

Diary of a Diva

photography by **Steve Raymer**

A month in the life of Megan Radder

There was never any room for doctors, astronauts, chefs, or smart-suited lawyers in Megan Radder's career dreams. The 23-year-old Indiana University grad student always knew she wanted to be an opera singer. As a child she began singing as soon as she learned to talk. Music, Megan says, was "the only thing I felt passionate about or was interesting in pursuing." A Wisconsin native, she attended the Oberlin Conservatory of Music, appearing in many opera and musical theater productions there, and has just begun the second year of a master's program in vocal performance at IU. This past summer she appeared in her first university production as Yum-Yum in Gilbert & Sullivan's *Mikado*. Music may be her consummate passion, but life intervenes on multiple levels. There's school...teaching...a part-time job...friends...family...so many often-conflicting needs and desires even as the rehearsal clock is ticking down to opening night. How did the aspiring soprano handle the pressure day to day? *Bloom* asked her to keep a diary of her experiences, thoughts, and feelings on and off the stage. This is Megan's how-I-spent-my-summer — without a vacation — story.



In MAC 103, Megan practices at an early music rehearsal.

30 June

I was very happy and excited when I learned I was to play Yum-Yum in the *Mikado*.

But as rehearsals began, I knew that one of my biggest challenges would be managing my schedule. I am taking two music classes and practicing at least an hour every day. I teach five private students in the afternoons before our two daily rehearsals. Soon we will add morning and afternoon Saturday rehearsals, so I have arranged to work at my part-time job at Best Buy on Saturday evenings and Sundays. I have decided to view this summer as a kind of personal challenge. My main goals are to learn how to handle the stress of such a busy schedule while maintaining a positive attitude, to take care of my health, and to learn how to channel my energy when I am tired.

5 July

Bloom Magazine photographer Steve Raymer wanted to photograph a rehearsal and I had to ask the cast, director, and pianist if it was all right with them. Rachel Copeland (who plays Peep-Bo, one of the “three little maids”) immediately began to read one of my lines from the score: “Sometimes I sit and wonder in my artless Japanese way, why is it that I am so much more attractive than anybody else in the whole world? Can this be vanity? No!...” Everyone was laughing and jokingly calling me a diva.

12 July

I have the afternoon off since Vince [Liotta], our director, decided to start staging from the beginning of the opera, and I don't appear until song number seven. I am taking the extra time to review my character and her specific motives in the songs I sing. I have developed a story line about Yum-Yum's life up to the time the opera takes place. The story I have created will never be obvious to the audience, but it drives her character by giving her objectives and desires. I find it much easier to set out with a clear picture of who I am in the opera than to develop one during rehearsals.

15 July

We began staging "Three Little Maids from School" this week. Erin [Houghton], Rachel [Copeland] and I all have parasols, which we use throughout the scene. There are a lot of quick opening and closing movements and times we have to spin our parasols. We were all struggling with getting them opened and closed on the correct beats, and we ended up laughing a lot. We spent a good hour and a half staging a three-page song. The parasols are also quite fragile, and after only one staging mine quickly began to fall apart.

Last night we staged my aria. The entire song is basically a fan dance, and body and fan movements have to be coordinated. That has proved to be the most difficult thing for me thus far. I came to rehearsal a little early today to practice by myself. In



Megan grabs lunch during free time with pal Caryn Kerstetter.

general, I have been meeting with various members of the cast a half hour before our afternoon stagings. There is a lot to absorb and get right. We have to remember our blocking, what we are doing with our props, and our dialogue, all while speaking and singing with an English accent. Our dialogue has been choppy since Vince tends to stop us every few words to correct specific vowel sounds. Trying to remember the lines, while also having to concentrate on which words are pronounced with an English "Ah" — like "hahf" instead of the American "half" — has been really difficult.

Still, I am having a lot of fun, and I don't mind all of the hard work. What I am having a hard time with is coming home from rehearsals exhausted and ready for bed but being unable to fall asleep. My mind cannot stop running over our blocking or going through lists of things I have to get done the next day.

