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## An Opera Comes to El Paso by Way of Bhutan



Bhutanese dancers performed in "Acis and Galatea," the first Western opera staged in Bhutan, in October. Handel's work is the story of a shepherd who falls in love with a semi-divine nymph.

JENN CRAWFORD / UTEP NEWS SERVICE

By RACHEL MONROE

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When the University of Texas at El Paso stages its free performance of Handel's English-language opera "Acis and Galatea" this Saturday, it will mark the latest expression of a century-old connection between El Paso and Bhutan.

The production — the culmination of a collaboration among the university, the El Paso Opera and the Bhutanese Royal Academy of Performing Arts — got off the ground in 2004, when Aaron Carpenè, 50, an Australia-born conductor based in Italy had an idea: to stage a Western opera in the Himalayan kingdom. "Aaron casually asked me if opera had ever been performed in Bhutan," recalled Preston Scott, a former adviser to the Bhutanese government. "I looked into it and found

that it hadn't — and that's where the idea was born.”

Over the next few years, Mr. Carpenè, Mr. Scott and the Italian director Stefano Vizioli approached several opera companies in Europe, the United States and Australia to find a partner. But at the height of the recession, with shrinking budgets and declining audiences, none of the companies could take on the ambitious project. In 2008, an unlikely partner was contacted: UTEP, a state school better known for its football team than for its music program.

But the alliance made perfect sense, given the university's deep-rooted connection to Bhutan. In 1914, the year the school was founded, National Geographic published one of the first major dispatches from the kingdom. Two years later, what was then the State School of Mines and Metallurgy lost several major buildings in a fire. Inspired by [the National Geographic article](#), Kathleen Worrell, the wife of the dean, suggested that the new buildings be built in the Bhutanese style.

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