

By Jeanné McCartin for Seacoast Online

PORTSMOUTH -- The New York City police officer who moved the nation with his voice following the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks will perform in Portsmouth next year.

Granite State Opera artistic director Philip Lauriat said that while it's great having someone with national recognition performing with his troupe, it is Daniel Rodriguez's voice that he is most excited about.

Rodriguez, who was discovered by the nation when he sang "God Bless America" at the 9/11 interfaith memorial service in Yankee Stadium, will perform the lead role in the New Hampshire company's "I Pagliacci" at The Music Hall on May 10. The show will also be performed May 13 at the Capitol Center for the Arts in Concord.

But it certainly wasn't his appearances on "Regis and Kathy Lee" or "The Today Show" that landed him one of opera's most challenging roles.

"I would never bring somebody in because I might fill the seats once, because that's all I'd get. I'm planning for this company to last a lot longer than I. You can't do that with a publicity stunt," said Lauriat. "That just won't cut it. His voice is amazing."

Initially, it was Rodriguez's fiancée, Maryann Motos, who scheduled an appointment for the GSO's auditions in Manchester. Later, Rodriguez called and said he'd be accompanying her from New York and hoped to audition as well.

"I did recognize his name," said Lauriat, "but I hadn't heard him sing except on TV, and I thought, 'I'm not sure this is an opera guy.' I just didn't think of him as opera."

The GSO conductor had seen Rodriguez performing pop material only. But he gave the New Yorker a slot and then the lead role.

"His high notes are just amazing," Lauriat said. "So we talked a little bit, and managed to work it out for him to come and sing this spring."

While Rodriguez became an overnight sensation in 2001, there was nothing immediate about his talent. The Brooklyn-born former police officer came from a musical family and had studied voice since he was a child. He performed his first recital at Carnegie Hall at age 17. After graduating high school, he continued singing. He later joined the police force for its steady paycheck, working first as a patrolman, then vice officer. Eventually he was assigned to the Police Department's ceremonial unit. He resigned officially last year. Known as "The Singing Cop," he regularly sang as a representative of the department.

After 9/11, Rodriguez was dubbed the "American Tenor." Since then, he has released three recordings and performed throughout the United States.

He sang at the opening ceremonies for the 2002 Winter Olympics, at numerous World Series games and Disney World. He's appeared on television shows, including "The Late Show with David Letterman" and "Good Morning America," and starred in a PBS Memorial Day concert. He sung with scores of orchestras, including the Atlantic Symphony and Los Angeles Philharmonic, and for President Bush on a number of occasions.

After his 9/11 performance, Rodriguez was also invited to train with the Vilar/Domingo Young Artist Program of the Washington Opera at the invitation of its artistic director, Placido Domingo.

"He'd been out doing concert things, pop and televised (shows) like the 'Jerry Lewis Telethon,' which is where most people know him from," said Lauriat. "But his heart is really in opera. He wanted a chance to do it, and to be taken as a serious singer, which he is."