



STREAMING THE FIRST CENTURY

MEMORIES PROJECT: Touring with Western Opera Theater (WOT), Main Stage

Featuring: Joyce Castle in conversation with Ann Farris (former SF Opera administrative and archives staff, 1969-1971 and 2014-17) and Richard Sparks (former SF Opera box office and subscription manager, 1974-1993)

(transcript read time ~ 7 minutes)

SF Opera Archives: Memories Project

The San Francisco Opera Archives has, since 2009, been interviewing leading participants in, or well-placed witnesses to, major events in the development of the San Francisco Opera Association.

In 2009, Ann Farris, former administrative staff, began typing notes as former staff and others shared their experiences with SF Opera and/or its affiliates. In 2013, Richard Sparks, former season ticket manager, joined the Archives volunteer team and has accompanied Farris as they interview former staff, artists and others. Later, they began audio recording interviews. Beginning in 2017, interview questions are included in subsequent Memories, as part of the interview reports. Most recently, Mary Seastrand, Marianne Welmers, Stan Dufford, and Richard Balthazar joined the Archives volunteer team assisting in the editing and electronic organization of these materials.

Oral History is a method of collecting historical information through tape-recorded interviews between a narrator with firsthand knowledge of historically significant events and a well-informed interviewer, with the goal of preserving substantive additions to the historical record. The tape recording is transcribed, lightly edited for continuity and clarity, and reviewed by the interviewee. The corrected manuscript is held by the Archives of the San Francisco Opera Association for scholarly use. Because it is primary material, oral history is not intended to present the final, verified, or complete narrative of events. It is a spoken account, offered by the interviewee in response to questioning, and as such it is reflective, partisan, deeply involved, and irreplaceable.

Interview conducted on: 07/10/2017

Joyce Castle Memories

1969/1970 WOT Operas/Roles:

The Crucible: Elizabeth Proctor

Marriage of Figaro: Marcellina

Gianni Schicchi: Zita

The Medium: Mrs. Gobineau, Mme. Flora

1970/1971 WOT Operas/Roles:

Gianni Schicchi: Zita

The Medium: Mrs. Gobineau, Mme. Flora

Amerika: Brunelda

La Cenerentola: Tisbe

What Price Confidence?: Vivian

Threepenny Opera: Jenny (performed in the streets of San Francisco)

Earth Trapped: JC sang excerpts at the National Opera Institute in 73-74

1970 SFO Opera/Role:

Faust: Seibel

[BEGIN TRANSCRIPTION]

JOYCE CASTLE [JC]: My introduction to Western Opera Theater (WOT) was Richard Weitach (WOT conductor) who got me into WOT. Both Weitach and I went to Eastman School of Music. The Director of Opera at Eastman was Leonard Treash. Treash was also the Director at Chautauqua and invited me to perform at Chautauqua. Weitach conducted one of the performances at Chautauqua. When we were back in New York, Weitach called me up and auditioned me and then set me up with Ben Snyder (WOT manager), who gave me a contract (for the 1969-70 WOT Season) and I came to WOT. For the 1970-71 Season, Edward Corn (WOT manager) and Kurt Herbert Adler (SF Opera general director) signed my contract for \$185 a week.

I was with WOT for two years (1969/70 and 1970/71), two wonderful years. Then I married the tenor Bruce Brewer. We were first in Berlin for 9 months where Bruce had a contract with Deutsche Oper. He broke his contract, and we moved to Paris for 9 months, then DC for 3 years, then back to Paris for 7 years.

While I was with WOT, these are some Memories.

Alaska:

We did *The Crucible* (role: Elizabeth Proctor) in Anchorage as well as *The Marriage of Figaro* (role: Marcellina). *The Crucible* was a joint production with Anchorage Opera. We came in at the last moment. There were no issues integrating the two groups.

