Numerous Contributions

Supernumeraries contribute to major operas in small, yet important roles

Stage

The opera stars grab all the headlines, but the silent background actors known as supernumeraries play an important role of their own.

"Although they may not be onstage all the time, they are

The Story

In medieval times, Cornish knight Tristan brings the unwilling Irish maiden Isolde to marry his uncle, King Marke. Furious, Isolde tries to kill Tristan, but they end up falling in love instead. King Marke finds out about the affair, and his lackey wounds Tristan. Some people — we won't say who — die in each other's arms. **S.D.**

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crucial to creating the atmosphere of the drama," says Francesca Zambello, the Washington National Opera's artistic director.

Drama is, after all, something opera has in spades, both onstage and off. The latter kind ran high earlier this month when star soprano Deborah Voigt made an 11th-hour decision to drop out of the company's "Tristan and Isolde." She just wasn't up to the punishing vocal gymnastics of Wagner's 1886 masterpiece, she told the Washing-

ton Post. (Swedish soprano Irene Theorin will be taking her place.)

The appeal of watching melodramatic characters wail can be hard to explain to the uninitiated. So we'll leave that to three true superfans, the supernumeraries below, all of whom contribute to "Tristan and Isolde." SADIE DINGFELDER (EXPRESS)

● *Kennedy Center, 2700 F St. NW; through Sept. 27, $25-$300; 202-467-4600, kennedy-center.org. (Foggy Bottom)*

Supernumerary Lauren Christopher, left, tugs Isolde (Irene Theorin) away from Tristan (Ian Storey) in the Washington National Opera's production of Wagner's "Tristan and Isolde."

SCOTT SUCHMAN (WASHINGTON NATIONAL OPERA)

a few hours out of our lives to try to commit to this kind of journey that is completely out of the ordinary, it's powerful and it's worth it."

John Tinpe

Day job: Co-owner of Burma restaurant
Role in 'Tristan and Isolde': Soldier
How to spot him: You probably can't, since the soldiers are all dressed the same. "I tell my friends, 'Don't come to see me, come to see the opera.'"
Favorite musical moment: Isolde's final aria, "Liebestod." "It's always a great performance and it's always wonderful to see different sopranos perform it. They are all great in their own ways."
Toughest challenge: The set, which mimics a boat at sea. "When we're marching, we have to pay attention so we don't step on a drape or slide on the water."

Lauren Christopher

**Day job:** Staff member at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
Role in 'Tristan and Isolde': A lady-in-waiting to Isolde
How to spot her: "I'm onstage for all of five minutes, but you can't miss me. I rush in and actually grab Isolde and try to break her away from Tristan to get her dressed for her wedding."
Favorite musical moment: Act II, when Isolde's handmaiden Brangane sings "Einsam Wachend." Mezzo-soprano Elizabeth Bishop "sings it offstage as a warning to the couple. ... Her voice sounds angelic."
Toughest challenge: "In this opera we are definitely supposed to be

reacting to what we are seeing, and you want it to look realistic and genuine without distracting from the main action."
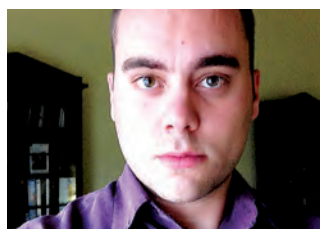
M. Scott Frank

Day job: Legislative correspondent for a Democratic representative
Role in 'Tristan and Isolde': Sailor and soldier
How to spot him: "I have this gnarly, curly beard and I get to abuse one of

the leading ladies a bit."
Favorite musical moment: "Wagner was very revolutionary. He wrote these dissonant chords that move into other dissonant chords. You want the chords to complete themselves, and the only time you achieve that resolution is at the very end when the two lovers die."
Toughest challenge: Watching the 4½-hourlong production several times a week. Still, he says, "if we can take

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"If we can take a few hours out of our lives to try to commit to this kind of journey that is completely out of the ordinary, it's powerful and it's worth it."

— **M. SCOTT FRANK,** SUPERNUMERARY FOR THE PRODUCTION OF "TRISTAN AND ISOLDE"