

Bringing Theater to the Opera Stage

By Kelley Rourke, OPERA America

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Each year, OPERA America's Conference allows us an opportunity to reconsider what we do and how we do it, not only in terms of business practices, but in terms of the art form itself. At Opera Conference 2004, a panel of distinguished opera and theater directors gathered to discuss the state of opera as theater. The panel, moderated by Robert Marx, included Leonard Foglia, Christopher Mattaliano, Kelly Robinson, and Robert Woodruff. In this issue of Newsline, we present excerpts from that discussion, as well as additional perspectives from across the opera field, taking a hard look at where we are today, and considering challenges to and opportunities for greater theatrical expression.

Marx: The title of our session is "Bringing Theater to the Opera Stage." I think we can all say that it has been brought. It is here. It is nothing new. It has been a half-century since Rudolf Bing came to the **Metropolitan Opera** and had that extraordinary roster of great stage directors — Tyrone Guthrie, Margaret Webster, Peter Brook, José Quintero, Garson Kanin, Alfred Lunt — the list goes on and on. But just as an example of how things have changed: One of the Peter Brook productions was *Eugene Onegin*. It was a very naturalistic, very romantic production. Brook made one significant change in the scenario, which is that he switched the final scene from a room in Tatiana's house to a snowy park. He was excoriated for that, for that one change. Think of the change in sensibility: from the shift of that one scenario, within a very romantic context, to the kind of directorial interpretation we have today. The question is not whether we're bringing theater to the opera stage, but what kind of theater we're bringing, and how opera and contemporary theater overlap in our country today. Many people in and outside of opera say that we're in a director's era, that directors dominate opera. Is that true?

Mattaliano: I think it depends on the opera company. Some companies are associated with having a more director-oriented angle, and others less so.

Robinson: I think audiences are becoming much more visually literate. The kind of visual stimuli that audiences are exposed to is so markedly different in this generation. I think they are demanding more and more onstage, and they tend to respond very well to the visual aspect of opera. Opera immediately suggests the visual through the score, and I think that most companies are looking for ways to develop that visual quality. I think there are differing capacities to do that, but audiences expect it and hope for it and respond well to it.

We need as many new productions as possible and as many new works as possible. I think, given the resources that OPERA America can help us bring to bear, it is possible to join together to take a new look at the repertoire. That is the first step to making the entire arena more vital and to preparing ourselves to make new work. We need to pay attention to why we got into this business in the first place. As opera producers, we are some of the most accomplished and knowledgeable professionals in the performing arts, and we need to be actively involved in the production of what is on our stages, whether the work is time-honored and traditional or something just out of the box.

What excited me about the conversation with stage directors at the Conference was that Kelly, Leonard, and Robert have successfully worked in both opera and theater, and they bring the dynamics of the two disciplines together in a vital way. I think the field is greatly enlivened by directors who challenge the "this is the way we do it" syndrome.

A company that's never produced new work may not be ready to take on a full production but might indeed be able to present a concert version, a first reading of a new work, or work in co-production with a more experienced new work producer. Doing a production that uses other media, like projections, can make a new physical production affordable — perhaps even as affordable as renting an existing set. Companies are only limited by their imaginations, and that of the artistic leadership.

It is always an option for our audience to stay home and see opera on video or to listen to a recording. It is incumbent on us to figure out what makes it worthwhile for audiences to come to our theaters, and to do everything we can to provide the level of quality, invention, and vitality to attract them and keep them coming back for more.

— Diane Wondisford, Producing Director, Music-Theatre Group

I just did *Nixon in China*. It's just a really cool piece. What's amazing to me is how people connect with it still. At one of the performances, there was this old lady walking down the aisle and muttering to herself, "You know you're in bad shape when Nixon looks good."

I've been very surprised to question young people who want to be opera singers, and who haven't had any acting. I was shocked. What is wrong with these people? They should be taking acting classes all the time. Add another year to the program. Some people may have natural ability, and that's very nice, but a lot can still be learned. The voice is a gift. You seldom start from nothing. Maybe these people assume acting is a gift, too, and they have it or don't. Either way, you have to work, to polish it. That's what actors do.

