



STREAMING THE FIRST CENTURY

SESSION 4: Ho jo to ho!

SPANNING THE DECADES: Director Edition, pt. 3

Featuring: Francesca Zambello (stage director, former SF Opera staff) and Dr. Clifford “Kip” Cranna (SF Opera dramaturg emeritus)

(transcript read time ~ 14 minutes; audio run time ~ 18 minutes)

[BEGIN AUDIO]

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

KIP CRANNA [KC]: This is Kip Cranna, Dramaturg Emeritus at San Francisco Opera, talking with Stage Director Francesca Zambello, who has had a long history with our Company. And we’re thinking about the Centennial, the 100-year anniversary of the founding of San Francisco Opera right now, and we want to look back and visit some of the highlights that Francesca has experienced at San Francisco Opera. Thanks for talking with me Francesca. How are you?

FRANCESCA ZAMBELLO [FZ]: I’m great. Kip, it’s so lovely to see you and talk about a Company I love so much.

KC: One of the new productions that you did for us that I remember quite distinctly is Verdi’s *Luisa Miller*, another sort of off the beaten track piece, a very famous composer, lesser-known work. I think you took a really interesting approach to that, again with Patricia Racette, an artist that you’ve worked with so often. Can you say a little bit about the production concept that you had in mind for that?

FZ: Absolutely. Verdi’s *Luisa Miller*, based on the Schiller play, *Liebe und Kabale*, is a lesser-known work, but is one that is full of thrilling Verdi music. And like *La traviata*, where it’s just a bit before, it’s one of those things where the soprano starts with a lot of coloratura in the first act and by the last act it’s very heavy, and the reason is that she’s a poor girl, the father a miller, and she has been entrapped by a sort of very cagey philanderer, who’s trying to get her for the count. I mean, it’s, like, one of those, you know, bad, bad people stories.

KC: He had the name of Wurm to make it even more evil.

FZ: Yes, the name of Wurm. And so Patricia Racette, who started life as an Adler Fellow -- I knew her first as a Merolini and we have done many things together -- most recently, even, she was the old prioress in *Dialogues of the Carmelites* with me last month in Houston -- and I think she’s one of America’s great artists, who is having a long, long career, and is smart enough to keep reinventing herself. And at that point she was still an ingenue type, singing, and just dipping her toe into these roles, later, shortly thereafter, singing Violetta.

Although I do know that she started with San Francisco by singing *Butterfly* on Western Opera Theater tour, which I don't think she sang again till she got older. But anyway, the piece with the designer, Michael Yeagan, we looked to the setting, which is Switzerland, and created a world of panels in a large semicircle, which turned and changed and created different locations in nature. And nature's very much a part of the piece. It's like the nature world versus the world of the court.

And so these panels turned and created a lot of different locations, but also I think it was with Donald Runnicles, the then Music Director, we really wanted to create a great acoustical set. I mean, that's one of the things, as a director, aside from the visual world that you're creating and trying to tell the story within, you also often have to think of the practical things, like is this gonna work for the voice; is this gonna help the voice. And so this was one of the sets that every singer has loved, because they're in a great big amphitheater shape, and it's on a rake, which is inclined platform, which also singers may not love it on their calves by the end of the night, but vocally it's always a big help, because it kicks out the voice. I loved doing that production, and I was thrilled when we revived it a few years ago with Leah Crocetto, another Adler grad, and Michael Fabiano, the superb American tenor. And I was very proud that night to receive the San Francisco Opera Medallion Award; really a highlight for me, and actually, as I'm sitting here in my office, there's a picture of myself with, then General Director David Gockley receiving it. So, *Luisa Miller* has held a special place in my heart over the years.

KC: Another piece that I think about a lot, and I remember working with you a lot on, is an Armenian piece called *Arshak II*. This was an idea that Lotfi Mansouri had. Actually a member of our orchestra, who was Armenian came to us and said, "You should do an Armenian opera, and we'll raise some money to help support it." And we ended up with this opera by a composer named Chukhajian, I believe was how you say it. I'm wondering how you felt when Lotfi came to you with this idea. This was a nineteenth-century opera that had never been performed, actually, in its original version, so that's what we did.

