



COC's Draganic grabs the ring

By **JOHN COULBOURN**

Now that the Canadian Opera Company's hugely successful production of Wagner's Ring Cycle is complete, Nina Draganic is moving centre stage.

Over the past year, the COC's director of programming for the Four Seasons Centre has put together an entire season of free concerts in the new venue's Richard Bradshaw Amphitheatre.

That series kicks off today at 5:30 p.m., when members of the COC Orchestra and Ensemble Studio join members of the National Ballet of Canada's Orchestra in an hourlong program titled Into The 21st Century.

While that event is generating a lot of excitement, so is the fact that it is merely the first in a wonderfully eclectic 90-concert series that will enliven the 100-seat amphitheatre (with standing room for an additional 100 people) through next June.

Putting together 90 concerts wasn't as tough as Draganic thought it might be.

"I was so daunted by that number," she said. "But I was so amazed at the outpouring of interest. Artists are clamouring to get in. It's such a sexy space.

" Indeed it is, rendered even moreso by a lineup that includes not only the COC ensemble and the Canadian Children's Opera Chorus, but the Uof T's New Music Ensemble, the Tiger Princess Dance Ensemble, the Humber Student All-Stars and Korea's Jeng Yi in eight different series embracing everything from dance to jazz.

Draganic adds with pride that there also are concerts by such well-known artists as baritone Russell Braun and soprano Isabel Bayrakdarian.

"These are people who have been around (the COC) for so long and have shared the dream," Draganic said.

When it comes to the Richard Bradshaw Amphitheatre, reality seems to have outstripped that dream -- at least as far as Draganic is concerned.

"What I was most amazed by was the effect of the movement on University Ave. You see the traffic but you don't hear it. It's sophisticated. It's urban but it's still welcoming.

"The feeling we were expecting to have was the feeling we had -- only enhanced.

" Then there is the man for whom the space is named, christened as it was during the COC's celebrations of their new home last spring at the behest of generous patrons to honour Bradshaw, the COC's beloved general director -- a man for whom Draganic laboured for five years as executive assistant before assuming this job.

"I thought it was perfect. It couldn't have been more fitting, because it was his dream. It was (going to be) a lounge space. It was only when Richard had this sort of vision ..."

Tonight that vision comes to life.

For more information on the free concert series, call (416) 363-8231.
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