

# Suor Angelica

## *An Opera at The Basilica*

BY JOHAN VAN PARYS, PHD

It is not every day that one hears the words opera and Basilica mentioned in the same sentence. And yet, that is exactly what happened in June this year.

The Basilica of Saint Mary partnered with Out of the Box Opera for the performance of *Suor Angelica*, a one-act opera by Giacomo Puccini based on a libretto by Giovacchino Forzano first performed in 1918.

This opera is entirely set in an Italian convent in the latter part of the 17th century. The main character, Sr. Angelica, has lived in the convent for seven years. She was sent there by her aristocratic family to do penance for a sin she committed. Her family all but abandoned her.

An unexpected visit by her aunt at first excited Sr. Angelica. She had not had any contact with her family since she entered the monastery and truly missed them. Sadly, her aunt, the Principessa, was not there to reconnect with Sr. Angelica. The sole purpose of the visit was to have Sr. Angelica sign a document that would transfer her inheritance to her sister Anna Viola. Anna Viola was to be married to a man willing to overlook the shame Sr. Angelica brought to her family. Sr. Angelica at first refuses, as she wants her inheritance to go to her young, albeit illegitimate, son. That is when she learns that her son died two years earlier.

Sr. Angelica signs the papers and collapses in tears. Soon she has a vision of her son calling her to heaven. Being the convent's apothecary, she quickly concocts a poisonous drink and finishes it. While dying, she is overcome with grief, fearing that she will be condemned to hell and will never see her son again. She fervently prays to the blessed Virgin asking her to intercede on her behalf. She also begs to be reunited with her son. That is when a great miracle happens.



Out of the Box Opera does things differently from more mainstream opera companies. One major difference is that its director, David Lefkowich, does not set their operas in traditional theaters. He always selects an alternative setting to stage each one of their operas. Verdi's *La Traviata*, for example, was set in a hotel. The Basilica of Saint Mary was thought to be the perfect place for *Suor Angelica*.

Also, instead of confining audience members to their seats for the duration of the opera, they move them from one space to another. *Suor Angelica* started with the opening scene of the opera in the undercroft of The Basilica, where the sisters are portrayed at work, enjoying some recreation and indulging in innocent gossip. The confrontation between Sr. Angelica and her aunt, the Principessa, which is the centerpiece of the opera,

was set in the Saint Joseph Chapel. The final scene of the miracle took place in the majestic interior of The Basilica.

The production of *Suor Angelica*, which sold out every performance, was deeply moving. It was a truly amazing experience for everyone in attendance. This noteworthy collaboration is one of the many ways in which The Basilica of Saint Mary contributes to the celebration of the arts in our community. It is something the Catholic Church has done from its very inception and continues to do today. ✚

*Johan M.J. van Parys, Ph.D., has been The Basilica's director of liturgy and sacred arts since 1995.*



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