A good director is a good teacher — tenacious but kind. Time can be a problem, though. With *Nixon*, we had just four weeks to find it. With the standard rep, if there is not a lot of choreography and if everyone has done it before, you can put a piece together pretty well in a couple of weeks. More time can sometimes be self-indulgent. If there's a lot of choreography, you need another week or so. For a singer, who is paid by performance, if you're engaged for three to four performances and the director wants to rehearse for four weeks, the time/money ratio is not good.

I have a very big place in my heart for contemporary things. These are pieces that people connect to in a different way. For me, it's more immediate than singing in somebody else's language. I don't think we're not adventurous. The Met and the Lyric are commissioning. Smaller companies like *Chicago Opera Theater* are doing interesting things. *Indianapolis Opera* is doing *The Crucible*. We need better advertising. We need to let people know what's happening. Yes, some companies are conservative. And I don't really need to do weird things where you have Santa Claus and a polar bear wandering onto the stage. But I do need to do new things. So many companies have commissioned. And those pieces are having subsequent productions — look at *Dead Man Walking*, *End of the Affair*, *Nixon*, *View from the Bridge*.

One of the joys of my career has been the combination of the old and the new. One informs the other. I'm not a predictor of doom and gloom. The emphasis on the theatrical is to my taste, and to the audience's taste, too. It's about imagination. It doesn't necessarily take money. Sometimes throwing money at a show is the worst solution. I just love low-tech theater. You don't have to have crashing chandeliers to keep the audience engaged.

— Robert Orth, baritone

Woodruff: Every art form evolves.

Obviously, the novel of the 19th century is not the novel of the 21st century. The language that theatermakers use now has evolved. It's not only the director. I would go anywhere George Tsypin was designing an opera to see George's response to a piece of work. I think the director is counted on to lead that investigation.

Marx: I was surprised that in some of OPERA America's own material it said that the field has never really shaken a kind of 'stand and sing' image with the public. I really wonder if that's true.

Mattaliano: I have a very hard time with the idea of someone standing and singing being a problem. Music is the primary reason that I go to the opera. I go to the opera to hear great music sung in as communicative a fashion as possible. And hopefully the choices that I make as a director, with designers, are supporting that. There are so many great artists today — when someone like Greer Grimsley is standing and singing, is there a problem with that? I don't have a problem with that, provided he's not singing in a vacuum [and] there's some sort of ongoing environment that's supportive of and responsive to what the music is communicating. I find that whole concept a little tired, both as an opera lover and as an opera director. If a great artist is standing and singing, there's a hell of a lot going on. The musical language is our main tool.

Foglia: I hope all of the standing and singing is in support of a story. I think composers were trying to tell a story. I know I've seen a lot of standing and singing that is just that. There's a chance for so much more. Why can't there be both? You stand and sing when it's necessary for the character to stand and sing. But to me, it's all

about the story, and using great music in support of that.

Robinson: I agree with Leonard. I work in opera because I like to tell stories, and I don't really see that there is, in that, any difference between spoken theater and lyric theater. I think there is a balance to be struck between the challenge of the music for the singer and the singer's capacity to do more than stand and sing, just in terms of sheer technical demands, but I think somehow we have a responsibility to make sure that the character is telling a story in that moment, whether standing or moving or whatever it is. As soon as we start to think, "Isn't this wonderful music? Isn't this a wonderful singer?," we're not in a story anymore.

Woodruff: When a production is made, you want it to be unique to the people that are creating it. The strengths of that choreographer, the strengths of that designer, the strengths of that music, the strengths of those singers, and that director's vision — it's essential that all these be allowed to flower.



Mark Duffin as Mao Tse-tung, Robert Orth as Richard Nixon, and Chen-Ye Yuan as Chou En-lai in Opera Theatre of Saint Louis' 2004 production of *Nixon in China*. Photo by Ken Howard.



Cincinnati Opera's 2004 production of *The Maids*, directed by Nicholas Muni. Photo by Philip Groshong.

Marx: There are a lot of different kinds of opera, and there are a lot of different kinds of opera houses. When you think about the working conditions for stage directors, what are the conditions of the field that respect and enhance the theatrical experience, and what are the conditions that limit it?

