



STREAMING THE FIRST CENTURY

SESSION 1: Slavic Sensibilities

SPANNING THE DECADES: Director Edition, pt. 1

Featuring: Francesca Zambello (stage director, former SF Opera staff) and Kip Cranna (SF Opera dramaturg emeritus)

(transcript read time ~ 13 minutes; audio run time ~ 15 minutes)

[BEGIN AUDIO]

NARRATOR: Welcome to San Francisco Opera's Centennial celebration.

KIP CRANNA [KC]: This is Kip Cranna, Dramaturg Emeritus at San Francisco Opera, talking with Stage Director Francesca Zambello, who has had a long history with our Company, and, we're thinking about the Centennial, the 100-year anniversary of the founding of San Francisco Opera right now. We want to look back and, visit some of the highlights that Francesca has experienced at San Francisco Opera. Thanks for talking with me, Francesca. How are you?

FRANCESCA ZAMBELLO [FZ]: I'm great. Kip, it's so lovely to see you and talk about a Company I love so much.

KC: It goes way back. I think you made your debut in San Francisco in 1983. How did that come about?

FZ: That was my first season with the Company. I had been hired a year before by the then head of Artistic Administration, Sarah Billingham. I had been working at another opera company, and, of course, I was thrilled to be asked to interview at the august institution of San Francisco Opera. I remember I flew out there on a very late-night flight from Chicago where I was working. And had an interview the next morning, got back on the plane, and got back, I think, in time, to be there for the end of the performance in Chicago. It was like a whirlwind 24-hour trip. I was offered a job of assisting on several operas and given the opportunity to direct the student matinee performances of *La traviata*. My first season -- I remember it very distinctly -- was *Ariadne*, *Ernani*, *Samson*, and the *traviata*. I'll never forget it. I'll never forget the opening night of that season. You know, it was *Otello*, when, Plácido Domingo . . .

KC: Plácido rescued the season.

FZ: Right, and actually Luciano was supposed to sing *Ernani*, finally another tenor came. And it was crazy, and so that was my first season. But the thrilling thing was as a young director was I got to work with a lot of great directors, but I also got to direct the student performances of *La Traviata*. That was at a time where we did not use supertitles, and I went to the then General Director, Terry McEwen, and I believe Kip Cranna was in the office, as well, and I said, "Why can't we have

supertitles for all these kids who are here, not knowing what the heck is going on in an opera?" And so it was the first time that we did it. We wrote them with the then Production Stage Manager, the late Jerry Sherk. They were an incredible success. And then Terry McEwen said, "Can we use these more?" And I said, "Well, we're doing' the Ring cycle. Why aren't we doing the Ring?" At that time everybody said, "Oh, no, that's a terrible idea. We can't have those for the Ring." So I remember he put on sale one cycle with titles, and that sold out before any of the others. So then they became a permanent part of the opera, and I continued writing them with Jerry. And then, of course, as it grew and grew and grew it became its own department and all of those things. But that was really my first season, which was truly, exciting and memorable, and not just for the work I got to do but the singers that one got to experience there.

KC: There were quite a lot of big stars in those days. You mentioned Luciano Pavarotti and Plácido Domingo.

FZ: The cast of *Ernani*, I remember, was Monserrat Caballé, Sherrill Milnes, Paul Plishka, and Dolora Zajick was the Maid. (laughter) I'll never forget that first year, the young artists included the likes of Dolora and Ruth Ann Swenson and, Debbie Voigt shortly thereafter. It was really an amazing class of the then -- newly-founded Adler Fellows.

KC: Yes, we might mention that it was one of Terry McEwen's innovations when he took over the Company. He created the Adler Fellowships, which was reinterpretation of what had been called the -- I think it was the Exxon Affiliate Artists. It needed more of a direct connection with the Merola Opera Program, and lots of important singers came out of that.

Supertitles. I want to talk a little bit more about that, because I don't think people realize the idea of what it involved in those days. Nowadays, of course, it's all electronic, and you change things in an instant, if you need to. In those days it was old-fashioned slides that you had to photograph with a camera, take it away and get it developed, make a slide, and put it in a carousel. It was not an easy process.

