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MSU Opera's 'A Room With a View' tackles Victorian-era sexuality

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A commanding voice called from the orchestra pit.

"It's very disconcerting when I can't hear you."

Two apparently naked MSU opera students — actually clad in flesh-colored Speedos, their bodies blurred by a wate around, waiting. The technical challenges of singing while skinny dipping put a temporary halt to Sunday night's reh E.M. Forster's novel, "A Room With a View."

Everyone took an extra breath while Marcello Cormio, an athletic, live-wire guest conductor from Italy, ironed out the from the back of Fairchild Theatre.

"It's not your fault," Cormio assured the semi-nude singers.

Within seconds, the lush, lyrical music of Texas-based composer Robert Nelson rolled on, prodded and massaged the pit.

Nelson himself sat in a bank of empty seats, chin on hand, listening.

"Cormio is just fantastic," Nelson enthused. "He works well with the orchestra and has a wonderful rapport with the

Students in Victorian garb, waiting in the wings, milled around a prop table, nervously hefting plastic fruit. One prete outside, bit player Matt Riutta stood patiently as artificial blood was squirted onto his already gory scalp.

"I'm the guy who gets killed," he explained. "It's a very small role."

In a dark aisle of the nearly empty theater, Helton chided a student singer in a maid's outfit.

"You're not flirting enough with Quentin," Helton told her. "That kiss has to be sexier."

The repressed Edwardian sexuality of Forster's novel, known to most Americans from the 1985 Merchant/Ivory film,

"There was a lot of hanky-panky going on, but it was all behind closed doors," Helton said.

Repressed emotion and grand opera might not seem lik librettist Buck Ross came to him with the idea.

"What attracted us is that it's almost a real story," Nelso

The MSU production of "A Room With a View" will only performance at the University of Nebraska was followe to Helton, suggested "A Room With a View" to her last

"It's a real romantic comedy, and those are hard to com

Cormio, an Italian opera specialist, first came to MSU la score drew him back.

"I'm in an enviable position," Cormio said. "I'm working

Cormio is as impressed with Nelson as the composer is

"He is a master at using the music to describe those ps operas are the big consequences of small things, and I find that very much in this score."

Nelson's harmonic tapestry changes like weather as the scene changes from hot-blooded Italy to repressed Englan

"I'm from Italy, so this is very close to me," Cormio said. "Florence has a very specific flavor of the late Middle Ages

When the scene switches to class-bound London, four stuffy, melancholy chords say it all: Somebody open a windo

Nelson delights in that kind of power. With a well-placed chord or carefully calibrated harmony, he can get across a

"That's the beauty of opera," Nelson said. "You can communicate subtleties that people will absorb subconsciously.