

# New Snopek opera will give Irish Fest some roots

By JIM HIGGINS  
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A tragic era in Irish life has inspired a flurry of creativity and research for this weekend's Irish Fest at the lakefront Maier Festival Park.

The great potato famine of the late 1840s and an accompanying fever epidemic, which combined to kill hundreds of thousands of Irish farmers and drive many others to emigrate to the United States, will be remembered through music and historical exhibits.

Local composer Sigmund Snopek will premiere "Trocaire" (Gaelic for "compassion"), a three-act operatic tour through Irish mythology and history inspired by the 150th anniversary of the onset of the famine.

Commissioned by the Irish Fest Foundation and the Shamrock Club of Wisconsin, Snopek began working on "Trocaire" four years ago. He composed the music; Jess Brownell, John Gleeson, John Kruth and Jeff Walker helped him write the book and lyrics. Act I takes place in Irish mythology. Act II, set during the famine years, features the most traditional-



Snopek

■ **Black 47**, the pugnacious New York band of Irish transplants that plays a fervently political brand of rock/hip-hop. Led by playwright Larry Kirwan, the band sings about actor/singer Paul Robeson, Irish revolutionary Michael Collins and rock mystery Bobby Fuller, as well as rowdy stuff about busting up an ex-girlfriend's wedding party. 8:15 p.m. Friday, 10:15 p.m. Saturday and 6 p.m. Sunday. Kirwan will speak about the band 2 p.m. Saturday at the festival's Hedge School.

■ **Present-day Irish music**, with performers such as Tommy Makem, The Clancy Brothers with Robbie O'Connell, Carmel Quinn, Arcady With the Voice Squad, Cherish the Ladies, Green Fields of America, Schooner Fare, Battlefield Band and others performing each day of the festival.

■ **Tug-of-War battles** begin at noon Saturday and Sunday at the south end of the festival grounds. Sponsored by the U.S. Amateur Tug-of-War Association, the competition features teams of burly and feisty men and women battling for control of the rope.

■ **Irish cooking demonstrations**. Growing up, the Higgins

family nod to Irish cooking was ham and cabbage, whose scent would drive my father out of the house. But surely former Irish TV cook Mairin Ui Chomain, who once taught fishermen in the Aran Islands, will expand your options during demonstrations at 2:30 p.m. Saturday and Sunday.

■ **Sunday morning liturgy** at the Marcus Amphitheater celebrated by Father Derek Byrne, from the St. Patrick's Missionary Society in Kiltegan, County Wicklow, Ireland. Those bringing nonperishable food items before the liturgy can enter the festival grounds free afterward. Music begins at 9 a.m., with the liturgy starting at 9:30 p.m.

■ **A chance to trace your roots**. Nora Hickey, a genealogist from County Cork, and Dwight Radford and Kyle Betit, co-authors of "Ireland: A Genealogical Guide for North Americans," will offer information on Irish families in the Genealogy Tent. Hickey also will speak on "The Famine and Irish Emigration" at 1 p.m. Saturday and noon Sunday at the Hedge School.

■ **A giant festival-closing jam session**, dubbed The Scat-

tering and featuring Cherish the Ladies and many other entertainers, begins at 9:45 p.m. Sunday.

Irish Fest admission is \$8 for adults, \$5 for seniors 60 and older, free for children 12 and under. Entry is free for all from 4 to

5:30 p.m. Friday. From 11 a.m. to noon Sunday, enter free at the Mid-Gate with donation of nonperishable food item to the Hunger Task Force. From 2 to p.m. Sunday, enter free with Milwaukee Journal Sentinel Press Pass at the Mid-Gate only.



Irish Fest attractions this year include Black 47, a New York band of Irish transplants that plays a political brand of rock/hip-hop.

sounding Irish music, Snopek said.

The brief, contemporary Act III has a link to Somalia, he said.

The Ghillies, members of Present Music and the Encore Singers will help him perform the work, which will last about 50 minutes, Snopek said.

Snopek is Irish on his mother's side. He said his grandmother, Edith Behan, was related to the famed Irish writer Brendan Behan. In the course of preparing the opera, Snopek made a three-week visit to Ireland with his mother and sister, visiting his relatives in Dublin and the Wicklow Mountains.

"Trocaire" performances are 9 p.m. Friday, 3:30 and 9 p.m. Saturday, and 12:15 and 8:15 p.m. Sunday.

Irish Fest also has assembled "A Time of Hunger," a multimedia exhibit covering the famine years from 1845-1850, when farmers faced the choice between the workhouse or traveling to America. In this exhibit, you can walk through the "coffin ships" on which Irish emigrants traveled. Sponsored by Miller Brewing Co., this exhibit is in the festival's Cultural Village.

Other attractions of this weekend's festival: