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Creating opera a Goliath task

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ROOSEVELT - On a humid summer day in 2003, Mark Zuckerman approached his across-the-street neighbor with a simple, but seemingly strange, question.

"I want to write an opera, but I need a libretto," Zuckerman said to David Herrstrom. "Could you do it?"

The result was "The Outlaw and the King," based on the biblical story of David and King Saul. It was performed at Rutgers University in 2006 as a chamber opera.

There is more to the story.

On Monday at 8 p.m., the second and final act of "The Outlaw and the King," is scheduled to be performed at the Nicholas Music Center on the Rutgers University-Douglass College campus in New Brunswick. The public is invited to the free performance, which will be done in concert form over about 90 minutes.

A rehearsal - which could include interruptions for fine-tuning the performance - is scheduled the day before. The public, too, is invited to the 3 p.m. rehearsal.

"This is kind of a culmination of all this work," said Zuckerman, 60.

Emphasis on kind of. Because, five years after Zuckerman approached Herrstrom, the two continue to revise the "The Outlaw and the King."

"We both find things we want to change," said Herrstrom, 62. "I guess the culmination will be if we get a full performance by an opera company."

While Zuckerman's question may have seemed strange elsewhere, it was not in this small, western Monmouth County borough, known as a home, over the years, to various artists: writers, painters, actors and musicians.

"We never really talked about doing any work together until then," Zuckerman said. "I did come upon him when he was cleaning out his garage and we talked about the things we'd like to do."

Zuckerman is a composer with a doctorate in music composition from Princeton University. Herrstrom is a poet with a doctorate in English literature from New York University.

Both have received fellowships from the New Jersey Council on the Arts. But they kept their day jobs: Zuckerman as a software developer and consultant, Herrstrom as a vice president for the Citigroup financial company, from which he is now retired.

In the spring, Herrstrom is scheduled to teach a Monmouth University course on the relationship between words and images. He is president of both the Roosevelt Arts Project and the Jacob Landau Institute, local groups promoting the arts.

The two met about 30 years ago when each moved to the same street in the borough.

As for collaboration, Zuckerman approached Herrstrom, but the idea to base it on the biblical story of David and King Saul came from Herrstrom's love of the story since childhood.

"You love the parts about Goliath," Herrstrom said. "It's the ultimate hero fantasy."

What the "best men can't do," a youth, David, does: toppling the giant, Goliath, simply with a rock and sling.

"What kid doesn't like a story like that?" Herrstrom asked.

Among the cast of "The Outlaw and the King" is David Arnold, a professional opera singer who formerly lived in Roosevelt. Arnold is cast as King Saul.

Although they continue revising "The Outlaw and the King," Herrstrom and Zuckerman are toying with a new project: something based on the speeches of the town's namesake, President Franklin D. Roosevelt.

"I think we show we work well together," Zuckerman said.

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