



## STREAMING THE FIRST CENTURY

### MEMORIES PROJECT: SF Opera Ballet Dancer and Choreographer

**Featuring: Carlos Carvajal** in conversation with Ann Farris (former SF Opera administrative and archives staff, 1969-71 and 2014-17) and Stan Dufford (former SF Opera wig and makeup master, 1956-1968; journeyman 1971-2010)  
(transcript read time ~ 19 minutes)

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### 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.

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Initial conversation conducted on: 08/13/2013; supplemented by Mr. Carvajal in 2020

Carlos Carvajal -- San Francisco Opera Affiliation:

Opera Ballet Dancer 1950-1955

Choreographer 1964-67; 1970-71, 1984-85, 1990

[BEGIN TRANSCRIPT]

In the Fall of 1950 at the age of nineteen I joined the San Francisco Opera Ballet under the direction of Willem Christensen. Maestro Merola was still alive and the Opera had a distinctly Italian flavor. Our stage manager was Etienne Barone. He always called us on stage in Italian. Licia Albanese, Jussi Bjorling, Desire Ligeti, Nicola Rossi-Lemeni, Lily Pons, Jan Pierce, Blanche Thebom, Claramae Turner were some of the artists.

For the 1950 Fol de Rol [Edit: a San Francisco Opera fund raiser event held in the Civic Auditorium] and subsequent ones, we performed dances that were set specifically for the event. At that time the Fol de Rol was a really big deal! The chorus, soloists, principal stars and the ballet all participated. It was held at the Civic Auditorium and not treated as a gala concert by the singing stars. There were spoofs of the famous operas. I was once half of "Grane, mein Ross", a 2-man vaudeville horse, with Claramae Turner singing Brunhilde [Edit: from Wagner's Die Walkure] just as she rides into the magic fire. One of our chorus sopranos did a spoof of Tosca jumping off of the tower and bouncing on a trampoline over and over again. Willem Christensen choreographed the *Faust* Ballet [4th Act] for the Fol de Rol. It was called "Hell in Hell!"

Lily Pons was our diva in the 1950 season. She had been famous in the movies. She looked like a debutante even though she was getting close to the end of her career. She was a very sparkling, French and glamorous person. She had a pink Cadillac convertible with the license plate PONS. During *La Fille du Regiment* in 1952, she made her entrance on a horse drawn cart and sat on Roland Vasquez's and my shoulder while singing her first aria. I noticed how she became much heavier when she'd sing a high note. It must have been because of her training to be grounded while singing. Very interesting. Another incident occurred during one performance when we experienced a small earthquake which made the horse bolt and poop on the stage! I don't remember how it was remedied, but it was quite startling to say the least. She sang on, unfazed.

Another time, she was singing her final note in the "Libiamo" scene of *Traviata*, and a too hastily dropped curtain cut her off before she had finished. She was very angry and threw a tantrum on stage. It was all wonderfully theatrical with broken glasses and a lot of screaming. She was married to Andre Kostelanetz, the famous conductor.

At that year's Fol de Rol, [Edit: 1950] I spotted where she was sitting in the audience which surrounded our thrust stage and asked her to dance during our big finale waltz scene.

She was thrilled and stopped us for a photo with Paul Tracy who was photographing the opera that season. His wife, Virginia Tracy, worked in costume [Edit: The Costume Shop at Goldsteins] and as a dresser with the Opera. [Edit: One of their daughters, Paula, was a ballet dancer who later married Michael Smuin, dancer and choreographer.]

Everett and Jean Mason who worked for Rose Goldstein were in charge of the makeup department which was located just near the orchestra pit next to the men's chorus and ballet dressing rooms. I enjoyed spending most of my spare time watching them put makeup on everybody. I also practiced my own make up skills and after a few years, became astute enough to be sent on makeup jobs for Goldsteins with which I augmented my income.

Here are some examples of what one spent during the early 50's. I was paid \$10 to make up an entire show. It was good money at that time when one could buy a pack of cigarettes for 20 cents. My share of rent where I

lived on Castro Street in an attic was \$15. Our supering roles netted us \$5 per scene, and when I danced the title role in *Le Coq d'Or*, I received a supplement of \$50 each performance. I don't remember what our salary was.

As I mentioned before, under Maestro Merola the Opera was an "Italian" house in which the ballet was given extra things to do and excelled. In *Carmen*, it performed a divertissement - using selections from Bizet's *L'Arlesienne* at the opening of the third act of *Carmen* in front of the bullring. We were bullfighters and gypsies in *La Traviata*.

