



STREAMING THE FIRST CENTURY

SESSION 3: Italian Roots

SPANNING THE DECADES: Production Edition

Featuring: Pierre Cayard (former SF Opera master builder) and John Del Bono (SF Opera scene shop foreman)

(transcript read time ~ 13 minutes; audio run time ~ 20 minutes)

[BEGIN AUDIO]

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

JOHN DEL BONO [JDB]: Hello, this is John Del Bono. I'm the scene shop foreman for the San Francisco Opera. I've been here for six years, and before that I spent 16 years on the property crew at the Opera House. And I'm here with Pierre Cayard, who was a stage carpenter in the late '50s, and in 1962 was the founder of the Scene Shop that we're sitting in right now. Pierre, tell us how you started a scene shop.

PIERRE CAYARD [PC]: Yeah, well, I, I became . . . (laughs) The term "shop foreman" does not sit well with me. Never did. I always liked to be called a master builder, which is more accurate. Many time, people went to the opera and knew me, told me, "Oh, you are not the master carpenter," because on the program the master carpenter is the head of the stagehands.

Nothing to do with building scenery. So anyway, I spent quite a few years (laughs) at the Opera, and working for the Opera and the Ballet, building the set. I was in charge of a bit of it and that's why I'm still hanging around.

JDB: (laughs) Excellent.

PC: And, well, and I really like to come to this place, because what John is doing is beautiful.

JDB: Excellent. Thanks.

PC: And it's something to be proud of, John.

JDB: We're carrying on a long tradition out here of stagecraft, which in itself doesn't really exist anywhere else. I started in theaters when I was in high school and moved on into working in the local scene shops here in the Bay Area in lieu of college and that's how I got into this. What background did you have?

PC: My background?

JDB: Yeah, to become the master builder for the San Francisco Opera?

PC: I grew up in Paris, in a family of fine furniture maker in interior decoration. So, I learned a trade. When I came back from my military duty I moved to Canada, to Montreal. I couldn't find a job in fine furniture making. A lot of Formica work, lot of drugstore type furniture, but nothing in my line of work.

After a few month, I met somebody that was working for CBC, and I explained my situation, and that person said, "You know, with your knowledge of woodworking and art and this and that, they need people in a scene shop for the television. You should apply," and blah, blah. And that's how I got in that business. And I stayed there four years.

I came here. I had one year of floating, because I did not speak English was one problem, and in those day—the Opera—well, the Ballet actually didn't have much work being a stagehand. And so my first contact with the Local was working at night at the Curran Theatre, as a stagehand. And I learned a lot. I learned a lot, because it was fairly new to me. And from working at night, finally 1958, I guess, work a little bit at the opera shop, very few weeks. And year after I worked little bit more, and I also became part of the stage crew.

JDB: Oh, nice.

PC: However, those were short month of employment, nothing like now. Around 1960, the director, Kurt Adler, asked me if I was planning on staying around, and I said, "Yeah, sure. I'll stay around if I can— (laughs) I can provide for my family." There it is. And in '61, he—yeah, '61, '62—he gave me the job of the—running the shop. And at that time, it was very short employment. So, I work as a stagehand at the same time. Also, you have to understand, the opera shop was where the offices are now on 1F—

JDB: Yeah.

PC: —stage left, with one work bench, and a leftover, few power tool, vintage 1930, because that's when the City bought the equipment for that little shop. I think that little shop was designed for repair work.

Anyway, we have to work in that one-bench situation, and also we had to work around the Symphony that was using the same building, which meant when the Symphony rehearsed we could not make noise, so we couldn't work.

JDB: Yeah, of course.

PC: And then we had a bunch of road show coming, which also—don't make noise, and the Ballet, the same deal. So, it was a (inaudible) between the shop work, after the here, go to the stage, and bah-blah, bah-blah. So those—that was my first period of time. Then for—then—it only lasted two or three season. Then we moved to Grove Street, in an old garage which was a big improvement. We could have three benches. But the height was a 12-foot ceiling, so, you know . . . You know, it's very small.

PC: Very low.

JDB: It's a constant struggle for us to find a shop space where it's tall enough.

PC: Then, from there, after 1968, we used the National Armory Guard on Mission Street which was a huge building. We had to work around the military this time.

JDB: Yeah.

PC: "We have a group of artillery men coming tonight, (laughter) marching. You cannot -- or this afternoon—you cannot work." Anyway, another situation. And then we finally moved to Indiana [Street] —and Indiana, when we move in, that's been closed, not in use, for years I think.

That building was built in 1914. It was dirty. Where the scenic artists section did use, the floor was dirt. And I remember building my first show in that building, *Traviata*, on the dirt floor.

But over the years some improvement was made. The scene shop has always been important. It has been important way before my time -- and I saw a picture of the (laughs) carpenter building show on a stage—because they had to work on the stage in, I guess in the '30s, and those people did beautiful work. And I did my very best to carry on the tradition of doing beautiful work . . . with the budget.

JDB: Yeah. (laughs)

PC: And the time schedule. And I think I did okay. Nobody ever complained.

JDB: Great, yeah.

PC: I did okay for thirty, almost 35 years, for the Opera and the Ballet.

JDB: Kurt Adler was the General Director for most of those years, supporting the shop?

PC: Yeah.

JDB: And he valued what was happening out there?

PC: (laughs) Officially, maybe I shouldn't say that, because it's not official, but I always felt he was like my mentor. Mr. Adler liked me from the beginning. Oh, he yell at me, sure. He was that type of person that blew up. But that's okay. And for years and years we work well together. He was very clever, in the sense that he realized that my input on a basic conception of the scenery at the beginning was important, and quite a few time I had to go to Europe—he was a European-minded person, (laughs) I mean—and a lot of designer were European.

