



STREAMING THE FIRST CENTURY

SESSION 2: Parlez-vous français?

MEMORIES PROJECT: Props Edition, pt. 2

Featuring: Lori Harrison (SF Opera props master) in conversation with Ann Farris (former SF Opera administrative and archives staff, 1969-71 and 2014-17)
(transcript read time ~ 25 minutes; audio run time ~ 21 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.

LH: So, the year that I was an Assistant Stage Manager, there was a point at which I was sitting in the Assistant Stage Manager's room; I was always the last one there and always the first one in because I felt like I had to make up for the fact that I had no idea what I was doing as a production assistant.

There was a night that I was working late, and Julie Rogoff came into that office; Julie Rogoff was Larry Klein's assistant. She was an impeccable drafts person and artist. Her work was absolutely stunning. Julie came over and she was talking about how she has so much work and do I know anybody that can draft, and I said, well, I can draft. And so, for the 1986 summer season, I shifted over to the technical department to be a second assistant to Larry Klein. There were a number of things about that job that were really interesting.

The way that drafting worked, at that time, was that a show was built, and then we would draft it. It was built, because Pierre's [Cayard] system in the scene shop, they kind of went straight from designer drawings and he figured out how to build it, and he built it as worked out best, somehow. But they did not draw it before it was built.

AF: And that's a very European system.

LH: All of the drawings that Julie and I were theoretically doing were called "as built", and essentially, they took the existing units once they were built and drew them. And essentially were an Ikea guide to how to put it together, so that if the show went to some other city, they could use these "as built" in order to put it back together.

But of course, everybody, including the people who worked in the shop, maybe not Pierre himself -- but of course, this was considered to be really kind of crazy. I mean, here most people draft the show before it's built. And so, we sort of decided that we were going to try that for some reason. So, I was the one that kind of joined the department before they built the *Traviata* that is still in our rep, and as

Larry Klein's assistant, as an experiment, I drafted each piece to send over to be built. And the idea was that even these pre-built drawings would turn into the "as built" eventually, that they'd be sort of reorganized in some way so that they would become the "as built" so that it still was only being drawn once.

It was a John Conklin set. He drafted elevations, essentially. I don't really remember the details, I just remember this whole big discussion going on about why we only draw things after they were built, instead of drawing them before they were built. And in this experiment, we were going to try drawing them before they were built and see if that would work.

Because of my prop background -- because by this time I had spent three seasons in Miami as the prop master, and three seasons in Chitaqua as the prop master, so I had this prop background -- so I also did the shopping for the furniture, under John Priest's auspices. So, I was sort of a general assistant in the technical department. I also did all of the ordering, and of course John Conklin had chosen all of this stuff, but I did all the ordering of the detail, the ornament for the walls out of an ornament supply in Chicago, this is really heavy stuff and there was tons and tons of it. I did all the ordering for that. So, I really had a big hand in this *Traviata* that was going to be new.

The important thing about it was I kind of got to know the crew. Because I was down there working with them. And in fact, I was often at the shop, measuring pieces as they built them and bringing drawings for *Traviata*, and all of that stuff. So, there came a point at which I finally got very brave and went to talk to Larry Klein about it, that I really wanted to be on the crew eventually, that my future really was maybe in props and that that had to be union, and I wanted to kind of go union.

And I kind of got the blessings of Larry and John; got very, very brave and went down to talk to Mike Kane. And I told him that this was kind of what I ultimately wanted to do. And Mike Kane jumped on that immediately. He called the [union] office and he said, while I was sitting there, you know all those lousy women you've been sending down to me that don't know what they're doing and making me hire, well I've got one here and she's good, and I'm going to send her down there now and I want you to sign her up. And Rod McCloud, the business agent at the time, was kind of telling him, what's her name, I think we know her. No, you don't know this one, she's been here and she works harder than any of us, and -- he told me okay, go down to the office right now. Okay, I call Larry, hey he told me to go to the office right now.

So, I go down to the office, and Rod takes one look at me and says, I knew that was you, because I had in fact been going in pretty regularly. In fact, there was a movie I worked on at one point, but they didn't really associate me with the opera. But every time I took a job, I went down there and told them this is what I was doing, and my name was still on the list -- so, I go down there and they called -- I don't even remember how, but for some reason they sent me right that minute, that day, to Pierre's shop.

