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**MAKING AMERICAN OPERA IN THE 1990's:  
The Co-Commissioning and Co-Producing of Houston Grand Opera  
From the 1990-1991 through 2000-2001 Seasons**

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by

Michael Eugene McKelvey, B.M., M.M.

**Treatise**

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## **Dedication**

This document is dedicated to my mother Shirley, my wife Ann, and all of my family, friends and students, who have given me the love and encouragement to continue on my path for all these years.

## **Acknowledgements**

I would like to acknowledge the following individuals for the invaluable personal and archival information they have contributed to this study: Carlisle Floyd, Stewart Wallace, Michael Korie, Christopher Alden, Bruce Beresford, Garnett Bruce, Patrick Summers, Duane Schuler, Paul Steinberg, and Noele Stollmack; David Gockley, Ann Owens, Greg Weber, Rodi Franco, Susan Bell, Laura Bodenheimer and Brian Mitchell of Houston Grand Opera; Dr. Clifford “Kip” Cranna and Bob Cable of San Francisco Opera; Ian Campbell of San Diego Opera; Joe McClain, Susan Threadgill and Vince Herod of Austin Lyric Opera; Chad Calvert of Opera Carolina; Dale Johnson of Minnesota Opera; Robert Lyall of New Orleans Opera Association; Evan Luskin of the Lyric Opera of Kansas City; and Susan Woelzl of New York City Opera. I would also like to thank my co-supervisors, Dr. Michael Tusa and Professor Rose Taylor, and the members of my committee, Professor Leonard Johnson, Dr. David Nancarrow, Dr. Suzanne Pence, and Professor Dan Welcher, for their support of this project.

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Publication No. \_\_\_\_\_

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2004

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This is a study of the Houston Grand Opera and its co-commissioning and co-producing practices with a focus on the seasons from 1990-1991 through 2000-2001. Chapter one discusses the history of producing American opera since its inception, and the role of OPERA America in aiding North American opera companies in regard to communication, producing and financial support. Chapter two surveys selected North American opera companies of varying operational budget levels for their history of commissioning and producing American operas. Chapter three presents an overview of the methods and procedures entailed in commissioning and producing processes, and compares these to co-commissioning and co-producing. Chapter four is a look at the Houston Grand Opera, its history, and co-commissioning and co-producing practices. Chapters five and six are case studies of Harvey Milk and Cold Sassy Tree, co-commissioned and co-produced operas on which Houston Grand Opera served as the lead commissioner and producer. Appendices are included listing the world premieres by Houston Grand Opera from 1974 through 2005; world premieres from the 1990-1991

through 2000-2001 seasons for the Lyric Opera of Chicago, Metropolitan Opera, Minnesota Opera, New York City Opera, Opera Theatre of St. Louis, San Diego Opera, and the San Francisco Opera; samples of advertising from Houston Grand Opera; and co-commissioning and co-producing agreements for Harvey Milk and Cold Sassy Tree.

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## **Chapter 1: The State of Commissioning and Producing of New American Operas**

During the 1960's and 70's, many American opera companies avoided performing new works, let alone commissioning them, for fear of losing ticket revenue. However, with inventive marketing and fund-raising strategies, a very small number of companies of varying sizes have embraced new works and realized a great deal of success for their efforts, both financially as well as critically. The number of American operas commissioned and produced over the past decade, from the 1990-91 to the 1999-2000 seasons, has shown a significant increase from previous decades. During this period, Houston Grand Opera established itself as the leader in the commissioning and producing of American opera.

The intent of this study is to (1) give a comprehensive report on the status of American opera and commissioning of operas by North American opera companies from the seasons 1990-91 through 2000-01; (2) discuss the process of commissioning and producing new operas and compare that with co-commissioning and co-producing practices; (3) examine the history of the Houston Grand Opera's program, Opera New World, and its affinity group, Vanguard; and (4 and 5) present case studies of two Houston Grand Opera productions that were co-commissioned by the company during this period: Harvey Milk and Cold Sassy Tree.

## I. AMERICAN OPERA: A HISTORICAL SKETCH

According to Joan Peyser, a contributing writer to Opera News: “Throughout the twentieth century, literally thousands of American composers were drawn to the creation of opera [. . .] few had any staying power.”<sup>1</sup> Is the standard of success for an opera “staying power?” Is success simply reliant upon what the critics say, or does the audience at-large hold that key in popular opinion? In Ms. Peyser’s article, “Future Indefinite,”<sup>1</sup> she paints a picture of failure by American opera composers for writing music in a tonal vein, instead of daring to break the tide by composing in a musical language that challenges the listener and takes pride in the advances of Arnold Schoenberg and Pierre Boulez.