It must have been in the 1951 [Edit: it was 1953] season that the ballet danced *The Creatures of Prometheus*, music by Beethoven. Choreography by Willem Christensen. We were given one half of the performance. The opera half might have been *Cavalleria Rusticana* or *Il Tabarro*. [Edit: It was *Elektra*]. It must also be noted that during these years, the ballet was integral to itself and was hired as a group. It was the choreographer/director who was responsible for the whole ballet company. There was a strong similarity during Maestro Merola's direction to the way the opera houses operated in France and Italy where the ballet was an entity to itself that included its own principal dancers. The opera component would usually feature imported principal singers added to its resident chorus and demi soloists.

We would travel to Los Angeles where we would spend a couple of weeks performing at the Shrine Auditorium in LA. We loved going to Los Angeles where we all stayed at the Figueroa Hotel. It was certainly exciting to be going on tour and taking the train to Los Angeles. For some unknown reason, the dancers were always told to stay away from the singers and orchestra personnel. That never worked since many of us became friends anyway and several of the girls married members of the chorus and orchestra.

My first *Aida* was in 1950 and not only did we dance during the triumphal scene, but also supered in the parade carrying spears and effigies, crossing and re-crossing time and again with different props so as to appear to be very numerous. It was lots of fun.

Inge Borkh [Edit: dramatic soprano] was featured in one season [Edit: three seasons, 1953, 1954, 1955]. I can remember seeing her rehearsing *Elektra* [Edit: 1953] and the power and audacity of her performance was awesome. She seemed to be possessed and almost insane. She was great in those parts. Intense in *Turandot*, [Edit: 1953, 1954] and danced her own *Salome's* dance of the seven veils [Edit: 1954].

For *Salome* [Edit: 1954] we wore body makeup and little else. Same in *Aida* [Edit: 1950, 1952]. Conrad Ludlow and I were in *Aida* and painted blue with loin cloth and our wigs were turquoise. Conrad ran out to the street to put a nickel in the parking meter and was spotted and reported on by the press. Nancy Johnson and Sally Bailey were painted lavender. The setting was after Aubrey Beardsley and fantastic.

In 1954 Paul and Ghita Hager were directing *The Flying Dutchman*. It was one of their first seasons. The dancers were asked to come to the theater to rehearse as supernumeraries for which we received an extra \$5.00 as we did for other operas. We all turned up in the afternoon in our best clothes and were led to the stage where we were each given a large T stick. Much to our surprise and wonderment, the stage crew had lifted the ground cloth and we obediently went under, T sticks in hand and were ordered to simulate waves by pushing upward against the ground cloth with them. We were instructed to follow Paul Hager's shouts of 'forte', make bigger waves to "piano" for smaller ones to "pianissimo" for tiny ones and finally to "fortissimo" for huge waves which we vigorously created with our sticks, all in response to the dynamics of the music. Needless to say, we all started sneezing because of the large quantities of dust we were stirring up and all of us ended up laughing

hysterically. Not surprising, we weren't allowed to do this particular task afterward. I think that our ballet director objected along with the rest of us.

Paul Hager was a strange one with a porcine appearance, but full of ideas which Ghita, who had been a dancer, would assist and stage. One of the most exciting productions was "*Jeanne d' Arc au Bucher*" [Edit: 1954] by Arthur Honegger. Famous movie and Broadway actress, Dorothy McGuire, was Joan and a young Lee Marvin played opposite her as a monk who would question her and plead with her as the plot developed to her final demise. The chorus was on the stage all of the time and acted and commented as would a classic Greek chorus. We of the ballet danced a card game which was being played for Joan's life. We each had lines to comment on the plays of the cards whose characters corresponded to those who were seeking to condemn Joan. The choreography was by Lew Christensen.

I stayed with the company as a dancer until 1955 when I went to Europe to achieve my career in ballet which included being principal dancer and co-choreographer at the Opera of Bordeaux before coming back to San Francisco.

I returned in late 1964 as ballet master and associate choreographer for the San Francisco Ballet where I worked with Lew Christensen. Unfortunately, Dr. [Kurt Herbert] Adler [Edit: 2<sup>nd</sup> general director] was not a great supporter of the ballet and sometime thereafter, Lew decided not to work with the Opera any longer. That came as a big disappointment for me since I had become a quite successful opera choreographer in France and was hoping to continue with the SF Opera. Nonetheless, I was subsequently able to work as contracted choreographer for the Opera Company.