I went to the shop that afternoon, put on a toolbelt, and started working union. Which was really weird, because usually I was at that shop working non-union. It was also especially weird because I had done all of the drawings that they were working off of, I had ordered all of the materials that they were working with; I had ordered all of the furniture that was arriving in the shop. So, I was in this extremely weird position of being the very bottom of the totem pole and knowing more than anybody else in the shop about the show.

So, John Conklin would come in for a meeting, and I'd be like washing out paint buckets and bending nails and whatever dopey things they had shop generals doing, and I would have to go sit in on the meeting and talk about the drawings, we drew it this way because it would do such and such, and either they would approve that or they wouldn't approve that. And somebody would go on to build it and I'd go back to cleaning paint rollers. (laughter) It was the weirdest thing. And so, throughout that show, finally it got to the point where once the flattage was built and it was time to apply all this ornament, and I had done all of the ordering so I knew which ornaments were meant to be where, so I would kind of go ahead of a gang and I would lay out all of the ornament and do the measurements and place it, and they would come along and glue it.

There's always a shop general -- and that's bottom of the totem pole, they're the nail benders and lumber rippers and paint bucket glue roller washers and stuff. So, that's what I was. But there were a bunch more for some reason, it was a big show, it had a lot of people. So, the real shop general was Dennis DeVost, he was like the official shop general. And I had come in and was kind of an underling shop general. And I was in charge of this whole crew of older men that had no interest in being bossed around by a snippy 25-year-old.

So, I made a big joke out of it. We were like a whole brigade of generals and I named them all -- it was corporal general and general general and we had sergeant general, and I was private general. I developed it into a kind of -- we'll help you with that little lady -- and it went smooth as silk. We wanted to have t-shirts printed up and we would have our corporal general and sergeant general and all of our names on the sleeves. It went great. And somehow, in the course of that, Pierre started to use me to make all of his ordering phone calls and he would call me out of whatever I was doing and have me call for lumber and for whatever it was.

And then the strangest thing of all happened, the *Fidelio* was about to be built. We had pretty much finished building *Traviata* and it was being painted, and this monstrous *Fidelio*. . . . It was a huge metal monstrosity and he needed all of his men to build it. And, at the [same] time they got their WOT tour that Jake Hutcher had designed. And for some reason, he called me to his office and I thought that it was for more phone calls, and he handed me the model to Jake Hutcher's WOT [Western Opera Theater] tour of *Fledermaus*, and he said I can't spare any of my guys to build this; I want you to build it. And I said, by myself? He said, well you know, as best you can, figure it out, you can work it out, you can do the drawings, whatever you need. And so, I told Janie Lucas this and she said, okay I'll help you. So, Janie and I --

AF: What was Janie doing?

LH: Janie was doing the sewing; Janie had taken over for Lynn Van Perre. She said, I'll help you out. So, I went to Pierre and said, hey, can Janie help me? And so, Janie and I had the girls set, and we were building the girls set, and the guys were building this giant monstrosity of a guy's metal set. And we just did whatever we wanted. We built the set, this little set, and I had to take it down to Saratoga.

I didn't know this at the time, but that turned into a little bit of a political nightmare that happened somewhere way around me. Because, I honestly had no idea of this, but generally, the WOT tour is something that is given to a bench hand that is about to move up into being a shop mechanic. And Pierre had skirted the rules by giving it to a shop general, meaning that the opera didn't have to pay either mechanic rate or bench hand rate. And so, there was all kinds of talk, people that were really, really angry that this was happening. And to some extent, angry at me, but I really had no idea.

And there was a point at which somebody finally told me that they were furious because this was something that should have been paid a different rate; the fact is, nobody helped at all. I mean, it was completely up to me -- what materials, what layout, he handed me a model and I built a set. I don't know that I could do that now, but I did. And it was a tiny little set. It fit in the armpit of this *Fidelio* set.

