



STREAMING THE FIRST CENTURY

SESSION 1: Slavic Sensibilities

MEMORIES PROJECT: Props Edition, pt. 1

Featuring: Lori Harrison (SF Opera props master) and Ann Farris (former administrative staff, SF Opera)

(transcript read time ~ 13 minutes; audio run time ~ 16 minutes)

* [NB: this interview was captured in June of 2021 as part of the SF Opera Archives Memories Project. For a description of the project, jump to the end of the transcript.]

[BEGIN AUDIO]

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

LORI HARRISON (LH): I went to school in the Lower Merion School District, outside of Philadelphia. We had art classes; I think we had music classes. Both my junior high school and high school had pretty serious theater activity. In high school, I was the vice president of Lower Merion Players. So I got started in theater pretty early, more or less because I had heard they had great cast parties, and there was no way I was going to go out for a play. And so I worked backstage on shows so I could, you know, see what these cast parties were like. (laughter)

ANN FARRIS (AF): And did anybody take you to an opera during that time?

LH: No. I distinctly remember my father taking my brother to *Tosca*, but I never went to an opera. On the other hand, my father was a great opera fan, and he really wanted me to listen all the time on the Saturday matinees. I kind of followed along. I didn't like the singing. I finally decided that I liked Wagner, because in my mind it was a war between the singers and the orchestra, and the orchestra won. I loved orchestral music, and we went to the Philadelphia Orchestra all the time.

In fact, I did take piano lessons, and I was very serious about the piano. And actually, considered music as a major when I went to school. For music, you had to sort of jump in right then and there, and I was not prepared to do that. It was during my high school theater activity that I started kind of going blue collar to some extent, and then in college. I ended up going to the University of Pennsylvania, because I was able to get some scholarship money there. And they had no theater major, but a lot of extracurricular theater. There was Penn Players, and the Quadramics or something like that. There were all these theater groups. And so I started doing things with all of those theater groups, and it was affiliated with the Annenberg Center. So I was literally at the Annenberg Center all the time.

I completely neglected my studies. I changed majors every 15 minutes, and I finally invented my own major my sophomore year, in technical theater, through the Engineering School. I mean, I had majored in folklore, and anthropology, and Shakespeare. (laughter) I mean, I really was trying all kinds of

different things. And so for some reason, I decided, okay, all of this is baloney, and I opened up a catalog, and to whatever page I was going to open up, that's what I was going to change my major to. So I opened it up, and it was at Civil and Urban Engineering, so I changed my major to Civil and Urban Engineering, which was completely inappropriate.

So I started this major, using the Annenberg Center, which was a professional theater, on campus. I worked in the metal shop while I took metallurgy in the Engineering School, and I worked with the electrician at the Annenberg Center when I took electrical engineering. The big problem with this, of course, is that in Engineering you have to do your homework. In folklore and Shakespeare and all of those things, I could get away with not doing anything, and then sort of writing a paper at the end, sort of somehow get by, and that's not true in engineering.

But the real kicker about Penn was that right around the time that all of this was happening, there was an enormous uprising. This was 1978. And we had a huge sit-in. The entire University shut down. There were like a dozen different issues one was that they were going to take away the hockey team, and people were very annoyed with that. I particularly was sitting in because one of the things they were taking away funding for was the Annenberg Center. They felt that this was a professional theater, and the University had nothing whatsoever to do with that. And for me, and me alone, that wasn't true, because I had designed this major around the Annenberg Center. I had created it based on the fact that there was a professional theater on campus, and therefore I suddenly became a really important person. If the Annenberg Center's funding was removed then my whole idea was down the tubes, my whole major. In the course of that sit-in, which took maybe three days, everybody had interviews, and there were meetings, and they called the president back from his vacation in Hawaii, and we're all camped out in the hallways of College Hall and playing guitars (laughs) and the things that you do at college sit-ins in the '70s. (laughter)

And I had said in my interview that if they took away this program I would have to drop out, because I had created this major based on the Annenberg Center, and if they took away the funding I would have to drop out of school.