In 1970 I was choreographing Lotfi Mansouri's *Carmen*. I had decided to approach the "Lillas Pastia" scene by not imitating a movie I had seen where a single dancer danced on the table nor the Nijinska ballet with the same opening image, nor that of Maurice Bejart which also used the same image. It was a super set designed by Howard Bay. Everything was huge and out of proportion. My inspiration was to put all the dancers on the top of the table, and to create a larger more massive figure. Carolyn Hauser [later Carvajal] was featured sitting on the top of Tony Ness' shoulder and surrounded in a conical formation by all of the dancers who were wrapped around each other. It looked like a gigantic dancer whose skirt undulated and finally dissolved over the edge of the table leaving Carolyn alone and revealing the picture that Lotfi wanted.

When Lotfi first saw it he said, "no, no". I admonished him to wait. And he did. He was able to agree with what I had done, and when the dance ended, he asked just that I pay attention to when the focus was being taken away from the singer so that the action would relate to her. We altered the choreography, but the action was all on the table. When the curtain opened, the audience applauded. It was an impressive stage picture.

I knew that it is important for a choreographer working in opera to both understand the director's intention and at the same time to harmoniously integrate his own artistic vision to enhance the director's idea.

This was particularly evident when I worked with Ghita Hager in restaging her *Carmina Burana* in 1971. I also choreographed the Paul Hager's *Eugene Onegin* that year.

When I was asked to choreograph *Carmina* by Ghita, I was very honored and excited to have the opportunity. I had already worked up some of my own ideas previously when working in Caracas, Venezuela. However, the problem was that my personal vision of the ballet was not what Ghita had in mind and during our first discussions of the piece, I realized that the staging, scenery and costuming was the same as the previous

production in which I danced, except that I was to choreograph all of the dance movements within Ghita's already established staging. It was then that I assumed the role of the consort and it became my goal to make Ghita's dream as wonderful as I could. It was a beautiful and successful endeavor. We had a very harmonious time working together and were happy with the results.

We worked together again in *Eugene Onegin* [Edit: 1971] in which the Hagers gave me the task of choreographing all of the dance numbers in the opera. It was a wonderful challenge. We had a very good ballet contingent from SF Ballet and I was able to work very quickly to stage the dance sequences. [Edit: NB the ballet company became a completely separate entity from SF Opera in 1942 and is renamed San Francisco Ballet.]

For the famous "Polonaise," they wanted the chorus as well as the ballet to dance. The stage set had staircases up and down the sides and a balcony across the back upon which the chorus was placed with the ballet across the stage itself. When the curtain opened, one saw a super polonaise! Everyone was dancing, up and down the stairs, across the balcony and on the stage. It was spectacular.

When we had fully completed the great and complicated waltz choreography and put it on the stage for the first time, Paul informed me that the principal singers would be coming through with their own dramatic staging. This came as a big surprise since we had worked without knowing about this fact. But instead of making it a big problem, I just asked the dancers to simply not bump into anyone while they were dancing. It worked perfectly. Everyone paid attention and the singers were able to perform their scenes without there being any collisions. It seemed very "natural" as the singers and dancers appeared and disappeared very smoothly and unexpectedly. We also had a scene as the Imperial Ballet and did a classical ballet number, with pointe and partnering. *Onegin* is a real pleasure and a challenge for a choreographer.

This must have been the time that the SF Ballet and Mr. Adler stopped working together.

After this, the Opera brought in guest choreographers and I was working intensely with my company, Dance Spectrum.

In 1984 *Khovanshchina* was scheduled for the season. The choreographer, Vassili Sulich, came in with his idea completely formed. He saw the dance as a divertissement. Sonja Frisell, the director, did not want this, rather she wanted the dancers to be integral to the action. Since Mr. Sulich was unwilling to change his choreography, he was fired from the project. I was brought in as choreographer and because of my experience in Germany at the Opera of Bremen, Sonja and I were able to work well together. I had just completed a marathon staging of my three act *Cinderella* for the Oakland Ballet and had 10 days to put the Dance of the Persian Slaves together. The directors weren't sure that we'd have enough time for a 10-minute piece of choreography whereas I felt that it was a huge amount of time in comparison to the very restricted amount of time that I had just been involved in. They even proposed cutting the ballet by several minutes if we were unable to stage it in time.

They gave me three days to see what could be accomplished and were surprised and pleased to find that we had completed more than half of the ballet but [Edit: Gerd Albrecht] conductor insisted on fast tempi and never looked at the dancers while conducting. Ms. Frisell wanted the Persian slaves to make their first entrance as though fearing for their lives. She wanted all of the dancers to jump onto the bed with Khovansky at the end of the dance, thus solving for me the problem of beginning and end of a dance. The rest was very enjoyable to choreograph. I didn't choose to use a Persian dance idiom, instead I used Middle Eastern belly dance movements as my base. It was much more exciting and expressed the musical dynamic better in my opinion.

