



STREAMING THE FIRST CENTURY

MEMORIES PROJECT: San Francisco Opera Center

Featuring: Sheri Greenawald (former stage artist and SF Opera Center director) 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 ~ 13 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: 10/09/2018

Sheri Greenawald
2002 - 2020 Director of San Francisco Opera Center

Topics: Opera Center; Pamela Rosenberg, Donald Runnicles; Western Opera Theater (WOT); Merola Opera Program (MOP), Adler Fellows; Curt Hancock, Chris Bragg, Bill Bowles, Kerry King, Patricia Racette, Karen Slack, Speight Jenkins

[BEGIN TRANSCRIPTION]

ANN FARRIS (AF): This discussion will not be a long one. We are grateful that you're giving us the time, because we want to be able to have a tie to the end of WOT.

SHERI GREENAWALD (SG): Right.

AF: So why don't you begin telling us how it was that you became the Director of the Opera Center, and what year was it?

SG: I became the Director of the Opera Center in May of 2002, when Pamela Rosenberg was the General Director for the Opera Company. And she and Donald Runnicles hired me.

AF: And when did you retire as a singer?

SG: Later than that, actually. That fall, after I assumed the position, I was doing the *Beggar Woman* at Chicago Lyric with Bryn Terfel doing the what's-his-name, *Sweeney Todd*. And did I have anything after that? I think that may have been my last professional job, so that would have been in the fall of 2002. It's probably my last professional job, in terms of straight-on opera. I mean, obviously I've sung next door (San Francisco Symphony)

AF: It's kind of fun!

SG: That was sort of by a surprise, rather than anything else.

AF: Well, you were wonderful, because I saw you. However, we're basically focusing on Western Opera Theater. When you came, there was Western Opera Theater in the Opera Center, there was the Merola Program and there was the Adler Fellows.

SG: Yes.

AF: So, of the artists that were in Western Opera, how many of them were Adlers, roughly?

SG: That all depended on what show went out, because which one went out on the WOT tour was generally the last production in Merola. So, actually there wouldn't have been any Adlers in that. The only thing that might've been would be if we had ... As time went on with the WOT tour, singers demanded to have more and more singers on the tour so that they didn't have to do quite as many performances. So sometimes I would have to hire other than who had actually been in the show. So then an Adler might've gotten involved in that tour, because the tour went on in the Fall.

AF: So, basically none of the WOT singers in your time were Adlers?

SG: They weren't necessarily Adlers. This production came out of Merola. This was always the last Merola production of the Merola season, and then we generally re-rehearsed it for a week before it went back out.

AF: Okay, so then what would be the complement of Adlers when you first started? How many would there have been?

SG: Almost invariably since I've been here, it has been ten singers and a pianist. And, then we have added a stage director again this last couple of years. But that's still not the norm.

AF: Okay, so then the three components to the Opera Center—and they were pretty distinct then.

SG: Well, Merola is a separate 501(c)(3) from the Opera Company, the organization.

AF: Right. It contracts the Opera to do the artistic work for them. Right?

SG: This has been contracted with the Opera for years and years. It has gotten more and more formalized. So I think Merola has been a component of the Opera Center for many years, yes, absolutely. And then WOT was sort of really like a company, almost, unto itself, in a strange way, except that it used the resources of Merola and the Opera Center, obviously. So, for instance, Chris Bragg, who is now my administrator, she was the tour manager for WOT. She was in charge of organizing everything for the WOT tour, so she knows how to organize things.

And so the Opera Center was always involved, in that it was Opera Center personnel who scheduled the tour, like Bill Bowles, I think was his name, who was our scheduler when I started. And the complication always was what can you sell, and so Merola was sort of hogtied about productions, because the people who wanted to hire the WOT tour, who wanted to engage the WOT tour, they only wanted certain operas. You know, they wanted barnburners. And, of course, immediately I saw that that is detrimental to Merola. That is not how it should work. You've got the cart steering the horse then. And I always felt that that was dangerous, because the things that they wanted out on tour were things like *Tales of Hoffmann*, or big productions and big standards, and that's not what I like to produce in Merola.

AF: No.

SG: That's what I always call the big girl, big kids operas, and then there are the things that are really more essential for training. Sometimes they would accept a *Così*, but they weren't thrilled to get Mozart, even, the people that wanted to book the tour.

AF: And that was ICM?

SG: I think it was ICM, yes. So, again, what they wanted to sell isn't necessarily what I wanted to produce. So there was always a little bit of a friction, at least when I came on, because I take training very seriously, having been there, done that, *[laughter]* so I know what young singers need.

AF: So now I want to back up a bit, just about you, and when you were getting to the point where you're going to stop ...

