



GEORGE WILHELM / Los Angeles Times

Soprano Wonjung Kimm, left, and youngsters from the Pacific Lodge Boys Home in finale of "A Place to Call Home."

Homeboy Opera

Juvenile Offenders Learn to Work Together

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The opera was starting in less than 10 minutes and Jesus Ortega, a 13-year-old convicted burglar and purse-snatcher, had forgotten his lines.

Not to worry, though. He had the words carefully inked on a cheat sheet stuffed in his pants pocket.

But as music swelled and the voices of 55 other youthful offenders in the chorus rose Thursday at the Pacific Lodge Boys Home in Woodland Hills, something clicked in Jesus' head. Suddenly, he did not need a cheat sheet.

"I remembered, man," he said grinning, as he and his homeboys basked in the glow of a successful opening.

Jesus was among the teen-age rapists, gang members, car thieves, drug and alcohol abusers and other offenders who interrupted their psychiatric counseling and Alcoholics Anonymous meetings to perform—with varying degrees of enthusiasm—in an unusual production staged by the Los Angeles Music Center Opera.

The 45-minute performance ended with cheers and applause from an audience of about 80, many of them staff workers at the Boys Home, a private residential facility for juvenile offenders. Most boys there have abused drugs and alcohol and about half are sex offenders.

The opera, "A Place to Call Home," was staged not only to expose Pacific Lodge residents to the performing arts but to teach them to work together—not a simple matter for members of different gangs and races.

"It might be easy to get youngsters to clap or sing in unison at another school, but that's no easy charge when you're working with youngsters who in some cases have severe behavioral problems, are from rival gangs and lack the social skills to interact positively with others," said Tom Stang, a teacher with the Los Angeles County Office of Education, which conducts classes at Pacific Lodge.

Written by Los Angeles composer Edward Barnes, the opera is a fast-paced tale of four young political refugees who

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Jesus Ortega, 13, conquered a touch of stage fright and performed in opera.

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come to the United States without their parents. In addition to performances at Pacific Lodge and a juvenile home in Venice, it will be sung at 13 Los Angeles area high schools under a Music Center Opera program to introduce teen-agers to opera.

In various scenes, one male refugee is assaulted by gang members while another is "adopted" by a rich matron who wants him only as a source of cheap household labor. A refugee girl experiences severe confusion on her first day of school; another is sexually harassed by a man at a bus stop.

The refugee leads were performed by professional singers from the Music Center Opera, with Pacific Lodge teen-agers singing the chorus, banging on homemade percussion instruments and performing a fist-waving "rhythm dance."

When they began training for their debut just before Thanksgiving, the boys—most of them fans of rap and "oldies" who could not tell Verdi from vermicelli—were generally unenthused.

"They said: 'Opera? What does that mean? It sounds really boring,'" said Pat Levinson, a blunt-spoken woman who is assistant principal of Pacific Lodge and an opera buff.

But after a series of workshops in which they learned, among other things, how to clap and dance together and make conga drums out of big cardboard tubes and improvise noisemakers out of cans filled with rocks, the boys' attitudes changed.

"They have yet to be tough and mean. They can't even do an attitude anymore. Because they were having too much fun," Levinson said.

Rehearsals at Pacific Lodge

posed special problems. Performers had to be ordered not to adopt "gang slouches" while standing on stage.

As show time drew closer Thursday, some kids developed stage fright. Levinson said two even "went AWOL," fleeing the unlocked facility before the performance.

Levinson was unfazed.

"They're going to be great, if I just hurt a few," she said, laughing.

As the opera began, the Music Center Opera singers gave it everything they had, belting out numbers as if they were at the Metropolitan Opera rather than a home for juvenile delinquents.

Watching the singers, some of the boys grew a little bored, giggling, snickering and whispering to one another. Others bumped into each other and faced the wrong way at times.

But others seemed completely absorbed.

A tall skinny boy watched director Robin McKee like a hawk, following her off-stage cues faultlessly. A serious-faced boy sat transfixed as soprano Wonjung Kimm sang a haunting solo, her voice trilling with emotion.

As singer Richard Bernstein was surrounded and beaten in a simulated gang attack, some boys broke into wolfish smiles. But the faces of others reflected a touch of sympathy.

And when it came time to shout their chorus lines, the boys were troupers, zestfully booming out the words in near-perfect unison.

Afterward, there were roses for Levinson and praise all around for the boys, some of whom allowed that opera was not that bad after all.

"The guys want to be cool in front of their friends—they're gangbangers and all—but now

they know . . . it's not just a sissy thing," said 16-year-old Robert Todd of Burbank, a runaway.

Others were just relieved to be out of the spotlights.

"It feels good. It's over with. I done done it," said 16-year-old Paris Hanchett of Rialto, who was convicted of receiving stolen property.

"And I got all the good parts."