Foglia: The limited amount of time onstage limits the creative aspect, especially with something big, like *Dead Man Walking*. There are an enormous number of set pieces that are used very

differently in the end product than were originally conceived. I've actually learned in the past couple of years how to work with the limited time. It forces you to think fast. Limitations sometimes cause you to be more creative. But the difference is enormous. In the theater, you get weeks of tech, weeks of previews.

Mattaliano: I would say that the opera profession is still light years behind the theater world, in terms of casting. The concept of the director not being involved in the casting process is unheard of in the theater world or the film world. In film, a casting director, with the director, will spend six months trying to find just the right delivery boy for a one-minute scene. As a freelance opera director, you're often meeting your cast on the first day of rehearsal, and sometimes meeting the conductor.

Marx: Have you all had that experience, of inheriting a cast put together by the musical forces of a company, with no real input from you?

Foglia: That's been my only experience. It's tough. In the theater, there's a saying: If you make a mistake there, there's no going back. And with new productions or new plays, you're actually making a decision on how that play will be perceived for a long time. I find it interesting that, in the original production of *Master Class*, I cast Audra McDonald just because she's a fantastic talent. Since then, everyone casts a black woman in that part.

Robinson: I think it's the single biggest inhibition to fine work on the stage, this notion of casting without the participation of the director. Or without relationship to who else might be in the cast, without considering what the physical production might be. How many times have we gone to the opera to see a Cavaradossi and a Tosca who don't seem to have met yet? There is something essential about creating life onstage, and that is chemistry: that invisible, unknowable essence of one person for another person that creates a love affair onstage. That is either in two people or it's never in two people. The other aspect, of course, is the voice, and the musical forces must have a voice in the casting. But

You can put together a dream cast on paper, and the director says, "I have to meet these people. I have to know who they are." But by the time you have arranged a meeting with the director, the singers have booked themselves somewhere else. The director and the producer can have discussions about what they're looking for in a particular role, but the director, having given their description of what they require, must allow the company to engage those artists that they can find who not only match the director's criteria but also the vocal requirements of the role. It's lovely if you want a six-foot tenor who played college football as Pinkerton, but if we can't find anyone who fits that description who can sing the role, you have to compromise.

For instance, we're doing *Cav/Pag*, and there are a number of different ways you can cast Santuzza. She can be an older woman who got involved with a younger man; she can be a young girl who's naive and innocent; you can play this in any number of ways. Once the director locks in on an idea, he has to be able to trust the company to find someone who imbues those qualities. They cannot expect to sit in on auditions. So much casting is not even done in audition, but with a mental computer bank of who is available and appropriate.

I've worked with a number of important directors, and we have developed a trust. They tell me what they have in mind; it's not as if they personally have to hear every one of them. So many opera directors do not have the experience of who is out there, and there is not always the luxury of time to make them aware of these people. They have to trust the opera companies to find the types they're looking for.

— Jonathan Pell, Director of Artistic Administration, The Dallas Opera



Wayne Strongman. Photo courtesy of Tapestry New Opera Works.

Here in Canada, we've tended to employ film directors, like Atom Egoyan and Robert LePage. I think that's part of the debate. Do film techniques work on stage? Those directors bring both the intense closeup and the spaciousness that a camera can give. I think the most exciting thing is that there's a movement to reinvent how people receive this art form. I know that I love working with people who come out of the theater, because they are looking for the physicality of the actor, for the nuance in the expressive word. It's not just the beauty of the voice. We work in enormous detail now, trying to hit those emotional places.

I had a really shocking experience last year. I was brought in as music director for a piece, and rehearsal time was managed in a way that presumed the music would take care of itself. Everyone came in with everything memorized. I felt there was little room for movement within that. The director worked with the cast on motivation, on character development, but music, in a way, came last, because we knew what was there. That was the given.

When works have been produced over and over again, I think we presume the decisions have already been made. In new work, there is an anxiety, so we turn it over again and again to be sure that we're revealing what the audience needs to receive. I'd like to think that technique could also be used with already well-established works. Certainly, as we "discover" repertoire from previous ages, as with the revival of baroque opera, it seems to me that a similar approach would serve it very well.

