



STREAMING THE FIRST CENTURY

MEMORIES PROJECT: SF Opera: *La Gioconda*, 1979

Featuring: John Priest (former SF Opera technical director) in conversation with Ann Farris (former SF Opera administrative and archives staff, 1969-1971 and 2014-17)
(transcript read time ~ 6 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 via email: 05/2015

John Priest Memories

1966 - 1993	Production Coordinator- Technical Director
1994 - 1998	Opera House Project Coordinator

[BEGIN TRANSCRIPTION]

An Afternoon at the Opera: 1979 *La Gioconda*

The sky above the anchored ship is dark and heavy with stars. Two women, one rich, the other poor, are having a heated discussion on the afterdeck. Presently, the peasant girl, suddenly alarmed, persuades her

high-born companion to leave the ship. Moments later a handsome sailor, captain of the ship, enters, thinking to find the love of his life. On learning that she has abandoned the ship he falls into a rage and accuses the younger woman of treacherously scheming to rid herself of her rival. A shot rings out. The ship's crew pours onto the deck. A shout from the lookout informs them of fast approaching galleys from the mainland. The captain springs to action. Rather than suffering the fate of capture and imprisonment, he vows to scuttle the ship. Ordering his crew to open the hatches, he flings a flaming brand into the void below. An explosion occurs. Flames erupt from the hold. The second act ends, the curtain falls to rapturous applause and intermission begins.

At which point the real drama starts ...

But first, a bit of background. It is Sunday afternoon, September 16, 1979. The above events are taking place on the stage of San Francisco's War Memorial Opera House. The scene described features Renata Scotto and Stefania Toczycka as the dueling divas and Luciano Pavarotti as the captain. The opera in which they are appearing is *La Gioconda* and it is being televised live to "an audience of millions."

My name is John Priest and I was Technical Director for the Opera at the time. I was standing behind the backdrop at the end of the act when the captain blew up the ship. The CRACK! of the explosion was produced by a starter's cannon of the sort commonly used to start a yachting race and it was gratifyingly loud. Even more impressive however, and quite unexpected, was the densely white, perfectly round doughnut of smoke that rose from the cannon's barrel. I hadn't seen this before and stood transfixed as it rapidly travelled, straight up, undiminished and unerringly aimed at a smoke detector over the roll-up fire door between the storage area and the stage. It reached the detector and, *pfuit*, it was gone. A moment later the fire door started down.

A little more background: a massive addition to the Opera House had been completed only the preceding month. Its most prominent feature was the stage-level storage space (fondly known, then and now, as The Patch after Bob Patch who was the foreman for the construction company). *La Gioconda* had been built to take conspicuous advantage of this space and the scenery for its several acts were mounted on wagons that could be easily wheeled from storage to stage and back. It was this space and its contents that was now being cut off by the descending fire door.

Several members of the stage crew made frantic efforts to stop the door, without success. The smoke detector had done what it was supposed to do: the door was down to stay. Dismay began to spread as realization of what had just happened set in. How to dispose of Act II and roll in Act III? Could the fire door be manually opened? (Not very likely considering it was 30' high, 32' wide and weighed several tons). Could its circuitry be tricked into reversing what the smoke alarm had told it to do? Not without schematics and a knowledge of where the controls were. Could the War Memorial engineering staff help? Perhaps, but not in time.

The stage was now awash in a sea of anxiety and frustration, its three principal directors in varying states of consternation. Lotfi Mansouri, the production director, after three weeks of coping with his prickly stars, had thought the worst was over – until the door came down. Kirk Browning, the film director, stood at center stage, mentally reviewing his rapidly diminishing options. And in a quiet corner Ingrid Bergman's daughter Pia Linstrom was conducting a live intermission interview with Kurt Adler, the General Director, who was blissfully unaware of the impending disaster. As for myself, I was as helpless as the rest.

In the meantime, the stage crew was doing its best to prevail. The air had been cleared of Act II hangers and Act III was poised to fly in. Props had bundled off Act II movables and stood ready with Act III's décor. And, in *The Patch*, the carpenters arranged Act III's scenery in ascending order of height so it could roll in as soon as it could clear the bottom of the door. The stage fell silent as these activities tailed off. A paralyzing uncertainty began to take hold.

Finally, Mike Kane, the company's Master Carpenter, abruptly called for a Tallescope, a telescoping ladder on wheels, to be set up in front of the fire door. Galvanized, his crew ran out the machine, set its outriggers and extended the ladder to its limit. Mike, carrying only a hammer, scrambled up it and proceeded to beat the bejesus out of the smoke detector. After a heart-stopping delay, the door started up. It was thrilling! Stifling a cheer from all present, Mike triumphantly waved his hammer, grinned and slid down the ladder. The Tallescope was whisked away and, as the fire door rose, Act III's scenery and properties, in successive waves, entered from all sides. With time running out, 'places please' was called, work lights were extinguished and Norman Mittelman, playing *Gioconda's* vengeful suitor, took his place onstage.

As the curtain rose, Pavarotti, awaiting his entrance in the wings, stood next to the stage manager. "What happened during the intermission?" he asked. "It was quite noisy." "Oh, nothing. Just the stagehands."

John Priest
May 2015

From: Jay Kotcher
To: Ann Farris
Subject: *Gioconda* near disaster

Almost exactly as I remembered it. The smoke detectors were installed after the final dress rehearsal, so no one foresaw the potential problem that the smoke could cause. We were watching on tv at home- this was the first live international broadcast from SFO. If the set could not be changed, and the show could not go on, and the company had run out of satellite time to finish the broadcast, it would have been an enormous embarrassment for Adler and the company!

---Jay

Jay Kotcher was SFO Scenic Artist