



STREAMING THE FIRST CENTURY

SESSION 4: Ho jo to ho!

SPANNING THE DECADES: Spring Opera/Spring Opera Theater and WOT Edition

Featuring: Ann Farris (former SF Opera staff) and Robert Darling (stage director and designer)

(transcript read time ~ 21 minutes; audio run time ~ 30 minutes)

[BEGIN AUDIO]

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

AF: My name is Ann Farris, and I have several connections to the Company, the first one being in 1967, when I met Mr. Adler and Nancy [Adler] at Expo '67 in Montreal, and I was offered a job to work with him, and I turned him down. That was because I was going to Paris and I didn't want to give up going to Paris. So two years later, I heard from Robert that the job hadn't been filled, so I called Adler. He said, (laughs) "Get on a plane and come down now," and I got hired, and I was his administrative assistant. I lasted only two and a half years because his temperament and mine were too similar and I didn't like being yelled at.

So then in 2009 I came back to the Opera as a volunteer, and then on staff, and now as a volunteer, initially, in the archives, which Barbara [Rominski, director of archives] now so brilliantly runs.

RD: My name is Robert Darling, and I am a designer and a director,

I have been begeisted by the San Francisco Opera since a very, very young age, wandered onstage in Woodminster Amphitheater as an urchin in *Carmen* at about age five or six, and then was taken for those grand Guild projects that took young kids in my grammar school class to see the opera in the amazing San Francisco Opera House. The Opera House was five years old when I was born, and so when we finally got to see it in the '40s I was simply overwhelmed by the magnificence of the Opera House that I decided I should really work there.

I used to listen to the Met [Metropolitan Opera] broadcast from a very early age. I used to take a little cardboard box, and I drew a picture of what I thought was the opera curtain of the Met on it, and would make some little scenery, and I would stare at the thing while I listened to the broadcasts as a young kid.

So it was a big deal for me, the San Francisco Opera. And eventually when I got onstage as a super it was a remarkable experience, and I'll never forget sitting in the footlight trough and having loom above me Kurt Herbert Adler, having just taken over the Company, talking to Harry Horner, who was a director from Hollywood, and the great French conductor Pierre Monteux. And the three of them were

having this extraordinary, rapid-fire conversation, in fluent French, fluent German, and in English, and I thought, this is the most amazing thing -- that people in opera actually do this and I am sitting here in the footlight trough listening to all of this stuff. So, it was a great a-ha for me, and I determined somehow that I was going to get to work at San Francisco Opera, and it was a focus of my life for many years thereafter.

Where was opera when you first were aware of it, or the Cosmopolitan?

AF: [AF reads the following text] During the '50s, in San Francisco, there were several smaller opera companies giving, usually, one performance in a series of four. One of these was the Cosmopolitan Opera, who, in the late '50s, began booking opera singers who were expensive, successful artists, and occasionally were also performing for the San Francisco Opera. Mr. Adler had a great concern about this competition.

However, the Cosmopolitan Opera met its demise in 1960. There were two elderly women, Mrs. Leon Cooney and Mrs. William Woods and William Kant III, who were the former members of the Cosmopolitan Opera board, who came to Mr. Adler and Robert Watt Miller, President of the Board of San Francisco Opera, asking if San Francisco Opera could do something so that the Cosmopolitan audience base would have a continuation of popular-priced operas. This request fell on listening ears, for Mr. Adler had long wanted to bring in new audiences at more reasonable prices than the San Francisco Opera. He also wanted to find a way to bring emerging young opera artists to this audience.

Eventually, Mr. Miller and San Francisco Opera board agreed to this endeavor, with a proviso this new company would have a separate board of directors, and that the funding was not coming from San Francisco Opera. Its name became Spring Opera.

In 1961, Spring Opera had its first season of popular-priced opera, with one performance of four operas. The roster was bold, featuring a cast of young, emerging artists, including George Shirley, as well as Marilyn Horne, who we all know had an amazing career. As the finances were tight, scenery for the productions were pulled from the San Francisco Opera stock and adapted as necessary.