17 July

This past weekend was very trying for me. My energy collapsed and I felt on the verge of tears all day Saturday and Sunday. My lack of sleep finally caught up with me, and I was having a very difficult time staying positive. I really had to try hard to put on a friendly face for customers at Best Buy, but by the end of the day I felt good about my efforts. I think I am slowly learning to suck it up when I am crabby.

Yum-Yum and Nanki-Poo (Josh Whitener) serenade.

One of our Saturday rehearsals wasn't on the original schedule, and no pianist had been assigned. Luckily Chuck, our assistant conductor, could play, but sight reading is difficult, and when Josh [Whitener], who plays Nanki-Poo, and I were singing our duet, trying to work out all of the kisses in it, we sometimes ended up singing in a different key than Chuck was playing. I couldn't help imagining what anyone walking into the rehearsal would think. I doubt they would buy tickets.

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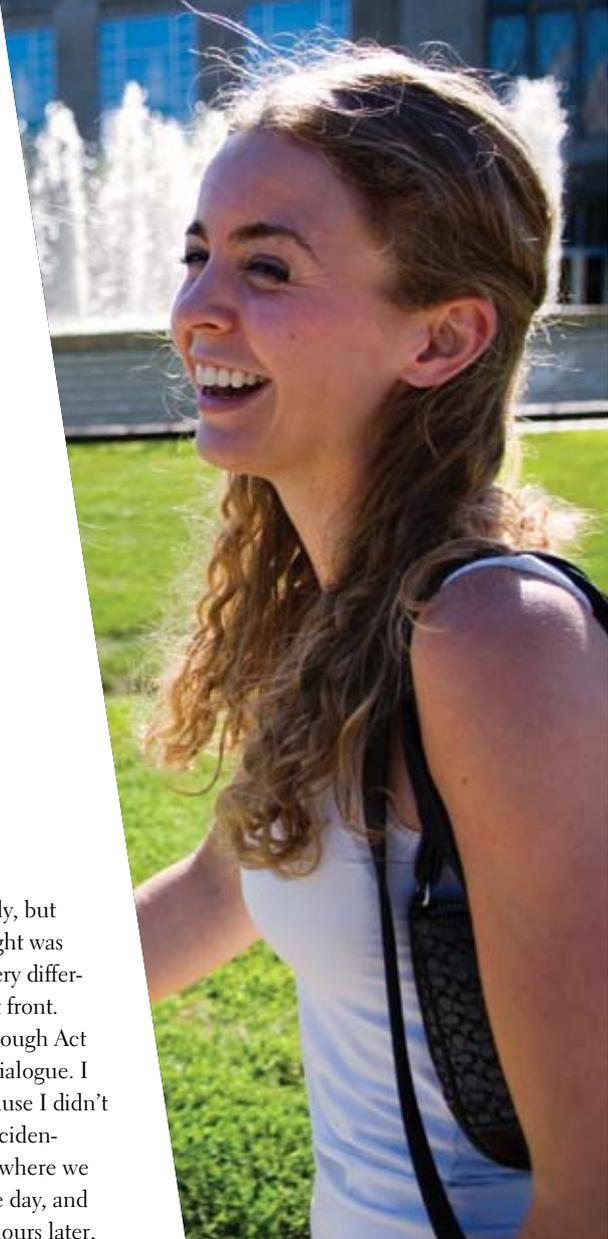
The parasol I had been using for all previous rehearsals was officially thrown out today. These beautiful paper parasols are not meant to be opened and closed hundreds of times a day. I have a new one, but now I am afraid to use it. Luckily my fans are faring much better.

19 July

Everyone is feeling the effects of the long rehearsals. We are exhausted, and most of us are having trouble concentrating. We are missing lines and forgetting parts of our staging. We began tonight by going over Act II dialogue on the front of the stage. Anyone who wasn't in the scene sat in the audience. Vince made us do this in order to prove a point. I realized how over-emphasized our diction has to be in order for it to be understood. On stage it felt fake

Last-minute touches are applied before the opening curtain.





to speak so loudly and slowly, but I realized that what I thought was happening on stage was very different from what I heard out front.