I have more questions than answers. How can we make the business of producing the work serve the art? My concern is that reinvention isn't necessarily the way that we're going to rediscover what this form is capable of doing. We need to absorb our contemporary world into it. Does that mean *Seinfeld*? In Verdi's time, opera was popular with the man on the street. Is that what we want? I just came through a clowning workshop. The master clown arrived with the idea that opera was "high art," and clowning was "low art." What we discovered was that both are over the top, and that clowning taps into the tragedy that is so often a part of opera. And we can adopt the pathos of the clown; we can laugh at our frailty, at the absurdity of it all.

— Wayne Strongman, Artistic Director, Tapestry New Opera Works

to truly create something magic onstage, it requires someone who really thinks carefully about this notion of essence or rightness for a part, not just rightness for the vocal line. Those experiences where I've been let into the process have been some of the most successful productions that I've done.

Marx: You've raised the issue of rehearsal time. It doesn't matter if it's theater, dance, or music: No one has enough time. It reminds me that many years ago I had the extraordinary experience to meet Walter Felsenstein. I asked him if it was true that at one point he had kept a production in rehearsal for two years. It was the wrong question to ask. He exploded. He said, "You Americans are all alike I'll admit it happened once in the early 50s with a production of *Carmen*. We could never get it right, and it took two years of rehearsal and re-rehearsal and redesign. It happened once in my entire, long life." Then he, with tremendous condescension and scorn, looked at me and said, "I don't need two years to create an opera production. I can do very fine work in six months." The current practice requires that you work immediately for results. You must stage that scene and move on, today. It's a race against time to get the work on the stage, to get to the result. For everybody involved, it becomes about trying to accomplish the first idea, and maybe you get to the next idea after that — maybe. But there's no chance for real discovery, for something dangerous to happen in the rehearsal hall, something unexpected or astonishing. The only really astonishing thing that happens is that you get it on at all. But in some of the music theater companies I've worked with, in which there are extended rehearsal periods where you really can explore, that's when opera begins to become very exciting. I think each and every day that is added to the rehearsal time allows a process to develop.

Mattaliano: I could not disagree more. What's unique about the opera profession is that there are a number of people who develop working relationships over many years. We're dealing with the language of music, which provides, for those with whom you've developed a working relationship, a certain shorthand that allows you to do very detailed work within a relatively short period of time. I think the whole concept of three weeks versus six weeks versus six months is all very relative. If you have the right group of artists, if you have a sympathetic conductor, and if you're working for an opera company where the general director creates an atmosphere that encourages detailed, meaningful, concentrated work, I've been astounded over the profoundly moving work that can be accomplished in a relatively short period of time.

Foglia: Do you think that applies to new work, though?

Mattaliano: It applies in that, in your situation, you had singers that had known each other for years in *Dead Man Walking*, who could, hopefully, build on those synergies that already existed.

Foglia: We premiered Jake Heggie's *End of the Affair* in Houston a few months ago. This work had never been on the stage. We discovered what it is as we went along. We discovered at the final runthrough that there were things that

weren't clear, and there was no time to fix it. We're in a very lucky position, because there are three more productions, so the opera is going to grow. But you really don't know until the singers are all up there doing it, until there's been an audience and you start to feel the response. I think what you're talking about certainly does apply to famous operas, known operas. But with a new work, the whole process is discovery. What is this story about? You think you know, but you don't really know until it's up there. With something new, you need more time. We made changes — music changes — three days before opening. Those were panicked singers, let me tell you. Welcome to the theater, kids! But they went for it. They were a fantastic group of people. I will say that I had nothing to do with the casting, and they were spectacular.

Woodruff: We work with a lot of European directors, as well as American directors, who need to develop an idea. Kama Ginkas came from Moscow last year and said, "I need 12 weeks to rehearse the play." We couldn't do that, but we wound up figuring out a way to do nine weeks. Krystian Lupa is coming from Cracow, and he needs to do four weeks of a workshop before he does five weeks of rehearsal, so we're going to try to figure out how to do that. Try to treat the project, and the individual artists making it, with the love they deserve, and honor the uniqueness they have. Some people can work better under certain conditions and make something extraordinary, and other people don't need it. It depends on the project; it depends on the artists.

Marx: You've all mentioned opera producers, general directors, general managers. Do you, as directors, really feel supported by producers?