It was really right after that that the season was starting, and that Pierre and Ivan [Van Perre] decided between the two of them that it was time for me to move over to props. And that's when I joined the prop crew, was at the beginning of the 1987 season. I couldn't wait to get on. That was really exciting. And Ivan was working in the shop, because he worked in the shop during the off season. So, I went over to props when they started. The other woman on props was Joanne Desmond. I think Susannah Bailey might have been on props at the time too. Yes, she was. So, I was not the first woman on props. In fact, the first woman on props had been Michelle Susa.

And there are projects I distinctly remember from that, because the most extraordinary thing was that, of course, we were doing *Traviata*. So, I had drawn *Traviata*, I had done all of the ordering for *Traviata*, I had built *Traviata*, decorated *Traviata*, went over to the prop department, and propped *Traviata* on the various projects that were done for it. So, when we do *Traviata* now, it's very near and dear to my heart, and the fact that it's lasted that long is extraordinary. And all of the props, the furniture that we upholstered way back then, I remember making these horrible centerpieces, and of course, this was really the only show that I worked on with Ivan, were *Fidelio* and *Traviata*.

I can still hear Ivan's voice in the back when we were making the fruit pyramids, because they certainly gave me all of the little bitsy crafty stuff, he'd say symmetry, it's got to be symmetrical, and things had to dangle off of it so that there was some life, so little flowers or fruit or something that wiggles so that there was a little bit of life to it. All this symmetry. And those are things that I harp on my own crew about. Although, I tend towards less symmetry to make it more real looking, and less proppy.

AF: Is this a good moment to stop and say a definition of what a prop is?

LH: In my mind, props define more or less the world of the story and the characters. So that if the set is where things are taking place, the props are who inhabits that space, so that what's hanging on walls -- which is essentially dressing, that's props, things that people carry are props. Sometimes trees and greenery are props, greens tend to be props. Live animals and food and things like snow and rain are props, things that define the moment.

At San Francisco Opera, if the floor is hard, it's grips, plywood. If it's soft, like dance floor or ground cloths, it's props. So, there's a lot of overlap between say props and electricians, because I'll tend to be responsible for finding the right lamps, but then electricians handles them because they have to be battery charged and wired and plugged in and operated from the board.

When something was hanging in the air, something like a flag or a banner, usually it's props. Ropes, dressing that gets dressed in some particular way tends to be props. So, there is quite a bit of crossover among the departments. When I started in the props department, props were a little bit of the laughing stock. I worked very, very hard to kind of form alliances with the grip department to make sure that our crew was available when the grips needed help, because the grips would then be available when we needed help and we could work together.

LH: Anyway, I was on the prop crew proper, as it were. Just as a regular crew member from that 1987 until 1991 or 1992 when I had to get knee surgery. I, at that point, really had sort of moved into the craft position. I was pretty much in charge of making . . . there were two shop positions. One was the shop mechanic, who did the furniture building, that was John La Noue, around that time. And then I was kind of in charge of the artsy crafty stuff, the fabric and jewels. And I wasn't officially in charge, I just -- that's what I did, that's where I was. And there were a couple shows that came up during that time that were major in that. One was *Abduction from the Seraglio*, and I was corresponding regularly with the designer because I was buying the fabric.

And so, there was a role that I was playing which had to do with making things look like they were supposed to look. And I had some responsibility doing that. So, when my knees went bad, and they went really bad, and I had to get knee surgery. I decided, myself, that there was no reason I couldn't continue doing what I was doing. I was essentially corresponding; I was shopping; I was doing hand craft; I was doing all these things, and that perhaps if I didn't have to run the shows, that I could have this knee surgery and still kind of keep working. Because what I was mostly doing anyway didn't really require that I use my knees.

And that got shot down. And I left in a huff. I mean, I left and I'm going to have my knee surgery and I'm done with this business. To me, the fact the value of someone had to do with whether you could load a truck, that nobody placed any value on what I was best at, which clearly has a critical role in theater and opera, and the fact that nobody would have paid me a higher rate for taking on the responsibility of doing these things. But there was a higher rate for the shop mechanic, who was building the furniture, say. They'd give him a drawing; he'd build a piece of furniture. Well, I was kind of creating the drawings, ultimately. I mean, I was making things -- it's just that they were soft, girly things and not big, manly things. And it made me very angry that they weren't willing to accommodate that; that they placed no value on what I was doing. So, when I left to get my knee surgery, I left with a I'm never crossing these doors again, unless I'm in charge. I think I even sort of said that.