Afterwards, we ran through Act II with both music and dialogue. I had a difficult time because I didn't have my score. I had accidentally left it in the room where we rehearsed earlier in the day, and when I returned two hours later, it was gone. What anyone would want with my used *Mikado* score is beyond me. I am not as upset about having to buy a new one as I am about having to re-enter all of my stagings and get it re-bound. More time wasted that I do not have. I have a quiz in one class and a test in the other this Friday, and I am not even close to being prepared for them.

My goal of learning to channel my energy when I am tired is not working so well. It feels like everything is a train wreck right now, and the show opens in one week. I am worried about focusing enough on the things I need to fix and improve while I have to work at Best Buy, teach voice lessons, do homework, and study. How will I get all of this done?

20 July

Vince acknowledged the disaster we called a rehearsal last night and gave us tonight off. I felt this little bubble of joy well up inside of me when he told us. I love how things in life always seem to work out. Now I have time to study for the two tests I have tomorrow.

This morning instead of warming up as I normally do, I got a coffee and completed my music theory homework, which was due today. I hadn't had time to print it out last night before our evening rehearsal and had to run over to the library in my ballet shoes while the cast did a scene I was not in. I did not finish the homework after rehearsal last night because my body is so exhausted that my voice was a little hoarse yesterday.

Today I bought tickets for my family. Thirteen family members are coming. It's pretty neat that I do something that interests them enough to travel for hours to see me perform. I have not been able to go home since December, and have only seen my parents once since then. That is one of the main problems I have with my career choice. Family is one of the most important things in my life, and I do not get to see mine often enough.

I am so out of it that when I finally sat down to eat something today, I absent-mindedly began eating my corn-on-the-cob across instead of around. I have never eaten my corn across. When I realized what I was doing, I stopped and stared at it for a while. Then I went back to the beginning and ate around. Now THIS is cause for concern.

Megan on her way to practice in front of the Simon Music Center.



Megan and coffee on her way to an early morning rehearsal.

24 July

We had our first dress rehearsal yesterday, and I think it went well. Everyone in the show is wearing a wig, which means all of the women with long hair have to put it up in pin curls. I pinned mine in the front and had a friend French-braid it in the back to save time. I forgot how crazy I looked when I went to school to warm up before the rehearsal and laughed once I realized why people were staring at me.

This weekend I spent hours making a performance plan, which is a very detailed outline of specific things I need to think about during the run of the show. Before my first entrance, for example, I wrote down such things as taking calming breaths and using mental imagery to picture the opening scene and how I would ideally feel both vocally and physically. These ideas have come from a book I am reading called *Power Performance for Singers*. The most noticeable improvement after I put my plan into practice was in my dialogue: for the first time I did not forget any of it.

I am officially addicted to coffee and felt awful all morning. I came home for lunch and felt as though my soul was brewing in the pot while I waited for my coffee to be done. Coffee got me through many days when I woke up after not sleeping enough and needed to practice and function in class. I do not know what I would have done without it.

Yum-Yum finds out she will lose her head if she marries Nanki-Poo.



28 July

I have a costume change in the show between the first and second acts, and I was going up the spiral staircase between acts of a dress rehearsal when I heard, “Megan, don’t you have a costume change?” They had to hold the show while I stood in my dressing room with arms extended as three people helped me change. I learned my lesson and arranged to have one of the dressers meet me downstairs between acts to make sure I change. Why did this happen? I think the problem is that Yum-Yum’s aria is at the beginning of the second act, and I always have that in the back of my mind, which means I forget about other things. During our final dress rehearsal I also made another mistake. In my aria I use a fan that has one gold side to represent the sun and one silver side to represent the moon. I accidentally opened the silver side when I was singing about the sun. Oops!

The funniest thing that happened throughout the rehearsal process also happened during our final dress. When Josh (Nanki-Poo) and I were alone on stage he leaned over and whispered, “My pants are falling off.” Picture the two of us standing alone onstage, crooning, as I am reaching down Josh’s robes trying to find the top of his pants. My shoulders slowly started to shake as I tried hard not to laugh out loud. The teachers and friends in the audience all started laughing, and then we both lost it. They stopped rehearsal and one of the dressers came on stage to pin his pants back up.