And so I started thinking, what would I do if I dropped out of school? It had never occurred to me that you didn't have to go to college. It was a revelation. And somehow, we won all of our requests, all these meetings. All of the funding came back. The hockey team came back. The Annenberg Center funding came back. Everything came back. And I was so infatuated with the idea that I didn't have to be in school that I dropped out anyway. And I kind of saw myself through the rest of that semester and went and got a job at the McCarter Theatre in Princeton.

And at the time I had also applied to Santa Fe Opera, to be an apprentice, and Ted Ohl was the Technical Director at the time, and he was fascinated by this major that I had created, because he was a theatrical engineer. He was starting this theater engineering program at Yale. And so the theater and engineering in the same cluster; it really piqued his interest. So I got in almost immediately that summer in Santa Fe. The fact that I had dropped out of school, and that this major hadn't worked out, wasn't really relevant. (laughs) I still had that summer job.

So that's where I started with opera was sitting on the back deck of the Santa Fe Opera, gluing webbing onto a ground cloth. You know, it was a theater, and it was exciting, and I was 18 years old, and of course the scenery was beautiful, and I knew nothing about the scheduling and anything else that was going on. At any rate, the first orchestra rehearsal happened right that day, and the first notes of *Tosca*

came out of the theater, and I'm sitting on the back deck, and the Sangre de Cristo Mountains are around, and I started to cry. (laughter) It was astounding, and I completely fell into it at that moment.

The first two summers I was a grunt, a carpentry apprentice. The third year, I moved over to be the props running crew chief, which was based on the fact that at the end of my second year, I was the running crew chief for the apprentice scenes, and so I had done all the pulling and organizing and stuff for the apprentice scenes, and so I came back as the prop running crew chief, which is my introduction to props, but it was all the organizational side; it had nothing to do with the building or designing. That was a very fancy department that Alice Maguire ran, and I just sort of ran them around in the truck to rehearsals and organized them onstage. And then my fourth year I was also the prop running crew chief, and it was a very pivotal year.

It was a *Rake's Progress* that had a lot of props in it, and so I was kind of key to the prop running. And Drew Field had gotten everybody together and was trying to run this thing, to tell everybody what they were doing, and where they were, and what they had to do. And he starts it out, and assigns some people to something, and suddenly there's a big windstorm. Everybody had to stop everything and hold the scenery down. And then the wind stopped, and everybody got back together again, and Drew says, "I can't deal with this," and he disappeared. He just went away. And that left me, because he was the one doing scenery, and I was the one doing props. And so I started out with, "Okay, so-and-so, so-and-so, and so-and-so, you're on the such-and-such." And they said, "No, we're not. We're on the garden." And I said, "Well, I had so-and-so, so-and-so, so-and-so, you're in the garden." "No, we're not. We're on the..." I said, "You are now." (laughter) And went through, and we had the rehearsal, and suddenly I had literally taken over the entire backstage. Everybody started to come to me to find out what to do next, no matter what department they were in. That had never happened before. We had awards at the end of that, and I won the "Who Runs This Place Anyway?" Award, (laughter) out of nowhere.

So that was kind of a pivotal moment. That was the first time I ever really accidentally took charge of a lot of people. And then my last year there, I had got hired as the scenery running crew chief.

AF: So then why did you not go back to Santa Fe?

LH: I got a job in Miami. That's when I worked in the Miami Opera. And that job was as prop master, which was terrifying, because the level at which Alice Maguire ran the prop shop in Santa Fe, I mean, it was incomparable, and I didn't know any of that, of the prop-building techniques. I could build scenery, but I'd never really done any prop building. But I got this job in Miami, and I walked around Alice's prop shop, and I wrote down everything. I wrote the contents of the cabinets, and talked to people about how you do things, and ended up in Miami.