FZ: Well, there are many operas that have gone into obscurity, and most of them should stay in obscurity, quite frankly, and this one probably should, as well, although it was a great experience doing it. We did it in Armenian, and I salute all the artists who sang in Armenian, although we did have some Armenians in the cast. But the chorus learned all the music in Armenian, phonetically. And he was imitating Verdi in style. And it's the story of Arshak, the emperor who beat back the oppressors and saved Armenia. And I think the best thing about the opera, to be truthful, was we got to know so many Armenians in San Francisco, and it was a constant dinner, because we kept having Armenian people showing up and bringing us food, to rehearsals, and going to Armenian restaurants. The really sad thing was is that it was in the season immediately after 9/11, and so many of the costumes, of course, suggested characters that came from a very conventional way of thinking of the Arab world, and so it was not popular with the audiences. I think that the process of doing it was fascinating, and I'm glad that we did it, it was a wonderful experience, but I do think it's an opera that can lie dormant now.

KC: I think it probably will.

I look at the list of things you've done -- and we don't have time to talk about them all, obviously, but the range is so incredibly broad and I'd like to talk a little bit about Rachel Portman's, *Little Prince*, which, to me, is one of the best operas for young people that I've ever encountered. You did it in conjunction with San Francisco Opera and Cal Performances at UC Berkeley. I presume you've done it in other places.

FZ: Right. *The Little Prince* with Rachel Portman and libretto by Nicholas Wright, based on, of course, the Saint-Exupéry. It's really one of the pieces I think I'm proudest about in my career, because it has brought so many young people to the theater. I helped create the piece from the very beginning. I met Rachel because of Philip Glass. I had worked with Philip on several operas, and he said, "I really think you should meet this composer." I was working in Paris, and she came to meet me, and I opened the door, and a woman was standing there with curly, short, blonde hair, and I thought, oh, it's the Little Prince herself. We became fast friends, and she had the idea that she wanted to write an opera of *The Little Prince*.

And so we set about the onerous task of getting the rights, which was very difficult. Many people have tried to get the rights, and I think the fact that we could say it was going to be performed at all these major opera companies helped convince them. So Rachel and Nicholas Wright -- English playwright -- wrote the libretto, and it was just a joyous process. And then she composed the music, and I think it really spoke to her. All the familiar characters are there. The Little Prince himself is a boy soprano, and the pilot is a baritone. And for me, it was also a very bittersweet time, because one of my best friends, the designer, set and costume designer, Maria Björnson designed it, and she died right before we did the world premiere in Houston. And so, of course, *The Little Prince* is about death. I think of her so often, and I have done the piece at least a dozen times, and one of the times was in San Francisco.

And it was wonderful to do it there. I remember we did it not in the opera house but over in Berkeley, so it's a theater that was the right size. The production that we had created in Houston has gone on to many other theaters, but it really fit perfectly in that theater. We had a wonderful young cast, mostly Adler Fellows, and everyone embraced it with joy, because you have a story that is so much to the heart, and so much about, you know, we can only see from inside -- all the great quotes that come from it -- you see only with the heart, and the messages that are in the piece are so powerful.

It's sung in English, and there's a children's chorus. And so, as always, I find that when you're working with adult singers and with kids, there's infectious magic that fills the air all the time. Because we are passing on to them what we know about music and theater, but they are giving us their joy and energy and innocence. And so it was a beautiful time, a beautiful collaboration, and I was thrilled that we could do it in San Francisco. And it was very successful over there. I think it's too bad not to have more collaborations like that between various institutions, particularly around music that attracts new audiences, younger audiences.

KC: Another area that you've had quite a lot of experience with is Broadway. And you sort of brand Broadway to San Francisco with a production of *Show Boat*, which I think was one of the real highlights of the kind of extended repertoire that David Gockley tried to bring to the Company. What was that like? I know you worked with operatic singers in that production, as well as regular song-and-dance Broadway types, a fusion of these two art forms.

FZ: Right. *Show Boat* is a complicated piece, in the sense that it is a part of America's history, which is very complex. Life on a showboat, goes from 1880 to 1920, and follows the life of a young woman, Magnolia, as she grows up on the showboat, marries the wrong guy. But all the characters around her are really a tapestry of America. And David had produced the work earlier in his career, and so when I was doing it, I did it in London, and then San Francisco took the production, and we did it there. It was, I think, an amazing success for the Company in the spring season. I know it sold gobs of tickets, which is good, and I'm so proud that we made a wonderful recording and DVD of it.

The cast uses a range of opera singers, music theater people, dancers, and actors. Captain Andy and Parthy, they don't really sing, so we had some great actors in that. And it was just -- the cast was a phenomenal group of people, and I think we did the piece proud. We presented it in a grand style with all the music that certainly was, I think, composer's first intention. And so it was thrilling to be able to do it there, and to be able to release the DVD from it.

KC: For me, my experience of hearing this music sung with real operatic voices was kind of a revelation. I think that Jerome Kern's music really benefited, I thought, from top-notch singing.