Mattaliano: It's been less than a year that I've been general director of the **Portland Opera**, and I'm in the middle of a fairly steep learning curve. But I'd like to think that my years of being a freelance opera director give me a better understanding of the rehearsal process and the type of chemistry that was mentioned earlier. You can't direct that into a production: You have to create an atmosphere and hire the right people.

Robinson: It's a collaborative sport, putting things on the stage. But in a lot of the regional houses, the artistic director will choose a set, will choose costumes, will choose a cast, then will unleash the director onto that. I wish — here's a plea — I wish the director was involved in helping to shape the production from the beginning. I know that often the choices of sets are limited, the choices of singers and costumes and so on, but I think there really could be a profitable partnership at that time. I'd also love to see more partnership later in the process. I feel that artistic choices are made very much by the producer at the beginning, and then toward the end of the process I can't find my partner. I would very much like to have a partner who represents the audience, someone who is sitting with me in that rush to get it onstage. I would like hear from them at that time in a collaborative way.

Marx: What's the relationship between directors and producers when something does not go well? We all know we're in a speculative business. Everybody has to understand that. What happens to the relationship when the production goes sour?



Sarah (Cheryl Barker) and Bendrix (Teddy Tahu Rhodes) fear for their lives as the air raid sirens blares in Houston Grand Opera's 2004 world premiere of Jake Heggie's *The End of the Affair*. Photo by Brett Coomer.

There needs to be time to build trust between the director, the conductor, the singer. We don't allow for that time, therefore we have to use shorthand and shortcuts. The conductor and singer know how to get it done, and the stage director can get pushed to one side. I think there is a happy medium. I think it has to do more with intent and openness and willingness than actual time. We all know that six weeks of rehearsal, with the stage director — in operatic terms — wasting everyone's time, is not the answer.

A lot of very good work happens, even with limited time, when the three parties are experienced enough. Inevitably, the problem comes with a director who doesn't understand the rituals of opera. They are searching for ways into what both the singer and conductor already understand implicitly. That's why theater directors feel they need more time. We have to create a mechanism by which people can be introduced to the rituals and gain the tools to move a little faster.

For instance, the things that singers can do, vocally. The way they change when they mark and when they sing out full. How to negotiate with conductors on the timing issue. Some conductors believe they alone determine the tempo; some are very collegial and want to develop that with the director. The amount of time people can rehearse — what they can and cannot do in relation to what happened yesterday and what will happen tomorrow.

What do we do about this from a training perspective? It seems to me that we should allow singers to connect with the theater world early on, so they don't erect the normal barriers down the line in their careers. There must be some way, early on, where we help them explore. Opera companies that have training programs have the opportunity to make singers aware that there's this other world that they need to learn about, to understand, to be open to. Inevitably, it will be a part of their working environment. How can different rehearsal processes, different ways of looking at character development, make them better performers? We need to set up mechanisms that work for singers, that help them connect with theater, rather than just torture them and make them feel inadequate.

— Christopher Hahn, Artistic Director, Pittsburgh Opera

Mattaliano: A general director hires his or her artistic team, and once you do that, the die is cast. I would say, in the best of all possible worlds, the producer remains your biggest defender throughout the process, regardless of whether [or not] you fall flat on your face.

Marx: One of the things that I think is missing today is the joy of the defense. One of the great disasters of Bing's time at the Met was a production of *Carmen* directed by Jean-Louis Barrault. It was a legendary flop. I remember seeing a press conference with Bing and thinking, "Oh my God, this is what a producer does." Bing was inordinately proud that he had one of the great titans of 20th century theater at the Met. He got up and said, "A lot of people think Jean-Louis Barrault's *Carmen* was a mistake. I disagree with them all. But even if they're right, I think Jean-Louis Barrault is a genius, and as a producer I would rather produce the mistakes of a genius than the success of a pedestrian artist." Maybe he thought it was as bad as everybody else, but he was not going to let Jean-Louis Barrault be hung out to dry.

Robinson: I think, most of all, the producer represents his community, knows his people. I, as a director, rely on that person to know who I'm speaking to in that particular part of the world. The first time I worked in London, I made assumptions about that audience. Fortunately, I had a producer who really worked with me to understand who [they were] and how to speak to them. It's not a passive activity. I look forward to a collaboration — whether it's "I don't think this part of the story is getting across" or "This isn't the kind of work that my people have been used to."