FZ: It was a very time-consuming process, which is why we had to have them pretty much done by the piano dress and then we would make changes so that by the opening we would have the carousel of slides, like when you would go on your vacation to wherever, and you would have the things. I do remember a terrible experience I had was, I was a notorious collector of parking tickets near the Opera House, arriving often a few minutes before I needed to be there. And I had the supertitle slides in my car for -- we were doing *The Elixir of Love* that season. I had all the slides in my car, and I rushed in to do something, and my car was towed, and it was the opening night. I'll never forget running to the car retrieval place somewhere over in East San Francisco, getting my car, getting the slides, and getting them there by the downbeat,

Which, of course, as you say, [now]everything is computer-generated. We make changes. We can do everything very quickly. That was really the sort of rudimentary days. But it was so important for changing sales, and, motivating the Ring cycle -- which, of course, would sell well anyway, but the fact that it sold out one cycle immediately because of supertitles, and then they ended up adding them to the other ones. And I remember the then box office head Margaret Norton, who initially said, "I don't know about this," and then was, of course, a convert, as was everybody at that time.

They were a revolution to opera, the same way that, for example, now just using projections the way we use them so often as a scenic element. They really transformed more than anything, I think, the general public's understanding of the opera.

KC: Right, I think it made a difference in what was, to some people, kind of a ceremonial, experience. They didn't really know what was being talked about or said, and they just kind of followed it along, listening to a mass in Latin . . . (laughs)

FZ: Right.

KC: And suddenly now you were deeply engaged in what was actually happening. And I know that critics were the hardest to convince at first; they tend to be more purist about this sort of thing -- but even they came along eventually. Once we got really more developed in terms of refinement and, really tailoring the slides to what was going on on the stage and so forth. Growing -- a learning process, as I recall, figuring out how to really make it work, but it's certainly a close part of the whole process now.

FZ: Absolutely. As a director, you always either help write the supertitles now, or you certainly read them, because they are often the way that the audience is initially receiving what you're doing. There's sometimes that I just think, oh God, I wish they would go away, and I wish they were looking at the stage more. Which is one of the joys, I think, when you perform in English is, there's an immediacy that comes the same way supertitles do. But, listen, they're part of what we do and I think an important part of having created more audiences and audience appreciation for what we do.

KC: There are lots of productions that you were involved with that I'd like to talk about. But, I'd like to go back a little bit to the early stages of your becoming a stage director. I know that two important directors that you worked with were Nikolaus Lehnhoff on the Ring here, and also you had an association with, the late French director, Jean-Pierre Ponnelle. Can you talk a little bit, first of all, about working with Jean-Pierre, who had a big influence at San Francisco Opera, with many iconic productions with us?

FZ: Jean-Pierre, was one of those incredibly rare artists. He was a director and a designer, but he was a consummate theater animal. And I think that some of the lessons that I learned really came so much from him. They are still things that I think about. I was very fortunate that I did not work as an assistant for him in San Francisco, as it turned out. Sarah Billingham introduced him to me, and I remember I went for an interview. He was going to direct Rossini's *Otello* at La Fenice, and he needed an assistant because his regular assistants in Europe were not available, and Sarah said, "I have just the person." Sarah was the great connector, and still is the great connector in many ways.

And so I went and met with him. He was staying in New York, and I met with him. Jean-Pierre loved American artists, but he loved it if you could speak other languages. And so, I speak a number of other languages. He was incredibly impressed by that, and by the credentials that I came with. After a conversation for half an hour, he hired me to be his associate at La Fenice. And then it turned out he was going to some sort of health cure; he ended up having to stay there for a long time. I basically went to the health cure place before going to La Fenice and sort of studied the production with him, and then I got to direct it at La Fenice, really up until the piano dress

rehearsal. And that was a trial by fire. I was a very young director. He came to the piano dress at La Fenice in Venice. He was super happy and of course he made corrections and made it better. But that became, for me, the beginning of a long association with him, where I worked exclusively in Europe with him. I never worked in America with him, working at houses in Germany and Italy and Austria and France.