I had a workspace in a garage, in a dark, dingy garage, in the back of the opera building. I sort of taught myself to build props, and to upholster, and to do all those things. And that was closer to what my skillset is than anything I'd ever done. I really loved that. Now, Miami had a union situation that was -- I mean, obviously Santa Fe had no union at all. McCarter, I actually was working with union people for my \$4 an hour. (laughs) But Miami had a union running crew in the theater, and a non-union prop person making all the props.

So I worked in this dingy place until we got into the theater, and then they sort of created this space, and I'd try to teach the guys there what I was doing. There was a union issue going on there. There was a woman suing Local 545 to get into the union. And for some reason they had all kind of come up with

this sort of “If we have to let a woman into the union, why not this one, who actually knows what she’s doing and has some skills?” And so they kind of brought this to the Opera’s attention, that they wanted that to be a union job, and that I would be in it, and therefore I would join Local 545, because it was their ticket to getting out of their mess of not having any women in the local and being sued by this woman.

But I already was sort of working my way out of being at the Miami Opera. So from there, I went to Chautauqua. I worked at Chautauqua Opera for a couple of seasons, I had already started working Chautauqua in the summers. But, you know, in my last year at Miami, that’s when Caroline Moores was the stage manager, who was the stage manager at Chicago up until very recently. But she also worked at San Francisco. And she had this boyfriend who was on the crew in San Francisco, and he came to visit her in Miami, and he started talking about all the problems that they were having in San Francisco with women suing to join the union. And so he was blustery, big guy, and he made it sound like all I had to do was come to San Francisco and he’d get me in. It wouldn’t be a problem.

It was time to go somewhere and stay there. I turned down all of the things that were sort of on my plate, and I got on a plane with a suitcase and a toolbox, and landed in the Oakland Airport, in the spring of 1985, with nothing.

So I did go into the union office, and the guy who was at the window at that time, at 230 Jones Street, most fortunately was the nicest man in the world. His name is Ted Manke. And he was pretty honest, and very kind. He said, “You know, you’re going to have to keep checking in. I cannot make any promises. You can fill stuff out, and the only thing I can recommend is that you just show your face as often as you can, and maybe something will happen. Maybe not. I don’t know, but I wish you the best of luck.” And so that was my real introduction to the union. Meanwhile, the guys in Miami had written to Local 16, saying, “This woman is great. She’s got all these skills.”

So my first job in San Francisco was with a rock and roll shop called Nomad, and I was building some kind of a big rock and roll show that had a giant dragon. She did introduce me to Jerry Sherk, who said, “Lori Harrison, I’ve heard of you. Dean Gordon told me to keep an open for you someday as a production assistant. We have an opening coming up. Do you want to apply?” So I did, I got on as a production assistant, assisting, of all people, Caroline Moores. (laughter) So she was first and I was second on *Billy Budd*. And I didn’t know much about being a stage manager. I could read music, because I played the piano, but I really didn’t know much about reading scores, and so I would study the score.

And so riding the bus to and from my rock and roll scene shop job, I would have my headphones on and a little cassette player and the score, and I’m studying, and I’m counting. And I sat there (laughs) on the bus towards the end, (sings passage on “ah”) and I’m counting, I’m counting, and I’m like, they’re going to hang Billy Budd! They’re going to...! And I started crying, and these other people are sitting on the bus, looking at me like, what is the matter? I’m like, nothing. They’re going to hang Billy Budd. (laughter) Because, you know, opera does that to you.

That’s why it’s 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]

*** SF Opera Archives: Memories Project, 2012-present**

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

In 2012, Ann Farris, former SFO administrative staff, began typing notes as former staff and others shared their experiences with SFO and/or its affiliates. In 2013, Richard Sparks, former SFO season ticket manager, joined the SFO Archives volunteer team and has accompanied Farris as they interview former staff, artists and others. Later, they began audio recording interviews. In 2017 on advice from SFO director of archives, interview questions are included in subsequent Memories, as part of the interview reports. Most recently, Mary Seastrand joined the Archives volunteer corps 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.