The Crucible was Ghita Hager's production. This was not an easy role for me but a good challenge. The final dress rehearsal when I sang the final line: "He has his goodness now, God forbid I take it from him," I was so involved with the part that I was sobbing, but being so involved, I could hardly get out a note. Hager came up on the stage and said: "You are going to have find a way to control your emotions so you can sing." I said: "I know, I know," walking away. I just had to get my emotions out. And, the opening night went fine. I was thirty. These were the things we learned.

April 22nd, while we were in Alaska, we were also performing *Gianni Schicchi* and *The Medium* which we had performed previously many times. We played this double bill in Sitka and Juneau, and in Anchorage we performed *Gianni Schicchi* in the schools.

The airport was scary in Sitka. It looked like you were going to hit a mountain. We didn't! Claudia Lindsay and Gene Brundage were terrified of flying.

Being in Alaska was heaven on earth. I was enthralled with the snow and eating caribou burgers. We did many, many *Gianni Schicchis* during this period.

In 1970-1971, my second year, I was paid \$185 a week from December 2nd to first week of May.

Performances:

What Price Confidence? (composer Ernst Krenek) There used to be a theater at Ghirardelli Square called The Power House. WOT performed a public preview of *What Price Confidence?* there.

WOT later performed *The Threepenny Opera* as part of Opera in the Streets. (SFO Archives has a copy of *Threepenny Opera*.) I was hired back to do *Threepenny Opera*. Carolyn Lewis was in it. Calvin Simmons was conducting. David Ostwald directed. A drunk came up at one point when I was performing. It was a challenge to handle and thus really a wonderful experience. We were in all corners of San Francisco.

Adler listened to us—he would pop into rehearsals. We were once again going through *Schicchi*. Everyone was marking. Ostwald was out there (out front) listening to us. And all of sudden, Adler walked in behind Ostwald. We started singing at the top of our talents. Ostwald jumped and wondered what was going on, turned around and saw Adler, and then he understood.

Earth Trapped: I hardly remember doing it. Woitach found the work, and we did it.

Occurrences while on the WOT tour:

Somewhere in the tour doing *The Medium*, I, as Madame Flora, was supposed to shoot Toby, but the gun didn't go off. So, I whispered to Toby to lean forward saying "I am going to strangle you."

Once we performed in a big theater, but there were only 7-8 people in the audience. Edward Corn came back and lectured to us that we were to perform as though the theater was full. Another good lesson.

Personal comments:

I was very happy to be in the WOT company. My first apartment was near the Opera House. It was very exciting, and I was very happy. I was always a performer. Now, I was getting paid for doing that.

It was exciting when we saw the truck carrying OUR props and scenery. I was seeing different parts of the business. The experience of going into different schools and so-called dressing rooms was an eye-opener.

More recently, I have had a couple of my students accepted into the Merola Opera Program (MOP). WOT and MOP are so important. With WOT, the difference was the travel. We were on the road. We sure got to know each other. And we liked each other.

I strung beads to make necklaces in the long bus rides. Tim Nolen "hated me" (*ha!*) because I never gave him a necklace. However, we were a good group. Julia Emoed Wallace was part of WOT. So many fine voices/talents. We were all so busy and had so much to do and with so many roles. I don't remember any animosity.

I hated my dress in *Schicchi* (role: Zita). It was so big and bulky and hot. After our last performance of *Schicchi* in some high school, we were all in one dressing room. I let the dress go to the floor and stomped on it. I killed it. It didn't deserve it.

Singing unexpectedly with Fall SF Opera Season:

In my second year, the Siebel in the mainstage *Faust* (SF Opera Fall Season) was sick, and Adler asked me to step in with 24 hours' notice. I did not know the role. I didn't even know "Faites lui." I learned it overnight. It was my

debut role with SF Opera. Adler sent me a note and said I had come through for them. I am so grateful to Adler for giving me the chance.

San Francisco Symphony:

Arthur Fiedler was conducting during the summer at the Civic Auditorium with the San Francisco Symphony; four of the WOT singers (Carolyn Lewis, Tim Nolen, David Hall-Sundquist, and I) sang with him.