FZ: Well, I think that Hammerstein and Kern would be thrilled, and imagine when they did first do it, of course, those were the kinds of voices that they were casting. I mean, all the way up until once we get into the 1960s, where the microphone takes over. Up until then you look at so many of the people who were singing these things, whether it's Ethel Merman or John Raitt in *Carousel*, who were all operatically trained.

KC: Ezio Pinza, another example.

FZ: Exactly. His "Some Enchanted Evening," *South Pacific*, truly transports you to the South Pacific.

KC: We have to talk about the Ring again, because it's been a big part of your work with San Francisco Opera. You developed your own concept of a Ring, an American Ring, so to speak, beginning in 2007-8, I believe. And it was a joint project between Washington National Opera, where you have been involved for a long time, and San Francisco. And then we did it complete in 2011, and was revived again in 2018. Can you talk a little bit about conceiving that whole project?

FZ: Absolutely. I think, Kip, you are like me in that you never get tired of the Ring.

KC: Right. (laughter)

FZ: It was a co-production between San Francisco Opera and the Washington National Opera, and Kip served as Dramaturg on it in San Francisco, and also was our main lecturer in Washington, when we produced the Ring there. Doing the Ring is a director's dream. And I was fortunate in San Francisco to collaborate with Donald Runnicles both times, who is certainly one of the most knowledgeable Wagnerian conductors living and working now, and a thrill to work with. Of course musically a thrill to work with, but also dramatically, because he knows the Ring inside out, and he cares about it so much, and that we were able to collaborate together to really draw out the characters and the story.

The concept, yes, it has been called the American Ring, the feminist Ring, the environmental Ring, but it really started with metaphors of America. With the designer Michael Yeagan, Projection Designer Katy Tucker, Costume Designer Cathy Zuber, and Lighting Designer Mark McCullough, we really set down a road to use American iconography to suggest the pure world in *Rheingold*. And then moving forward through time, with *Walküre*, to move, in some ways, to a time somewhat around World War II. And then with *Siegfried* to begin to see the perils of America, once we had gone through Vietnam, and then finally in *Götterdämmerung*, a post world of today, but one that we are really seeing as we watch climate change rip through and destroy our country and our resources. And so, in a way, every time we did it, we kept drawing on things that were happening around us.

I was so fortunate in San Francisco to work with the great Brünnhilde, Nina Stemme. She had not sung the role, and so we really developed and completed the whole Ring cycle in San Francisco. We had been doing it one at a time in Washington. But in San Francisco we did the whole thing, which was, I think just -- you know, it's an incredible, exhilarating experience, for the audience and everybody working on it. You're wrapped up in Ringomania.

And so this American concept, I think, was even heightened more by doing it in California, because of the commitment to the environment of so much of that state and of the Pacific Northwest. And so that really drew stronger and stronger into it. And actually, some of the settings are inspired by locales there. The actual rock where Brünnhilde parks herself and Wotan builds the ring of fire around her, is inspired by the bunkers, looking out from just over the Golden Gate Bridge, when you go out in the parks out there and go hiking. Those bunkers were really the shapes and the inspiration for Brünnhilde's rock, as were a number of other things, but that so specifically.

Rheingold, as I said, was really about, you know, the pure world, and so we thought so much about the American West, the Gold Rush, the world of the great industrialists. And I think what's so fascinating is that we in America are still constantly looking back at these periods -- in our really not so long history; America's not an old country. And so that's why I found that these metaphors and analogies and visual cues for the audience helped people who maybe didn't know the Ring. And I found so often people told me they were so drawn into it, in a way, because the story was so clear and felt so vivid to them.

And I think, for me, that's the other big thing, was that I've always felt that even though these are gods, they're actually humans, and that the relationships between Brünnhilde and her father, Wotan, are so human. And the love affair, non-love affair with Siegfried, all of those things just -- I tried to make the characters as real and human as possible, as opposed to isolating them from being gods. And, of course, as a woman, I can only say it took a woman to save the world at the end of the Ring cycle. That is what Brünnhilde does. That's what she achieves. She's the hero that Wotan always wanted, but never understood that it was his daughter.

KC: Yes, the women come to the rescue big time at the end of the Francesca Zambello Ring. I think it's very, very exciting.

FZ: I hope to do it again, and your input as Dramaturg, often, and many discussions with you were invaluable, so thank you for that.

KC: Thank you. Francesca Zambello, thank you so much for spending time with us as we look, uh, backward at the last hundred years at San Francisco Opera, and forward to the next. I really appreciate your time.

FZ: Thank you very much, Kip. Always a joy to be with you and friends at San Francisco 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.

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