Repression and expression

MSU Opera’s ‘A Room With a View’ tackles Victorian-era sexuality

A commanding voice called from the orchestra pit.

“It’s very disconcerting when I can’t hear you.”

Two apparently naked MSU opera students — actually clad in flesh-colored Speedos, their bodies blurred by a watery looking scrim — instantly ceased cavorting on stage and milled around, waiting. The technical challenges of singing while skinny dipping put a temporary halt to Sunday night’s rehearsal of MSU Opera Theatre’s fall production, a 2007 opera version of E.M. Forster’s novel, “A Room With a View.”

Everyone took an extra breath while Marcello Cormio, an athletic, live-wire guest conductor from Italy, ironed out the problem with director Melanie Helton, who was monitoring the action from the back of Fairchild Theatre.

“It’s not your fault,” Cormio assured the semi-nude singers.

Within seconds, the lush, lyrical music of Texas-based composer Robert Nelson rolled on, prodded and massaged with gymnastic grace by Cormio and an unseen, full-sized orchestra in the pit.

Nelson himself sat in a bank of empty seats, chin on hand, listening.

“Cormio is just fantastic,” Nelson enthused. “He works well with the orchestra and has a wonderful rapport with the singers. I am very impressed.”

Students in Victorian garb, waiting in the wings, milled around a prop table, nervously hefting plastic fruit. One pretended to take a bite and drew a outside, bit player Matt Riutta stood patiently as artificial blood was squirted onto his already gory scalp.

“I’m the guy who gets killed,” he explained. “It’s a very small role.”

In a dark aisle of the nearly empty theater, Helton chided a student singer in a maid’s outfit.

“You’re not flirting enough with Quentin,” Helton told her. “That kiss has to be sexier.”

The repressed Edwardian sexuality of Forster’s novel, known to most Americans from the 1985 Merchant/Ivory film, made Nelson’s opera version “There was a lot of hanky-panky going on, but it was all behind closed doors,” Helton said.

Repressed emotion and grand opera might not seem like lik librettist Buck Ross came to him with the idea.

“What attracted us is that it’s almost a real story,” Nelson said. “The MSU production of “A Room With a View” will only I performance at the University of Nebraska was followed by Helton, suggested “A Room With a View” to her last year.

“It’s a real romantic comedy, and those are hard to come by,” Nelson said. “There are a ton of parts and very little chorus. It gets a lot of people on stage in nice, significant roles.”

Cormio, an Italian opera specialist, first came to MSU last year to conduct score drew him back.

“I’m in an enviable position,” Cormio said. “I’m working on a piece that was written seven years ago, and the composer is here.”

Cormio is as impressed with Nelson as the composer is with him.

“He is a master at using the music to describe those psychological nuances,” Cormio said. “It’s operas are the big consequences of small things, and I find that very much in this score.”

Nelson’s harmonic tapestry changes like weather as the scene changes from hot-blooded Italy to repressed England.

“I’m from Italy, so this is very close to me,” Cormio said. “Florence has a very specific flavor of the late Middle Ages: When the scene switches to class-bound London, four stuffy, melancholy chords say it all: Somebody open a window, for God’s sake. Nelson delights in that kind of power. With a well-placed chord or carefully calibrated harmony, he can get across a f

“That’s the beauty of opera,” Nelson said. “You can communicate subtleties that people will absorb subconsciously.”