And I had to go and meet with them when they were just basically starting to think about the show. So I could convey to them, or try to, what our limit were. Our physical limit in the theater, the stage itself—and in those—as you know, in those days, the design of a set, more or less rotating around a basic stock. For instance, we had three pieces, about 20 feet tall, by six foot—that's it—of foliage—cypress tree or what—and we called them Tom, Dick, and Harry, (laughter) their nickname. And when designer was onstage, and we put up his show—and it was an opening there, "What, what, what we do there?" "Oh, bring Tom in."

JDB: Nice. (laughs)

PC: Or, "Bring Harry. That will plug up the hole." And the same with railing. Okay? The same with stock step. Okay, so this is where it was important for the designer to know the stock—and then, well—and say, "Oh, no, we cannot do this; we cannot do that," you know.

JDB: Well, that's a huge difference between the way things are now and the way you had it, because from what, you've told me in the past, is you were dealing directly with the designers.

PC: Pretty much, pretty much. Not always but pretty much, yes.

JDB: Yeah, and it was your responsibility to make sure what they were designing was something feasible to use in the theater, and something that the Company could afford to build. And now I have many people between me and the designer. We have an entire Production Department that deals with them, and as part of that Production Department we have the Technical Department that works out all the kinks in the design and shares the stock with them and all that. And then the whole show is modeled on a computer . . .

PC: Yes.

JDB: . . . before it even shows up into this shop. And essentially what we're doing is building off of printed drawings from that model. So, your job was completely different than what mine is now today as far as your involvement.

PC: It grew up with [inaudible] thing, but I had time for props, mostly, where I got sketches on the back of anything. You know, a table like that? Okay, you do it. I mean, that was it.

The other important factor that I think is better now, much better, is the timing. Again, let's go back to Mr. Adler. Mr. Adler went to Europe around Christmas or the beginning of the year to contact his designer, to contact his maestro, I guess, and his voice, and then so on. So, we are at the best possible situation: meet the designer in January, give the guy a month, or six weeks to get this stuff all together. Then it came—finally came to me April—well, April, at the best. And, you know, the tech started in July. Now, I went through that with five show a year.

JDB: Five shows. (laughs) In two months. Yeah.

PC: It was a race against the clock. And I must say we cut corner. We had to. It never affected the—how it look. I made sure of that.

JDB: Absolutely.

PC: But in some places, we could have spent a bit more time. But so, I think for you, John, now—this new management, let's say—is doing a better job of planning. Or they can afford it. I don't know—where that comes from, because Mr. Adler was intelligent man. He knew that.

JDB: One of the reasons we're lucky right now is Matthew Shilvock has made the decision that we're gonna start building legacy sets, that we intend on building these popular shows and renting them and

remounting them. It started off as 30 years, and it's kind of worked its way up to 50 years that we're expecting these shows to last. And so there's a lot of planning ahead of time to make sure that these *Traviatas* and *Toscas* and Mozart trilogies and the Da Ponte deal are able to last that long, and are gonna work that way. So with the investment financially and the investment from the Company that we want this show to last 30 years, they're putting in the time and the energy to really work out a lot of the kinks and give us the ample amount of time to be able to, to build a set that's expected to last that long—which is really a great place to be as a scene shop, being allowed to build shows that are gonna outlast most of our careers, if not us. (laughs)

PC: Well, here again there's a big difference. In my time, we build every show for trouping, which basically limited the width of each piece to six feet. You're going to say, "Why?" Well, honestly, I'm not sure. I think it was in tradition, number one, a flat of scenery had to be six—five-foot-nine. That was it.

JDB: Yeah.

PC: Now, the only explanation I have is because in the old day, the Broadway show, the show that tour a lot went by the railway. And the opening of the loading door in the railroad car is limited, I guess, to six feet.

JDB: All right, yeah.

PC: I know that my first two, three years, when we used to tour to Los Angeles, we had our own train.

JDB: Oh, cool. (laughs)

PC: Well, our own train; it was a train for the crew, and some scenery, most of it, yeah. Now, the backdrop mostly . . . we get in technical term there. A drop was 72 feet long, 48 feet, 50 feet, piece of canvas, tied to what we call a batten; a 72-foot-long piece of wood, five inches wide, where the canvas is attached.

The only way you can transport those pieces, you have to either roll them, make a big roll out of it—72 feet long, and by the time you roll it it's about three foot in diameter.

JDB: Yeah, that's a heavy thing.

PC: It takes six, seven people to move that -- or you can fold it but you still have 72 feet to deal with. So, we had the use of some old railway postal wagon, so we could go at the end, through. They have opening to go from one wagon to the next. That's the only way we could get 72 feet in there. (laughs) And the—and this old car will not use anymore. They still had their—all the pigeonhole—and a toilet—in the middle . . .

JDB: Oh dear.

PC: . . . of the car, and that was always in the way. (laughter) Anyway.

JDB: So did you actually go on the tours with these shows? Were you . . .

PC: Oh, yeah.

JDB: . . . traveling with them?

PC: Oh, yeah.

JDB: Where would you go play with the shows? Was it across the country, or . . .

PC: Well, mostly the best was Los Angeles, but we—once a week we went to San Diego, Pasadena . . .

JDB: Okay.

PC: . . . Sacramento. To Chicago, to New York. Houston . . .

JDB: Mm-hmm. Still all our partners, yeah.

PC: It -- it's important to keep the crew.

JDB: Yeah. That's my main focus and my reason for wanting to always keep this shop busy is to . . . I've got a really great crew here that works together really well and are making a great living and a career out of this, and I wanna make sure that we can keep that group together.

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[END AUDIO]