He became truly a lifelong friend, and then his life was sadly cut short in his fifties by what is every director's nightmare. He was standing on the stage in Israel and he walked backwards and fell into the pit. This is a nightmare that every director has, because when you're directing, you're standing on the stage and you're facing everybody, but your back is to the pit, to the orchestra pit. He fell into the pit. He went into the hospital. He got sicker and sicker, and he died.

The times that I spent with him were invaluable. I learned so much about -- really, about craft, but also about the psychology of characters, and how to really dive into individuals to help them connect with a character. And then, of course, his taste was sublime, and impeccable, and just being around that eye was invaluable. Actually, and then, to be truthful, from that it was one of those things that, it's like you're right place right time.

Because I had done that, La Fenice offered me my own production of an opera, and then I ended up working at other companies in Italy, doing revivals of his, where I then ended up being offered to direct other productions of my own. So he was so instrumental in not only being a mentor but also in really getting me tons of jobs in Italy and France.

Whereas Lehnhoff, I was not actually his assistant on that Ring cycle. I wrote the supertitles for the whole cycle, with Jerry Sherk, so I was in many, many meetings with Lehnhoff, because he was highly skeptical. He really didn't like the idea of them, and then he was won over. But it was great because I was in a very different perspective than assisting. I was able to watch another director put together the Ring cycle, which is a director's dream, and I was fortunate, of course, to do it 25 years later in Washington and in San Francisco.

So, Lehnhoff was important in watching how he worked. He was very meticulous. He was very specific, and, in a way, opposite -- not opposite, but different from Jean-Pierre, who was often, like, the broad stroke, who brought a huge emotional -- how to pummel the emotions of something and connect it. Whereas I think Lehnhoff's greatest skills were often really this incredibly precise fashion of staging. He was a highly prepared director in terms of his homework and what he did before. And I learned a lot watching him, as well.

I mean, that is the thing, when you are starting out, if you're able to assist people, whether you think they're good or bad, you're going to learn something because just being in a theater is how you learn. So Jean-Pierre was, for me, just, iconic in so many ways, and so sad of his early death, and amazing that so many of his productions, they're still in opera houses around the world being performed.

KC: Right. I think we still have a couple here at San Francisco Opera in the warehouse. There are many that were done over and over, over the years, and really became sort of audience favorites, in a way, although sometimes controversial at the start. He took sometimes an unusual stance on opera productions, and was maybe one of the first directors here in San Francisco working with General

Director Kurt Herbert Adler, who did that, who took the whole idea of stage direction in a new direction, (laughs) so to speak, and made the *regie*, as the Europeans call it, a much more vital part of the whole operatic experience.

FZ: I think that was very much one of the things that Mr. Adler. . . I did not work under him. I did work with him and got to know him fairly well, because we were going to go to China to work together, and as it turned out we didn't. But I stayed friends with him until his death. He was, of course, much more in the Germanic/Austrian way of thinking about opera, that theater was as important as the voice. And, of course, his legacy is so much about the singers that he brought to America, who were completely unknown -- Birgit Nilsson, Astrid Varnay, all these amazing people, as well as so many of the works of Strauss and Janáček. So, I feel fortunate that I sort of worked for him, and then got to work with every general director since then: Terry, [Lotfi], Pamela, David, and Matthew.

KC: Yeah. It's an association that is, longstanding.

Thank you. Francesca Zambello, thank you so much for spending time with us as we look backward at the last hundred years at San Francisco Opera, and forward to the next. I really appreciate your time.

FZ: Thank you very much, Kip. Always a joy to be with you and friends at San Francisco Opera.

NARRATOR: You've been listening to *Streaming the First Century*, San Francisco Opera's centennial celebration told through historic recordings. This recording is a copyrighted production of San Francisco Opera, all rights reserved.

[END AUDIO]