This is opening night, and I am excited to finally perform. I realized this afternoon that all my preparation has really paid off. I feel less nervous today than I have for past performances, and I also feel much more excited, relaxed, and confident. This is really important for me, because I have a hard time feeling confident in general about my singing and



The finale of Act I, Yum-Yum and Pooh-Bah (Robert Brandt).

performing. It is something I am working to overcome, and I think I have made a lot of progress this summer.

It appears to have worked. I have never felt so calm and focused during a performance. OPENING NIGHT WENT GREAT! The next challenge will be keeping the same level of energy and concentration for the second show tomorrow night.

31 July

I have now had a few days to recover from this past weekend and reflect on my second performance Saturday night. The show was a huge challenge for me. I ate dinner too late and was having trouble with acid reflux, which made my throat feel swollen. I also had such a bad headache that I felt nauseated during intermission. Because I was trying to overcome my physical problems, I felt detached from everything else that night. I knew I had to cover up the way I felt and really gave it my best effort. In a way, I was faking it onstage and didn’t think I was giving my best performance. I kept asking my close friends if they could tell, but they claimed they couldn’t. That was hard to believe at the time, but looking back I think I did a good job pulling it off.

Peep-Bo (Erin Houghton), Pooh-Bah (Robert Brandt), and Yum-Yum (Megan) in Act I.

2 August

This afternoon we had a brush-up rehearsal with the full company. I found it hard to focus because we had already brought the show to performance level and rehearsing again without an audience was weird. As it turned out, I was glad we had the rehearsal, especially because of the dialogue. It would be the first thing to go if I were to have problems with concentration this weekend.

4 August

Members of my family are driving from various places in the US to come to Bloomington today! That was my first thought when I woke up this morning. My second thought was how much my neck hurt. I did a few yoga poses to loosen it up, but that didn't help much. I went to class and warmed up for a half hour, only to have it steadily worsen. I was freaking out a little by this point and decided to book a massage. Now I at least have more rotation in my neck.



6 August

Friday night's show was fun, but I was more nervous than for the first two performances. Having my family in the audience always makes me a little bit more excited and jittery. I am not sure why because they are the one audience that will always think I do a good job. I found it difficult to return to the show after a week of not performing it, and I was a little rusty and less energetic than I had been the first weekend. Nonetheless, I felt good about the show. I came home to my apartment to find my entire family gathered there. It takes me a while to wind down after each performance, and it was perfect to be able to wind down with my family.

The next morning I showed them the *Mikado* set and let them walk around onstage. My sister said she thought that the stairs on the set seemed dangerous. Little did I know how right she was. After another massage I spent the rest of the day lounging around and left for the theater around 6:40 pm. I felt very focused and excited; I could tell concentration would not be an issue on the final night.

I don't know if I have ever had so much fun in a performance before. There were more members of my family in the audience than had ever come to one of my singing engagements; it was our final night, and the energy was high. We all added little bits and pieces to our performance, changing the way we delivered a line or actually changing the text. I think we were all a little sad that it was our last show.

Looking back I see that each performance had a distinct vibe and each presented different challenges. But some things remained constant. Every night before we went onstage Rachel, Erin, and I sang our

first two numbers in our dressing rooms. And there was a mandatory high-five right before our first entrance. Once we did those things on the first night, I would have been nervous if we didn't do them before every performance.

My last entrance on the final night was probably one of the most fabulous entrances I have ever made. When the assistant stage manager whispered, "Go," Nanki-Poo and I started to run up the bridge and BOOM! Down I went. I popped right back up for "The Heir Apparent Is Not Slain!" and ran all the way down stage laughing. My family thought I was really excited that Nanki-Poo was alive and that I was acting well, so I guess my fall fit right into the plot. I personally thought it was the funniest and best way to end the show. Might as well go out with a bang.

Now the show is over, it is Sunday night, and my family has gone home. The *Mikado* was a great show and I will sincerely miss doing it. It will be really weird to suddenly not be so busy. I am not sure what I will do with all my free time other than spending time with friends. I probably will just end up working more at Best Buy. Stop in if you need any help with cell phones or MP3 players. I'll probably be there. ✨



Hugs backstage from Mom Peggy after the final performance.