RD: Well, I think what is interesting about Cosmopolitan is the one opera apiece, and that was sort of the *rigueur* from around the country. I had done some work in Europe and in New York. I'd done Broadway and off Broadway and was very interested in the theatrical aspects of opera. But working with Wieland Wagner, and working with Felsenstein at the *Komische Oper*, I had a great sense of what I thought opera should be, and I was determined to chat with Adler about them. I had talked about this with Dr. Fenton McKenna, who had founded the performing arts college out at San Francisco State, and I said, "It's very hard. I can't get in to see Adler." I had tried two years before, schlepping my portfolio from New York on a boat through the Panama Canal, and that didn't work, and so there I was.

I was doing a season for Seattle Repertory Theatre and had flown back to the Bay Area to say hello to my parents, and I got this phone call, "Hello, Mr. Darling. I want to see some sketches." Well, I had no sketches, of course, a couple of old things under the bed, but there it was. And so I said, "Well, sure," (laughs) and went over to see this famous Mr. Adler with what few things I had.

I was very nervous, and from one o'clock came to two o'clock and three o'clock and all of these people I'd worked with in Europe came wandering by. I was very relaxed by about 5:30 in the afternoon, when finally, Betty said, "Mr. Adler can see you now." And I went into his office, a little apprehensive, and we sat down and very, very quickly started talking about opera -- and one performance each of one opera, four times around, and what was being expected by the audiences, which was really some music with people moving around in the costumes, and alas. And then we talked about what should happen, and it was an exciting conversation. At which point in the middle of all of this, Adler reached over to the windowsill and pulled up a newspaper. It was the morning *Chronicle*, and he had just had an article published, and the article said, "Adler's crazy new idea is to put Spring Opera into Winterland."

Well, at the time, it was '65, I guess. And the idea of Winterland, which Bill Graham had turned into the rock and roll palace, it was very exciting, and that was where it was at. And Adler said, "That's where I want the opera to be at -- is Winterland." So I thought that was a crazy idea, and a great idea. Well, we talked about a touring company, and I said, "Oh, you mean a bus and truck company." And he said, "Bus and truck? What is bus and truck?" That was a standard Broadway deal, when you do a production on Broadway, and you haul it out to the smaller venues, so bus and truck, you carry it around.

Anyway, at that meeting, which lasted for about five hours, we were joined by Otto Guth, and then we were joined by Paul Hager. And finally I was worried about getting the last bus across the Bay, because it was now 9:30 or something. And Adler said, "Okay, Mr. Darling, you bring me something about this." I said, "About what?" And he said, "About Spring Opera." And so I said, "Okay," and I went back a little dizzy across the Bay, and developed a production of *Traviata* and a production of *Carmen*, which you now have in the archives, four sketches each, and a whole marketing program on what to do about "Spring goes to Winterland" was the slogan. And went back to see Adler on Monday, and he said, "You come back on Tuesday. We have this board meeting." And so I did. And after they did the board business, we all retired to our cars and drove across town and walked into Winterland after it had just finished having rock concerts all weekend, and the detritus of the rock concerts were in evidence everywhere. And walking into the foyer of Winterland, and seeing the board members all done up, delicately kicking spent reefers out of their paths as they made their way into the theater, was one of the great moments that I still remember.

We got into the space, and I had these big drawings and all that stuff, and laid them out, on how this arena was going to be arranged with the orchestra in the balcony, etc. And it never happened, never happened. So, fine, but I had done these sketches for Adler, and went merrily back to work in Seattle and then to New York, and so forth. Until the famous call at 2:00 a.m. in the morning; he'd been evidently in his office. "Mr. Darling, I want you to do WOT." And I said, "What?" And he said, "Yeah, we do WOT." And I said, "What?" And then realized that this was Kurt Adler calling at 2:00 a.m. in New York, having been from his office in San Francisco, and I figured out he was talking about Western Opera Theater, and he wanted me to do Western Opera Theater.

I had done the *L'elisir*, and that was a great success, and I used an idea that has been developed at the San Francisco Opera brilliantly by Pierre Cayard, which was taking the tops of platforms and actually changing them into, like, a gigantic tongue-and-groove flooring and making a raker box. The advantage was that Adler had hired some designers and directors, and they wanted to do everything on raked stages. And Pierre's wonderful raker boxes, he chose a module of six feet by 16 feet -- not four by eight, which normal platforms are -- but six by 16, and about six inches deep, and used flooring so that they

were internally strong enough to be supported at one end and by the stage floor at the other, so you could just, by where you put the supports, make the rake different intensities.

