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PRIMA DONNA

INSIDER

Southwest Florida gains an opera diva with the arrival of world-renowned soprano Jennifer Rowley.

By Jonathan Foerster

Jennifer Rowley is apologetic as she pulls up a chair at our table at Chops City Grill on Fifth Avenue South.

“Maestro’s flight was late, and he was jet lagged,” she says with a slight frown, explaining why she was 45 minutes delayed for our interview. Her rehearsal at Opera Naples for the Opera Stars Concert, which was set to open the season in a few days, had run long. “But it’s all better now. This is our favorite place.”

Rowley and her husband, Raymond Diaz, specifically asked to meet at Chops. They’ve made it a point to eat at the restaurant whenever they are in Naples, ever since they started visiting the area when Rowley’s father moved to town 10 years ago. Her busy life as an internationally renowned opera singer meant that until recently, visits were few and far between.

But last year, the couple, who was living in New York, decided to put down roots somewhere warm. With her career taking her everywhere from South Korea to Barcelona, Rowley just needed to be close to a major airport. They looked up and down both coasts of Florida, before settling on a Pulte-built community in Fort Myers, less than 15

minutes from RSW. They closed on their home in late July and moved in a few days later after the long road trip south. “Now when I’m learning my parts, I’m doing it by the pool,” Rowley says, as she tucks into a specialty cut of steak the restaurant calls “butcher butter.”

For Rowley, Southwest Florida is a retreat from her grueling travel schedule and demands of the industry.

Opera is an unusual business, even for a classical musician. Like with most performing arts, it can be lucrative for the select few who break into its highest ranks. At the same time, those who haven’t made it, can make sub-poverty level wages. Rowley is closer to the top than the bottom.

Rowley’s first big break came nearly a decade ago at the 2010 Caramoor Festival in Katonah, New York, where she was a young artist at the festival. The opportunity comes with loads of coaching and growth but little pay. She was an understudy for the lead role in Donizetti’s tragic opera “Maria di Rohan.” The singer who was to star got sick, and Rowley stepped in for a dress rehearsal. She was so good, they asked her to sing the actual performance. From there,



Soprano Jennifer Rowley has portrayed many of opera’s great heroines, including Floria Tosca, which she performed at the Metropolitan Opera House in New York.

From left: Courtesy Ken Howard;
Courtesy Chris Singer





INSIDER

ARTIST PROFILE

After singing on some of opera's most prominent stages (here she is pictured as Leonora in Verdi's "Il Trovatore" at the Metropolitan Opera), since moving to Fort Myers, Rowley has also graced local stages. Last fall, she opened Opera Naples' season with a recital.

Courtesy Karen Almond

INSIDER

ARTIST PROFILE

Rowley went on to win several young artist competitions throughout the United States and catapulted into life as a professional opera singer, performing mostly as a lyric or dramatic soprano.

Performances make up a very small portion of Rowley's actual work, though. Opera singers are a lot like distance runners in that way. They spend their days preparing to deliver a few hours of perfection. Rowley has regular FaceTime calls with her language coaches to learn the dialects for her new roles. She makes index cards of the productions' full lyrics in both their original language and in English to memorize all the lines—even the ones she's not singing. She'll

study the operas' scores by the pool and then sit down at the piano to play the music. With every role, she aims to know the story through and through. Rowley also spends a lot of time singing at home, and before a big show the soprano might even fly to New York for a week with her vocal coach to make sure she is in peak form.

And that's just the artistic part. There are also meetings with various business managers and tons of time dedicated to social media, where she interacts with every fan.

Her husband is her biggest champion. Rowley and Diaz met at divergent points in their singing careers. In 2014, after making her Metropolitan Opera debut at the age of

33, as Musetta in "La Boheme," Rowley was just starting to book prime roles. Diaz was working on one last attempt at a career as a full-time singer.

The two were studying with the same voice teacher in New York, and Rowley walked in on the end of one of Diaz's sessions. "I couldn't believe his voice," she says. "And of course, he was very handsome." During another back-to-back session, they crossed paths when they were both wearing New York Jets jerseys. Though it would be many months before they officially started dating, that moment sealed the deal for her.



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Diaz eventually decided to pursue a different track. Opera singers are, naturally, obsessed with the mechanics of the human voice. For Diaz, that led him to speech pathology. The couple spent nearly four years in Michigan, where he studied for a degree, and worked on a thesis project on the differences in sound, air pressure and musculature of opera singers when they sing famous pieces of music. Rowley, of course, was his guinea pig (and an author on the study).

These days, while Rowley spends her time learning new roles, Diaz is working at Palmetto Ridge High School, helping students with speech problems.

In a lesser relationship, it could be easy for jealousy peek through, especially during Diaz's 5:30 a.m. commute when Rowley is in Spain, Italy, Germany, Australia, or soon, New York for her 29th show at the Met. But Diaz sees himself as part of team Rowley. "In some ways, Jen's success is my success," he says. "I remember when she got a call for a particularly big gig, and she was jumping up and down and screaming. And then I realized, I was jumping up and down and screaming too."

The couple are already feeling at home in their new city. They have developed some favorite haunts in Lee County. You might spot the two dining at Harold's or Angeli-

na's. And Diaz has become a semi-regular presence at karaoke nights at Mexican restaurant Casa Lupita in Fort Myers.

And because they love to entertain in their new home, they are also working to convince friends and family from up north to make the move. "We're definitely recruiting," Rowley says. "Because who wouldn't want to live here?" ■

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