

Rising Alternative

By Melissa Keeping

Giovanni Cozzi, charming and charismatic co-founder of Emerging Pictures and more recently, President of the newly launched Rising Alternative, took time out of his busy schedule recently to discuss his achievements, views on the industry and future plans.



Anyone familiar with opera's dominant position in the Alternative Content world, on either side of the Atlantic, will have come across Cozzi's two companies. Emerging Pictures, in which Cozzi still has a 33 percent stake, is run from New York City with old friends Ira Deutchman and Barry Rebo, and they have done much to bring opera to mainstream and 'mom & pop' theatres all over the US and Canada, to tumultuous acclaim.

Rising Alternative, Cozzi told me, was borne out of a more international focus, concentrating more on content than delivery. Emerging Pictures developed a novel time-delay 'e-cinema' method of delivery in the US that maximized the lack of SMPTE technical standardization in alternative content, and has resulted in an impressive reach throughout North America.

Cozzi saw the opportunities in Europe, the richness of opera houses, ballet companies and theatres that were only just waking up to the possibilities of a potential new audience in cinemas, and Rising Alternative was launched. Currently the small company boasts international distribution rights for Teatro alla Scala Milan, Opéra de Paris, Teatro Liceu Barcelona, Salzburg Festival, Bolshoi Ballet and the Mariinsky Ballet, and they are developing links with Teatro Real Madrid, Vienna, Munich and they are currently distributing Madame Butterfly, an interpretation by the San Francisco Opera. They have a reach of 300 cinemas, no mean feat for a small company in an increasingly competitive market.

The company is small – only six employees at present – but has ambitious plans for expansion; currently based in New York, Cozzi is back and forth to Europe every eight weeks and has an office in Milan, and he admits one of his strengths is in the appointment of Sonia de Beaufort, a former opera singer herself and now Director of Programming for Rising Alternative, based in New York. While Cozzi is passionate about the art form, it's Beaufort who provides the expertise in selecting appropriate content for each territory.

Adding to the international flavour, Gemma Richardson, marketing manager formerly of Arts Alliance Media, joined the company this year and is based in London as his UK agent. The company opened its Berlin office this month (Rising Alternative GmbH) with three more employees and their strategy is to reach 500 screens and diversify into various strands of programming, not just blanket coverage of 'opera', which is where, Cozzi tells me, Rising Alternative differs from the usual opera distribution company mould.

Opera is not just about big names and singers, he assured me. A novice would start with Aida or Carmen and work up to Wagner, example, which is in his view an 'intermediate' opera. Rising Alternative is working hard to position itself as a connoisseur of operatic works from all sources and nations, and by identifying 'strands' of genres within the opera art form, it is hoped this will bring its own box office success, wider audience recognition and industry acclaim.

The same goes for differing types of content, which again is selected based on geographical location. So the Berliner Philharmonic Orchestra's recent foray into cinemas went down well in Berlin, but one would have to be cautious about where else worldwide it would perform in cinemas. Cozzi sees Rising Alternative as more a 'curator' of content than simply a distributor, as intelligent decisions based on sound market assessment is key to making alternative content of the highbrow form a success.

Any concerns that the increasing competition in this marketplace might be making life harder for Rising Alternative to gain a significant enough foothold to rival the likes of the Met, Opus Arte and others, were brushed aside. If anything it makes us better, Cozzi asserted. Where opera differs from other entertainment forms is that there is a very limited repertoire, which might present a concern in an already aggressive marketplace, but Cozzi again sees this an opportunity to be exploited. "People come to see an interpretation of a title," he explained, "and while big names sell, there is a need to educate the public in a way that innovates." He feels strongly that the smart money is on new and previously unimagined interpretations of existing material. He could be right.

What about 3D? Cozzi is excited by the prospect as 3D will open up opera to a younger generation but harbours doubts that it will appeal to seniors. Recent studies held by the Royal National Institute for the Blind (RNIB) in the UK have shown that 3D is less and less effective the older the viewer is, and over the course of a three-hour opera, it's likely that by the end, a pair of senior eyes would be unable to see the 3D at all.

Whether such inconvenient findings trouble the likes of Real D as they plough forth with the 2011 release of Carmen 3D remains to be seen. Cozzi is similarly unconvinced by 3D ballet, but 3D is still such a novelty that it's possible people from all demographics will go and thus present misleading occupancy rates in cinemas initially. It's when 3D becomes the norm in opera and ballet that we will really see the true appeal, and that's still several years away.

Vintage content is also an untapped area and Rising Alternative is seriously looking into this as a revenue stream for the future. A recent UK release of Swan Lake starring Margot Fonteyn and Rudolph Nureyev in the UK proved so successful that Rising Alternative are looking to increase this side of the business so that classic interpretations sit cheek-by-jowl with contemporary innovations.

All of which means the ebullient Cozzi and his international team have more than enough to keep them busy over the next 12-18 months. Even in



an increasingly competitive market, with a roster as impressive as this and a limitless imagination, it seems anything is possible for Rising Alternative.

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