But it could also be used to define the space, which is what I did for Western Opera, which was to design a small, little shape that would show you, because it was raked, where the actors were. *La rondine* had never been heard in San Francisco. And since he took over the Company in the early '50s, he was wanting to expand the repertoire beyond the normal course of things, to make a simple statement on the stage, that was dramatically viable, without all the cost of painted scenery.

When we came to *Rondine*, it was the first time they had done a new production in Spring Opera. It was not a hand-me-down production from the fall, but he expected me to do a new production. He had no budget, of course, and so I designed a production of *Rondine*, using the raker boxes as a shape to make it easier to put scenery on it. So we did a shape of raker boxes into an oval, a small oval, in the middle of the stage. The grand piano and a chandelier made the first scene, and a couple of drapes from something else -- I don't know what it was, and a tree upside down made the second scene. I built actually, something for the Bullier's scene, and etc. And it worked. It was a new production, quote-unquote, kind of, but it was a bargain basement version of what it was. But it worked, and the audience got to hear *Rondine*, and Adler got to relive in his life in early Vienna when he first had heard that piece, I'm sure. Ann, you must have been there by now, right?

AF: I came in late April of 1969.

BARBARA ROMINKSI [BR]: Ann, you were there during the transition from Spring Opera to Spring Opera Theater?

AF: Yes. So what happened was that Richard Rodzinski was very upset at the dress rehearsal of the two operas that were in Spring Opera, that were not designed by Robert but came from stock. I walked up into his office, and he said, "I'm leaving." I said, "Richard, you can't leave. You've only been here three months." And he said, "The quality of art here is terrible." And I said, "Hang on. Mr. Adler and Robert have been talking and talking and talking about ideas. You and Robert need to get together and really push it," because Richard was Mr. Adler's artistic assistant.

They were joined by Margaret Norton, who was a publicity director, and for the period of time from May 1969 until middle August 1969, many ideas came up to transform it from the old Spring Opera to the new Spring Opera, and they suddenly realized that they couldn't make the ideas all work and have a season next year. So Mr. Adler said, "I'm going to go to the board, and I'm going to tell them that there are all these new ideas that we're coming up with, and we're going to postpone Spring Opera for a year, and we're going to open in 1971, and we're going to open in the Curran Theater." So we started in January of 1970, and by the time we got to the late spring, the creative forces had come to the conclusion of the Curran Theater setup, and the artists were being hired.

RD: The great thing about Curran Theatre is that it is the performing house for Broadway musicals, and what struck me about that was just the symbolic reality for a San Francisco arts patron, going to the Curran Theatre is a totally different experience than what they had set up going to the Opera House, and I thought that was the best thing that could have happened for this whole Spring Opera idea.

And the idea of selling Spring Opera as Spring Opera Theater in the Curran to me had great marketing sense because it said that it's not just the music and people wandering around in costumes, for goodness sakes. It's a story which has some meaning or other that you want to emphasize to your audience, and it has power and emotion as a story as well as gorgeous music. And that was, I think, one of the great underpinnings in all of our thinking with Spring Opera Theater.

AF: Robert, why don't you explain about how the theater was set up differently.

BR: Robert, can you use *Don Pasquale*, as your example, please? Because there's a great story behind that.

RD: Sure. What happened, I went back to the drawings that were done in our first encounter for Spring Goes to Winterland and hauled those ideas out. I wanted the orchestra out of sight, and I wanted to eliminate the barrier of the orchestra pit. That was a goal. The orchestra shouldn't be interfering with the performer, who had to be front and center. And because of Pierre's wonderful raker boxes we were able to take, inexpensively, existing raker boxes, put them up, and mount them on four-foot platforms upstage, put a scrim between it and the players, and then a product had come on the market that year, called Hexcel [?], and it was a hexagonal, like a honeycomb in a thin, lightweight piece of sheet. And by putting that on louver, we allowed the sound to come out. And because it had these little hexels in it you couldn't see the stand lights, which, of course, would have been a distraction behind the scrim. And then we shoved the stage out over the orchestra pit into the auditorium. Which both allowed us to get under the stage, down into the orchestra pit if we needed to, which is what you were referring to, Barbara, for a show like *Pasquale*.