Foglia: I was interested in what you said, that they know their audience. Isn't it our job to bring something new to the audience?

Robinson: By saying I'm happy to receive notes, it doesn't mean I'm necessarily going to do them. That's my right and why I'm hired. But to have somebody's perspective as I'm going toward the finish line is extremely helpful.

Foglia: With *Dead Man Walking*, there were initial concerns about the audience. People get a little panicked because of certain things in the opera. They have this perception of their audience. I hear that a lot: "Our audience" But it's the same audience that goes to theater. It's the same audience that goes to movies. It's the same audience that watches "The Sopranos." I feel like sometimes the opera audience is treated like they go home and they're locked in a box until they come out for



Opera Company of Philadelphia's 2004 production of Bizet's *The Pearl Fishers*. Photo by Kelly and Massa Photography.

the next opera. They are out there in the world. They've seen naked people. They've procreated. They've done things. This protecting of the opera audience I don't understand. My experience — luckily, joyfully— has been an embracing of the new. I find that they dive in with you.

Marx: Directors, conductors, composers, singers. What are the essential ingredients to make that work? John Dexter once said to me that the single most important thing is having the conductor in the room rehearsals. He said you could track his productions, and the good ones came about by and large when the conductor was with him from day one, and the bad ones came about when the conductor came later in the process.

Mattaliano: I think it's a matter of understanding each other's job, being supportive and respectful of that, and creating an atmosphere where you can all work together.

Foglia: And understanding that the jobs overlap. They have to overlap to some degree. What he or she does musically, let's say in terms of tempo, affects the tension of the scene. Just as I have to understand I'm not directing a play, I feel like it would be nice if they understood they're not conducting a symphony. We're all telling a story.

Mattaliano: I think a lot of it is based on trust. I remember my first meeting with Hugo Weisgall when I worked with him at **New York City Opera** on *Esther*. I said, "There's a scene that looks like an ideal opportunity to compose a quartet. You've got four people on stage, there are various story lines coming together, and I noticed you didn't take advantage of that opportunity. Might you consider composing a quartet this scene?" He said to me, "Young man, in my many years of working in the opera field, I want you to know that any advice I've ever taken from a stage director has always been wrong." I remember thinking this was going to be a very interesting year in my life. On the other hand, he was someone I grew to love very much, and over the course of rehearsing Lauren Flanigan, Allan Glassman, Joyce Castle, all those wonderful artists that did that premiere, there was an enormous sense of trust and great deal of flexibility in the process, and having him involved was very much a part of it.

We're in an art form that attracts people that feel very strongly, that have very strong opinions about what's good and what's bad, what's right, and what's wrong. And I think part of the art of directing is understanding how to harness the intensity of those feelings into something that's expressive and communicative. I think part of what makes a director effective is inviting that difference of opinion sometimes, which can have very creative results. ♦

I think it's possible to create exciting theater with any combination of elements. Rented scenery doesn't mean you can't produce something dynamite. But you have to have a specific idea about how the elements will work together. The *Salome* that we're doing now is rented. I wasn't in on the original discussions with the designer, but I don't feel at any loss as to how to make something fresh with it.

So much of the responsibility lies with the performers. Really great performances can happen in ill-conceived productions. Opera relies on the power of the singing actor, on their ability to take great musical/dramatic material and breathe life into it. The trappings are less important. By the same token, a really great set can look terrible if it's not supported by performers who can match its brilliance.

In Orlando, I can't get away with a bunch of canaries. That might be exciting in another community, where they're looking for voices above all else. Here, it's important that we have singing actors. We can't necessarily sell "names;" if a singer hasn't appeared on Letterman, our audience is not going to respond. On the other hand, there are singers who are now known by our community as singing actors.

Those of us who produce opera should always be looking for things to keep our work fresh. Sometimes we should do things that might not be the most comfortable for us, or that go against our natural inclinations. Find new collaborators — don't always stick with the same director/conductor team. I try to freshen things up for our company by bringing together people whose work I admire, people who perhaps haven't worked together before. That can be uncomfortable at first, but it can also prove to be exciting. If I just stuck with safe choices, it wouldn't be satisfying for me, and it would be deadly for the audience.

— Robert Swedberg, General Director, **Orlando Opera**