SG: Transition.

AF: Yeah, go into transition, stop singing on the great stage as a major part of your life. Did you have an idea that you wanted to be a part of helping kids, young artists become ...?

SG: Well, I was already teaching at the Boston Conservatory.

When they (Rosenberg and Runnicles) hired me, I was teaching at the Boston Conservatory, and I was directing in the Opera Department there. And had I stayed on, I would've probably ended up running the Opera Department at Boston Conservatory. So I was already involved in teaching. I had been teaching privately for a long time. I started teaching privately while I was still singing, because, it would be things like a chorus member would watch me working and they'd say, "Oh my God, could I have a lesson with you? Because I think you seem to know what you're doing." So I started teaching sort of ... Particularly when I lived in France, I was already teaching a little bit on the side. I didn't have much time to teach, but I would teach. So I've been involved in teaching. Both my parents were teachers, so it's in the blood. So I was already involved in training.

AF: And was John Mor—

SG: Moriarty?

AF: —Moriarty. (John Moriarty, vocal coach at Boston Conservatory)

SG: No, he was already gone. No, I worked with my colleague, Cecilia Schieve. But, of course, I knew John.

AF: Of course, you would have known him. How long had you been at the Opera Center when the budget issue became a reality, and ...

SG: One year, [laughter] almost to the day. I think I came in, and we did take a *bohème* out on tour that year, which I loved, because, of course, the chorus had to run around the stage to come back on. [laughter] It was one of those deals. And that's why I didn't like doing shows like that, because I always say seeing a half-baked *bohème* isn't seeing really *bohème*, so it's like, I don't know what we're doing here. But that was always my feeling about it.

So yeah, so then the following spring, of course, the horrible depression had happened, Silicon Valley collapse and all of that happened, and so all of a sudden things were dire. And I was asked to cut \$500,000 out of my budget. Well, I can't take it out of Merola, because that's a contract signed. That is sacred. That was not going to be touched. So I'm supposed to take that away from the Adler training? I don't think so. I don't think that would be the smartest way. And so I was looking, and at the time my administrator was Curt Hancock, and Curt and I looked, and the thing that was obvious was that the WOT tour would end every year with about a \$500,000 deficit.

For me, it looked like a no-brainer. Now, I took a lot of flak for it. A lot of people were very upset, and I understand that. I did tours, too. I did a tour with the Midwest Council on the Arts. I did tours with Omaha Opera. I've been out on tour. And I also was with Texas Opera Theater. I didn't go on any tours with them, but I sang in every grade school in Galveston, Texas, right? [laughter] So I know the advantage of something like a tour. It's called performing. You get a chance to do it over and over again. So I understand this. It's not like I'm an idiot. However, no one else was touring. By that time City Opera didn't tour; the Met didn't tour; Chicago didn't tour; Texas didn't tour anymore; LA didn't tour. Nobody was touring. So you wanted me to bear the burden... [laughter] That's what I loved was that everybody's blaming me. It's like, are you doing it? No. Well, because we all know why: It became too expensive. It's just pure and simple economics. And that's what it really was about. It's not for volition. I

mean, we'd all love to see us all have all those opportunities again if that was available, but the money isn't there for that kind of thing anymore.

AF: And was it all with orchestra, or was it...?

SG: Yes, it was with...

AF: It was. Everything?

SG: Well, not always. There were certain venues we went where we only did it with piano, in very small places like Eureka in California here. Some of the smaller places in California we only did with two pianos, but everything else that was in the big cities ... When we went East, everything was with orchestra, so we traveled with an orchestra.

AF: And were they Western (WOT) musicians, or were they pick up?

SG: Yes, they were our musicians. Not San Francisco Opera, but they were sort of the WOT orchestra. The contract under which we hire the Merola musicians is still sometimes referred to as the "WOT contract." So it was sort of the Merola orchestra, the orchestra that would play for Merola.

AF: What period of what year did you make this decision, and then what were the issues that you had to deal with closing it down? Did you already have contracts for the next year?

SG: No. Fortunately, it happened over the winter. This all came down during the winter, so the tour hadn't been set. So there wasn't really very much fallout on our end, vis-à-vis canceling it, other than a lot of disappointment and a lot of angry people yelling at me, but...

AF: Yeah. *[laughter]* It's part of the game.

SG: Yeah, I ain't got no choice, you know? You can yell all you want, but unless you can give me \$500,000, I gotta do it? Because it was about, we needed to keep San Francisco Opera solvent. You can't cut off your tail to—or cut off your nose to spite your face.

AF: Nose to spite your... Yes. *[laughter]*

SG: Cut off your tail to spite your ass. No, that's not a good one. *[laughter]* Although I think that could work. So, I mean, that's as simple as it was, really. It was that sort of clear.

