

In January, 2004, glassworkers Jay and Zoe Bridgland made their operatic debut, sharing the stage with foundry workers, welders, fire performers, belly dancers, an early music ensemble, and soloists from San Francisco Opera.

The Bridglands are a husband-wife team teaching glass flameworking at The Crucible. One of the west coast's leading educational facilities in the fine and industrial arts, The Crucible offers over four hundred classes a year in everything from blacksmithing to neon to glass. In keeping with its multi-disciplinary approach to the arts, The Crucible celebrated its fifth anniversary by producing a revolutionary interpretation of Henry Purcell's baroque opera, *Dido and Aeneas*.

Based on a story from Virgil's *Aeneid*, Purcell wrote *Dido and Aeneas* in 1689 for a convent girl's school. It follows the life of Dido, Queen of Carthage, who forsakes her royal obligations out of love for the Trojan hero Aeneas. When he abandons her after one night of ardor she cannot bear the heartbreak and impales herself on his spear.

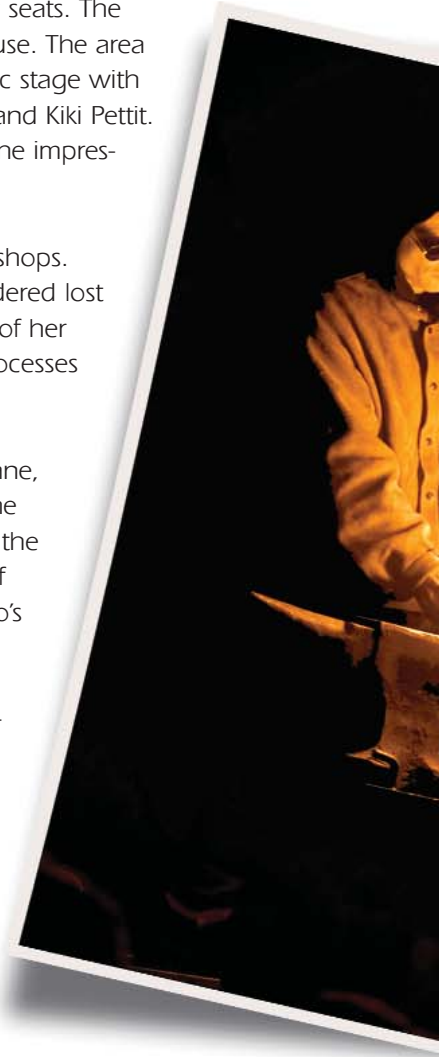
Using the artistic processes taught and practiced every day at the school, The Crucible turned this moralistic tragedy into a fiery spectacle that riveted even the youngest, hippest audience members to their seats. The entire staff, faculty, and community worked together to convert the art school into an opera house. The area usually occupied by the Crucible's metal shop became a custom-built, seventy-five foot panoramic stage with an orchestra pit in the middle, flanked by installations from Bay Area sculptors Michael Christian and Kiki Pettit. Set before a row of red welding screens and the boxy metallic arches of the ventilation system, the impression was one of an industrial fairytale.

All of the props, and some of the more flamboyant costuming, originated in The Crucible's workshops. Crucible artists manufactured flaming antlers, worn by nubile nymphs as Dido and Aeneas wandered lost through the forest. Jay Bridgland created two ornate glass scepters carried by Dido as a symbol of her royalty. But the texture of the performance came from the integration of industrial and artistic processes into the opera itself.

The production opened when a glowing crucible full of molten bronze flew in on the bridge crane, representing the sun god Pheobus. Silver-clad foundry instructors poured the liquid metal into the mold of a spear set at the stage's edge, almost singeing the eyebrows of the front row. Then, as the music swelled, the still-smoldering weapon was lifted from the mold and quenched in a cloud of steam. It went on to be used as a prop throughout the performance, finally burying itself in Dido's breast during her final act of despair.

The Bridglands used glass flameworking to portray the industry of Carthage. While Dido lamented the burdens of her life, Jay and Zoe fired up torches on opposite sides of the stage. Dressed in protective leathers and safety glasses, they slowly heated two glass rods until they glowed brightly. Then, as Dido fell to her knees, singing sadly, Jay and Zoe walked ceremoniously towards each other, carrying their glass. They met at center stage and, through a quick slight of hand, turned toward the audience holding the lovely scepter that Jay had designed for the production. To the unknowing eye it appeared the scepter was created as part of the performance.

Produced and designed by The Crucible's Executive Director Michael Sturtz and directed by San Francisco Opera associate director Roy Rallo, the entire production was a collaboration between artistic genres that would scarcely nod if they passed each other in the street, much less work side by side. Yet the result was an original performance where contrasts became complements and the performers were just as invigorated as the audience.



Says Jay Bridgland "Never in my wildest dreams did I think I would be flameworking in an opera, but the first day I walked through the door at The Crucible I knew immediately that my work was about to leap forward. This facility has everything needed to inspire a new approach to flame-worked conceptual art. It is a place that provides so many possibilities under one roof in a setting that fosters community involvement."





It is the community involvement that makes productions like *Dido and Aeneas* possible at The Crucible. The school's new 48,000 square foot Oakland home has greatly expanded that community, making room for a permanent stage and dozens of new classes. Also in the works is a fully functional glass department—the state's first non-profit educational glass facility offering furnace work, slumping and fusing, molding and casting, cold working and borosilicate torch working. This July, The Crucible will be hosting a five day Fire Arts Festival with Burning Man, complete with lectures, workshops, installations, and performances.

For more information on The Crucible's class schedule, open houses, and special events visit www.thecrucible.org.

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