AF: And Robert, add here that there were television monitors put on the balconies –

RD: That's right.

AF: -- so that the singers could see the conductor, and the conductor had some sort of control.

RD: That's another idea that came out of the Winterland business, is that we used crude black-and-white television monitors, mounted on the balcony fronts at the Curran, so that the singers could see the conductors upstage waving their batons behind the scrim. Conductors absolutely hated it. But the remarkable thing about that arrangement is that the singer's, being front and center, voice acoustically was as if it was being pushed out by the orchestra, which was behind it. It was a totally different acoustical arrangement than we're used to seeing in a musical show of any kind. And I found that very, very extraordinary.

All right, so the *Pasquale*, for that, Richard Pearlman was staging it. We had very skeletal scenery, but it started with the staging of the overture, in which Richard wanted Don Pasquale to be an opera fanatic, and he was listening to his favorite tunes when he put on the record that started the overture. And out of his trunk of memories came all of these gorgeous and fabulous opera heroines, Traviata and Carmen and Lucia and everything. And the opera heroines were all played by members of the Cockettes, which was a great San Francisco troupe. And we had put a space in the raker boxes in order to cut a hole so that all of the opera heroines could come out through this trunk that was carefully positioned over the hole.

It was a perfect San Francisco start to the season, needless to say.

Well, what do you think the opening season said to the people of San Francisco, Ann?

AF: Well, it was a complete -- such a change for them, for opera, that if we weren't sold out, we were sold out immediately, because people got very excited about it, became very involved in it. And John Rockwell, at one point, who was then the stringer for *Opera News*, critic, came up to me and said, "My God, what have you guys been doing?" I mean, it was an amazing change.

This is a very good time to bring in Persephone, because during this particular time Mr. Adler had his birthday. We came into the conference room during the day, during Spring Opera, and on the corner and on a shelf was this huge box covered over, and nobody knew what this was, and thank God nobody touched it until the right moment. And then all of a sudden Margaret Norton and Peter Botto walked over to the box and said, "Mr. Adler, happy birthday." And so he went over, and he pulled off this cloth, and in it was a pig.

RD: A real pig.

AF: And everybody, including me, "What the heck is this?" Well, it seems that Mr. Adler, with his artistic staff -- not with me -- and with Peter Botto, whenever he got stuck and he really couldn't figure out how to move ahead, he would turn to the left, and he'd say, "Persephone, what do you think?" And people in the office. . . Well, it became a thing. You waited for it to happen. So that's the derivation of Persephone.

Now, there's one fun story. At the very end of the performance that particular night down in the Curran, we all went home, or did whatever. When Robert and I got home about midnight my phone was ringing, and I answered, and it was Mr. Adler. "Where is Persephone?" I said, "What do you mean, where is Persephone? It's in the conference room." "No, Nancy and I are here and there is no Persephone." So I said, "All right." I called. . . I said, "I have Peter's bar number." I called the bar where he hangs out after a performance, and there he was. He said, "Oh, I just took it back to the farm. I didn't think it should be all alone in the opera house overnight." The next morning, Nancy and Mr. Adler took a car and went to the country and reconnected with Persephone.

RD: And he stayed connected to Persephone for years.

AF: Oh yeah, for his entire life. They went out there all the time.

RD: Spring Opera was a huge success. For the second season, I wanted to have other views from other designers than me, and so we hired several wonderful designers, both of them good friends, John Conklin and Santo, and John was going to do the *St. Matthew Passion*, which Adler wanted to do.

And I was to do *Mahagonny*, which was a production that Adler had done with Max Reinhardt, the famous theater revolutionary in Vienna in the late '30s, and that opera had been done by [Bertolt] Brecht and [Kurt] Weill in Berlin in the late '30s. Fabulous opera.

