salerni’s choice of episode. “There really was a Joe Coogan. He was my best friend in the army, and wrote great stories. One of the funniest was about this kid who wanted to be a priest. So when I wrote this episode — not based on that story — it reminded me so much of Joe, I said that’s what I’ll call the hero. Coogan loved it.”

Coogan passed away 20 years ago. But Reiner contacted family members and nearly a dozen of them, mostly from the Philadelphia area where Coogan grew up, will be attending the Zoellner performances.

Salerni met Reiner when he was in the middle of completing the opera. “Tony Caruso’s Final Broadcast” had just come out to Los Angeles, and Reiner and his family attended at Salerni’s invitation.

Says Salerni, “He kept asking me ‘So did you write anything on our piece? Could you come over to the house and play it for me?’ We went over to his Beverly Hills home. I played the piano, he made me sing, my wife sat on his lap and kissed his bald head. That was one of the most entertaining and magical afternoons of my life.” *Steve Siegel is a freelance writer.*