For the production of *Khovanshchina* [Edit: 1990] which we did several seasons later, we had a very fine Russian conductor [Edit: Yuri Simonov] who had a reputation of being difficult to work with. However, contrary to the German maestro of the first season, the Russian conductor loved the ballet as so many Russians do. When I first met him, I told him that I was there to learn his tempi for the ballet. Very much to my surprise and delight, he gently said, “No, I want to know YOUR tempi”!! He came to our rehearsals to see the dancers rehearse and when we performed on stage, conducted the orchestra in a most loving way, caressing the dancers with beautiful lush sound watching the dancers the whole time. It was an absolute treat for us all. What a difference from the indifferent treatment by the German fellow.

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ADDENDUM PROVIDED BY CARLOS CARVAJAL, December 3, 2020

It is approximately 70 years since I became a professional dancer with the SF Opera Ballet. It was my very good fortune to have chosen such an “insecure” profession instead of one in medicine as my father, who himself was a performing stage magician and hypnotist in the Philippines, encouraged me to follow. Both of my paternal grandparents were highly esteemed performers of Spanish Zarzuela and several of my aunts, uncles and cousins as well as my dad were performing artists on stage as well as in the cinema. As a child I was immersed in zarzuela, operetta and opera music which I learned to love. During my very successful career in dance, I had the opportunity to perform in almost every opera house and municipal theater in Western Europe, Scandinavia, North Africa and South America. I became principal dancer, ballet master, and choreographer at the Opera of Bremen and later Bordeaux where I was able to create a very large number of choreographies for operettas and operas as important as *Aida*, *Carmen*, *La Traviata*, and *Samson and Delilah* to name a few before returning to my native San Francisco to work with the SF Ballet and SF Opera again. I also had the opportunity to create dance for several seasons of Spanish Zarzuela during the 1990's during which I realized how parallel my life seemed to that of my grandfather in the Philippines and his Compañia Carvajal.

My youngest daughter, Celina, aka Lena Hall, has had a successful career in the musical theatre on Broadway and in movies and continues to this day.

Philippine patriot, Jose Rizal, mentions our family in his book, *Noli mi Tangere*. I can honestly declare that the Carvajals went from Manila to Broadway in four generations.

I am so thankful to have had such a fulfilling and joyous life.

## Performance history for Mr. Carvajal

The San Francisco Opera Programs from which the Archives have garnered information on artist's performance dates with the Company did not list the Ballet in the following years, 1950-1952. Carlos Carvajal provided the following information in which he was a dancer with the San Francisco Opera during that period.

1950	San Francisco Opera: <i>Aida</i>	Dancer
	San Francisco Opera: <i>Andrea Chenier</i>	Dancer
	San Francisco Opera: <i>La Boheme</i>	Dancer
	San Francisco Opera: <i>Manon Lescaut</i>	Dancer
1951	San Francisco Opera: <i>Carmen</i>	Dancer
	San Francisco Opera: <i>Boris Godunov</i>	Dancer
	San Francisco Opera: <i>La Traviata</i>	Dancer
1952	San Francisco Opera: <i>Mefistofele</i>	Dancer
	San Francisco Opera: <i>Aida</i>	Dancer
	San Francisco Opera: <i>La Traviata</i>	Dancer

The following information is drawn from the San Francisco Opera Programs

1953	San Francisco Opera: <i>The Creatures of Prometheus</i>	Dancer
1954	San Francisco Opera: <i>Jeanne d'Arc au Bûcher</i>	Dancer (Reynold de Chartres)
1955	San Francisco Opera: <i>Coq d'Or</i>	Solo Dancer (Cockerel)
1970	San Francisco Opera: <i>Carmen</i>	Choreographer
1971	San Francisco Opera: <i>Carmina Burana</i>	Choreographer
1971	San Francisco Opera: <i>Eugene Onegin</i>	Choreographer
1984	San Francisco Opera: <i>Khovanshchina</i>	Choreographer
1985	San Francisco Opera: <i>Un Ballo in Maschera</i>	Choreographer
1990	San Francisco Opera: <i>Khovanshchina</i>	Choreographer
1966	Spring Opera: <i>Lucia di Lammermoor</i>	Choreographer
1966	Spring Opera: <i>Mignon</i>	Choreographer
1967	Spring Opera: <i>La Traviata</i>	Choreographer
1967	Spring Opera: <i>Les Contes d'Hoffmann</i>	Choreographer
1967	Spring Opera: <i>Les Pêcheurs de Perles</i>	Choreographer