I do not share Ms. Peyser’s definition of success. The success of an opera lies in its conception and how it is realized through the emotions it evokes on stage through music and drama. In American Voice, Alan Rich describes the seventeenth-century opera, as “a wedding of drama and music on an equal basis, in which the passionate words of heroes and heroines, acting out great stories on a stage, would be matched by passionate tunes and harmonies appropriate to the actions.”<sup>2</sup> In its more than four hundred years of existence, people have debated at great length over what opera is and should be. When all is said and done, though, the ultimate judgment of an opera’s success rests in the hands of the audience members who witness the performance. This

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<sup>1</sup>Joan Peyser, “Future Indefinite,” Opera News Aug. 2001: 7 Aug. 2001  
<<http://www.operanews.com/archives/801/Future.801.html>>.

<sup>2</sup>Alan Rich, An American Voice, Houston Grand Opera Celebrates 25 World Premieres. (Houston: Houston Grand Opera Association, 2001) 7.

same public scrutiny was true for composers such as Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Giacomo Puccini and Giuseppe Verdi, just to name a few. Their works have been discussed continuously since the time of their premieres to the current day. It is the nature of art to raise questions and provoke discussion. Some say that if it ceases to do that, it ceases to be art.

Of all the “classical” art forms, opera is the most expensive. Escalating set and costume costs, building rentals, conductor and orchestra fees, score rentals and personnel expenses for both the artistic and technical staff all weigh heavily on the purse strings of an opera company. This financial burden does not even take into consideration the expense of running the day-to-day workings of the organization. When a company chooses a season to present to its ticket buyers, there is always a bit of risk involved. What if they won’t come? Of course, the company may have a large following of loyal subscribers that come no matter what. But the company must continue to appease these patrons by providing them with consistent, if not progressively higher, levels of talent and production on the stage, which means increased production expense.

Another significant problem every company faces is how to attract new audience members, both from the general public and especially from the younger generations. This sought-after populace may hold numerous prejudices against opera that the company must find a way to dispel. Because of high-ticket prices and the use of foreign languages, opera is seen by many in American society to be written for affluent and predominantly white or Anglo audiences. The roots of this stigma can be traced back to a time when composers presented their works for nobles in the courts of Europe as early as the seventeenth century and operas were quite often written and performed in a language other than that country’s vernacular. The mature story lines of some operas do not make them accessible to young American audience members. Of course, there are

exceptions. Mozart's Die Zauberflöte, for instance, was originally written for the socially diverse audiences of the popular theater in Austria and has a fairy tale story that appeals to younger viewers. A text can always be performed in English, instead of the original language, although the translation does disrupt the natural flow of the words with the music. Supertitles and pre-performance discussions with the audience by opera personnel also help new audience members understand the opera and learn about the history behind the work.

America as a country began with opera in its roots, although it was not a native art form. It was an import, as were so many other things brought over from Europe during the fledgling days of this new country. As early as the mid-eighteenth century, performances of English ballad operas and adaptations of European works into English by American composers can be traced to the theatres of New York and Philadelphia.<sup>3</sup> There were also early operatic attempts by American composers, such as James Ralph and Francis Hopkinson, most by writing ballad operas or masques.<sup>4</sup> Italian opera was also being performed in the early part of the nineteenth century by small independent opera companies brought from abroad, such as one run by the famous singer and vocal teacher Manuel Garcia, which appeared at the Park Theatre in New York in 1825.<sup>5</sup> New York's first opera house, the Italian Opera House, opened in 1833 and burned down in 1839. For thirty years prior to the opening of the Metropolitan Opera in 1883, the opera scene of

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<sup>3</sup>Robert Wilder Blue, "American Opera at the Met. A look at 1910-35." U.S. Opera Web Winter 2002-03: 20 Jan. 2004 <, and "New York" by Irving Kolodin et al., New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., vol. 17 (London: Macmillan, 2001) 171.

<sup>4</sup>Elise K. Kirk, American Opera. (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001) 13-16, 26.

<sup>5</sup>Kolodin, "New York," 172.