AF: Well, how did Pamela (Rosenberg) feel about it? Was she sad that...?

SG: We all were sad that the kids wouldn't have those opportunities. It is about cutting off opportunity, really. That's what it's about. But, again, she understood that that's where it had to come from. That was the only place it could come from, really.

RICHARD SPARKS (RS): We've surprisingly covered most of everything. As the WOT tour evolved from two or three productions, and maybe some small things that they could do, into just one opera going

out with two or three casts, did the singers ... Did you ever have a chance to talk to singers who had been through the earlier years of WOT, and compare it to the last WOT singers?

SG: Not really. Of course, I know Pat Racette quite well, and she had gone out with *Butterfly* with the WOT thing.

RS: Right.

SG: And she always talks lovingly about learning that role on the road like that. And so, I mean, I always knew that everyone found it valuable. That's what I know. I mean, I think all the singers always did find it valuable. And, of course, being out on the road has its amusements. [laughter] You get to go to lots of different secondhand shops and strange things, you know, eat strange food. I think everyone always had fun but I didn't do any polling on it.

But, like Karen Slack was one of the Mimis out on the tour. When we did *bohème*, she did Mimi on that tour, and Liz Caballero did one of the other Mimis, and then we had to hire out. And both of them had become Adlers, so they were Adlers out on the road. So, again, this was at a time also ... Pamela was always very hesitant about putting the Adlers on stage here, because she was much more conservative, and thinking that these are young singers that can't handle the job. So that's why they could go away, but when David Gockley came, of course, by that time WOT was gone anyway. But that was fortunate, because all of a sudden, oh, our kids are going to be on stage here. They don't need to be on a WOT tour. They're going to actually end up on stage here a little bit more than they had. So, you know, always grateful whenever the kids get a role onstage. And we've been very lucky lately, because some of our kids have done more than a small role onstage. [laughter] They've done Malatestas. Toni Marie Palmertree got to sing a *Butterfly*, all this kind of stuff. So we've done pretty well for them anyway. I think they've gotten that experience. The one thing that got cut under David, though, that I still feel should be restored for the Adlers is a production for themselves. There used to be a spring production for the Adlers, and I still feel that that's a component of training that we need to restore when we can, because I still feel that that's an essential thing for them.

RS: Well, it's an essential thing for the audience, too, because it was generally something that we wouldn't see here.

SG: Onstage, exactly. Exactly that. So it was wonderful, because you could tailor it to the singers you had and give them that opportunity. And like you say, it was always repertory that wouldn't necessarily show up on a main stage. So that's always nice. That's for sure. You could do Britten. You can do, you know, smaller Brittens, the chamber Brittens, which I would do every day if I could, [laughs] I love them so much, so ... If I could live in *Albert Herring*, I would. [laughter] I adore it.

AF: I have an off-the-wall question that goes way back to the beginning, but how did Pamela know about you?

SG: Speight Jenkins.

AF: You're kidding! [laughs]

SG: She was very close to Speight, and she called him up and she said, "I want to know who..." And he said, "Sheri Greenawald." And so that was that. So they called me up and I came. And at one point I said ... My interview was in the morning, at about 11:00 am, and you have breakfast, and I'm sitting there, and we'd already been talking about an hour, and I said, "I really need to use the restroom. Do you mind?" So I walked out, went to the bathroom. When I came back, they offered me the job. So that was pretty cool. And I said, "I should go to the bathroom more often. Jeez!"

AF: Well, do you have any other thoughts you'd like to share with us about it?

SG: No, like I say, for me it was ... You know, on the papers it was a clear decision, I mean, what I had to do, and what made sense for the Company. Of course you regret not having more opportunities for kids to sing, always. That's a sadness. But the reality is who else is able to do it? Nobody is doing it except, I guess *Phantom of the Opera* can still go out and make some money on tour. But I think even theater companies, I don't think there are as many touring national tours either anymore, even of music theater things. So, the reality is that the expense has become enormous. Certainly none of the other major opera companies are doing any tours, that I know of. I think we just did what the times would have ... If it didn't happen right then, it probably would have happened two years later, or it certainly would have happened in 2008. The forces of the general economy, of course, had an enormous effect.

AF: But the fact is that you've been able to keep the Opera Center going.

SG: Yes. Well, of course, because the San Francisco Opera has been wonderful about training singers, always, from Kurt Adler on. And I'm lucky because I've known most of the general managers of the San Francisco Opera. I worked for Kurt. I worked for Terry McEwen. I've worked for all but Gaetano Merola himself. That's the only one I didn't know. So, I have a history with this company.