Years before this, Adler had done a demo of some guys from Stanford who were developing lasers and laser technology, and it had lodged in my brain since, and I said, "This is the time to use it. This focused light beam, what can we do with it to tell the story that's told in *Mahagonny*?" "How can we make the hurricane happen, and do it with the laser?" And then at the end of the opera, the entire chorus is upstage. The whole thing is crashing down. The world is ending as far as they know it, and they walk towards the audience very, very slowly. And my vision for that was that we would scribble red lines across the stage as they walk forward, and how could we do that with the laser?

And the wonderful George Pages – he bought a couple of cheap battery speakers, and then went to Woolworth's and got some little pocket mirrors, and he mounted the pocket mirrors onto the battery speakers, little radio speakers. And by controlling them with sound waves we focused the laser onto the mirror, then the mirror went to the other little radio speaker, and then the sound waves could be construed so that it could become like a -- I wanted a sine wave where the wave continuously folds over on itself to start out the hurricane sequence, and then it would move across the stage and become wilder and wilder and wilder until it filled the whole stage and scribbled all over the cast.

The audience was crazy about it.

AF: So after the performance, opening night of that, I was out front and John Rockwell came up to me again, and he said, "Ann, your husband has done his best work ever." And the reason he did say that is because there was a huge theatrical step with the work. Here was Robert and Bill Francisco doing a totally different point of view, but the same idea. And John, who was of our age, got it, just got it.

RD: And I think it was Adler's genius to somehow see that as a possibility, mid-twentieth century, and know that by pushing a little bit in the right direction we could get to someplace else, just as *Faust Counter Faust* showed us what Wesley [H. Wesley Balk] was saying about the singing actor being center, and what the raked stage did by putting the singing actor down right in the middle of the audience. All of those were, I think, achievements of moving Spring Opera to Spring Opera Theater, and it's something that certainly I tried to do in all of my work, and with Western Opera Theater, as well, and Opera in the Streets.

BR: Ann, can you tell us about the end of Spring Opera, please?

AF: Yes. Robert and I moved away from San Francisco, so we weren't involved in Spring Opera anymore. However, when I came back in 2009 to start working on the archives, at some point I said to somebody, "Why did Terry McEwen really kill Spring Opera Theater?" And the general sense was that Mr. Adler's excitement about Spring Opera continued for about six years, but the last two years of his being boss at the company, 1979, '80, he kind of didn't have the energy or the interest to spend as much time on it. Terry came in as a person who loved traditional opera, knew the voice, and was basically focused on creating fabulous productions with star voices, and he wanted to have a spring season that would have a certain focus that would be his sound. When he looked at the bottom line of Spring Opera, in terms of the money, there were deficits, even though the Spring Opera Theater board was raising the money. Mr. Adler left in '81, and in '82 Terry took over and Spring Opera was gone right away. So that was the termination.

RD: Later, after I had done many productions for San Francisco and the Opera Company and Western Opera, Adler had originally scheduled *Salome*, which is a very famous production by Wieland [Wagner]. And Wieland, of course, had set *Salome* on Anja Silja. They had had a rather close relationship indeed in Bayreuth when I was there, and I knew Anja quite well. And so she was scheduled to do the opening performance of the *Salome* in San Francisco, and Adler sent me to Munich, and we looked at the remnants of whatever there was there from the production. I was honored to be asked to do the *Salome* for San Francisco, and I looked at Wieland's sketches and his notes, and I made one slight change: I separated the moon from the backdrop with a bobbinet so that it would give it more depth and mystery, and so that I could make the moon move a little bit, which I wanted to do.

And we were all on pins and needles -- Adler was very much on pins and needles -- about having Anja Silja, because she was notorious for being difficult. Anyway, we came to the dress rehearsals for the performance, and the famous Schluß at the end of *Salome*. Wieland had staged it so that Salome would go down and pick up the platter and sing the Schluß, most of it, to the platter with the head of John the Baptist on it, and then this extraordinary outpouring of Strauss music. It was great. And we got to that point in the opera, in the rehearsal, and Anja picked up the platter, and she was kissing it, at which point she looked horrified, and she dropped the platter. The head bounced out of the tray and into the orchestra pit, whereupon somebody in the orchestra pit pitched the head back onto the stage, and Anja ran off the stage. We all ran onto the stage to see what we could do, across the little bridge. And Anja said, "I can't go on. I can't do it." She said, "The head looks just like Wieland. I can't do it. It looks just like Wieland."

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