



# Labor of love

The new opera *Esperanza* will debut in Madison

JOHN URBAN

## By Nadine Goff

*Esperanza* – the new American opera based on the 1954 pro-labor film *Salt of the Earth* – will premier in Madison on August 25, and director Kathleen McElroy's vision, leadership and fund-raising prowess is making it all happen. A wonderful bit of serendipity didn't hurt either.

McElroy's love affair with opera began in the 1960s, when she attended Wooster College in Ohio. "The school offered an old-fashioned liberal education," she says. Among its requirements were that students take a class in opera and sing in the choir. McElroy fell in love with more than opera at Wooster. It was there she met David Newby, now president of the Wisconsin State AFL-CIO, her husband of more than 30 years. It was there too that she fell in love with labor economics, a subject in which she earned a Ph.D. from Case Western Reserve University.

When her decade-long job as a labor economist for the State of Wisconsin

ended in the early 1980s, McElroy decided to pursue her love of opera by enrolling in a performance class at the UW-Madison taught by Karlos Moser, professor emeritus and former director of the University Opera.

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Because of illness, McElroy was unable to complete the class, so Moser gave her an incomplete. Thus the scene was set for serendipity. Since she was unable to participate in the class performance, and knowing of her interest in labor, Moser suggested McElroy look at the papers of Marc Blitzstein, creator of the 1930s pro-labor musical *The Cradle Will Rock*, which is housed at the Wisconsin State Historical Society. Out of McElroy's research was born a musical review,

*Images of Labor*. That began her adventures with Moser, says McElroy, who designed the show and wrote the narrative. Moser was its musical director.

They thought they'd only do the show once. Instead, it toured the state off and on for several years. Soon after the final performance of *Images of Labor* in 1992, Moser asked McElroy to think about doing an opera. The two explored several possible subjects, including Martin Luther King, Jr. and singer Josephine Baker, but finally decided upon a film called *The Salt of the Earth*.

The film tells its story through the relationship between Ramon and Esperanza, a Latino miner and his wife, says McElroy. Set against a backdrop of political and economic struggles, including a strike at a mine and an attempted eviction, it is a remarkable journey to live together and love each other as equals and as friends.

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Moser is serving as the artistic director and conductor for *Esperanza*, which features music by David Bishop and a libretto by Carlos Morton.

Although the limelight has been shining on the creative team, it is McElroy, the project manager, who has worked hard behind the scenes to make *Esperanza* a reality, including securing the rights to base it on the movie from film producer Paul Jarrico. McElroy has also raised several hundred thousand dollars from more than 600 individuals and labor unions, as well as donations from local foundations. The premiere of *Esperanza* will be an exciting night for the woman who has worked so hard to make it happen. "I feel so fortunate to have a variety of loves in my life – David, politics, opera – and have them come together in an enduring artistic creation."

Nadine Goff is a free-lance writer based in Madison.

*Esperanza* will be performed at 8 p.m. August 25-26, 28 and 30 at the UW-Madison's Music Hall. Tickets are \$18 and \$25 for adults, \$15 and \$22 for students and seniors. Call 262-2201.