I eventually spent those several years, up until I came back in 1998, out doing movies. And I really loved that too. And that's when I came up with my movie prop theory. Which is that on stage, you're looking from the outside at a picture, and the designer is responsible for creating that picture, and you're filling it in and it has to do with shape and form and the colors match each other, and you're creating essentially a three-dimensional version of a two-dimensional picture.

But for film, you don't know where the camera is going to be, and so I consider film to be character driven, because you're looking from the inside out. And so, the camera is catching detail of a character's world. As a prop set decorator you have to be that person and choose the books that they're reading on their night tables and in their bookshelves, and what they're hanging on their walls and what their choices are, what their budget is, and what season it is. And you're completely going from the inside out, and I felt that somehow opera, certainly on the scale of opera, and theater was from the outside in. And that theory served me in great stead when we started doing high-def video, because that's the point at which those two worlds of propping got married, in my mind. I was able to use all of those character driven sensibilities on an opera stage.

Yeah, '97 I got hired [at SF Opera] end of the year. And '98 there was a little January season, where they were coming back to do a show that they had already done, and so that was my chance to kind of watch the crew and see how they operated because they knew more than I did about the show. And then, starting in the summer of '98 is when I was really in charge.

AF: So, you basically came back to head up the prop department. Who leveraged that one?

LH: I was helping in the scene shop a little bit, at the end of my movie life. And so, I heard that the opening was happening. Glenn Plott was still the technical director, Doug Von Koss asked whether I was going to apply, and I did. It was a rocky set of interviews, because I started to really remember how angry I had been when I left. And I started to remember the rift between grips and props, for example. And how badly treated props were. And there were a couple of times during the interviews, which were with Glenn Plott and Larry Klein, that kind of came out. I just started thinking about it and like remembering what it had been, and some of the bad stuff. And I don't know what they said to Doug von Koss, but Doug von Koss came and talked to me at one point, and he said, do you want this job, because you're about to not get it, what is it that you said to them?

And I had to do a lot of thinking. That as much as I'd had a great time at Industrial Light and Magic, and propping *Heart and Souls* and working on slasher movies. What I wanted to do is period stuff, then this is the only game in town. I don't remember how I got myself back up into their graces after whatever I had said that made me like, why would I want to do that, why would I want to go to a department where everybody hates you? But, I got the job, and went through those doors again. This time in charge.

And so, when I went back, I had to really think about what it was that had made me angry before, and fix it. And I can't say that I've changed it completely on my own. I wanted to make the best use of the people who were there that I could. And some of them worked out and some of them didn't, and so you end up with a cluster of people who work well together, and I have to give the credit for the kind of team that we have to them. They share as much of the credit as I do.

The really hard part of it, frankly, was, having spent all of these years making things and suddenly, I don't get to do that anymore. The crew does that. Learning to manage people instead of make props was a huge challenge. And keeping my hands off of things was hard. I had to learn the hard way that if you're going to keep brilliant, talented, creative people, you have to let them be brilliant, talented, and creative. You can't take that away from them. They're not giving you their best if you're telling them what to do and how to do it. And that was a really hard lesson to learn.

Props is never boring. You're always learning.

When I do all these things with kids now, which I try to do as much as I can, whenever we have school groups come through, and there's always some teacher asking -- what subject do you think people should be taking if they're interested in blah, blah, blah. And you know, knowing my own academic background, which is a little on the scattered side, my answer is always, especially when they are kids that are asking it, I'll say, well what are you learning now, tell me what are your classes now. And they'll say I'm doing math, I'm doing this, and science -- I'm like, that's what you need to learn. Just keep taking everything because you will use it.

You will use your languages; you will use your art; you will use your science; you will use your math; you will use your English; you will use your languages. There isn't one special thing that you want to study, you need to be open because you're going to keep studying it the rest of your life. I mean, I hated history when I was in high school, I hated it. It's my job now. I recreate it. How did they make paint

bladders in 1810? Well, you better get out the history books. There's nothing that won't be used. It's why this is the perfect job for me.

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**

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 Welmars, 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.