New York was dominated from the 1850's into the 1880's by the Academy of Music.<sup>6</sup> Although the Academy of Music featured many American singers, only a few operas by American composers, such as G.F. Barstow's Rip van Winkle (1855) and William Henry Fry's Leonora (1858), were presented. Leonora, thought to be the first grand opera by an American composer to enjoy any true success, premiered on June 4, 1845 at the Chestnut Street Theatre in Philadelphia and was sung in Italian rather than English when it was performed at the Academy in 1958.<sup>7</sup> As for the Metropolitan Opera, few American singers and operas were featured by the company, until Giulio Gatti-Casazza, formerly the director of La Scala, was appointed general director of the company in 1908. Until his retirement in 1935, Gatti-Casazza initiated the production of many American operas, including such titles as Converse's The Pipe of Desire (1909) and Deems Taylor's Peter Ibbetson (1931). Gatti-Casazza was also responsible for enacting the policy that all operas were to be performed in their original language.<sup>8</sup> American opera remained a very important part of the Metropolitan's producing efforts until the 1950's, when American works were presented on an infrequent basis.<sup>9</sup>

Different forms of music have evolved along with the growth of the United States, such as blues, which grew out of the Negro spiritual, and jazz, a further evolution of those styles. The "American Musical" was influenced greatly by the operettas of Europeans such as Rudolph Friml, Johann Strauss and Sigmund Romberg. Many of the foreign-based storylines of the operettas did not adapt well into the new art form of the

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<sup>6</sup>Kolodin, "New York," 172.

<sup>7</sup>Kirk, American Opera, 80.

<sup>8</sup>Kolodin, "New York," -176.

<sup>9</sup>Kolodin, "New York," -176.

American musical. Also, the vaudeville and revues of the 1910's and 20's had a greater impact with their popular musical style on American musical theater than did the late nineteenth/early twentieth-century romanticism of the European composers. Symphonic music and ballet also suffered from the European stereotypes that accompanied these forms of entertainment. During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, all three genres (opera, ballet and symphonic music) survived, but did not flourish to the same extent that they did in Europe. For the most part, they were still European art forms until the twentieth century, when American composers and choreographers began to give them a national identity.

As the twentieth century has made its way into the twenty-first, so has American opera made its way into becoming a genuine American art form. As ballet has been danced to many types of American music (classical, jazz, rock, pop, soul, r&b, etc.), so has opera found its voice in American culture. This is not to say that opera is as popular in this country as the music played on MTV or the musicals appearing on Broadway. But opera does have an audience in the United States, and it is a very loyal one.

According to American composer Carlisle Floyd, opera audiences today, as much as ever, enjoy the spectacle of the art form. There is a desire of the American audience to have a more equal emphasis on the theatrical and musical sides of the production. This was not the case in American opera houses fifty years ago.

This one factor has contributed as much, if not more, than anything else to the widespread acceptance and enjoyment of opera that exists today. We have come to expect singers to be convincing actors and producers nationwide are committed to casting singers who are physically credible in the roles they sing. This has constituted a real revolution in the opera world and one that is directly attributable in part to the three generations



of American singers who have emerged since World War II who, with superior musical training and pride in themselves as singer-actors, set a new standard for singers everywhere.<sup>10</sup>

Floyd went on to stress that opera has the same chance of survival as theatre or film. By its mere dramatic nature and sense of grandeur, opera is an art form that lends itself to multimedia.

The future of American opera in the twenty-first century at this point looks remarkably bright given the large new audience which has been developed around the old core audience, an audience which has a genuine enthusiasm for the art form itself and which goes to opera with far fewer predispositions as to what they expect, and are more open and welcoming in their response. This for the most part should translate into stable support for opera, although, like everything else, opera is at the mercy of economic shifts. Certainly the climate for the new and unfamiliar operas is more cordial today than I ever dreamed it would be in my lifetime, and my private hope is that American composers can provide new operas, which will maintain and even expand such a hospitable climate.<sup>11</sup>

## **II. OPERA AMERICA**

Before a real discussion on American opera can take place, one must look at the evolution of its producing bodies, the opera companies themselves. Like Fry's Leonora, which had a short-termed life and most likely will not be found on the current repertory

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<sup>10</sup>Carlisle Floyd, interview via fax, 11 May 2003.

<sup>11</sup>Floyd, interview via fax.

list of any professional opera company, many American opera companies have failed as well. At times, new companies spring up in their places, such as the case with opera companies coming and going in Los Angeles over the years. It was believed by some that the only place opera was truly appreciated and cultivated properly was on the east coast, particularly in New York.

Rudolf Bing, former general manager of the Metropolitan Opera said in 1958 that in the United States “there is no opera worth speaking of outside of New York...unrehearsed, shoddy performances with no production and bad scenery.”<sup>12</sup> Of course one must take into account that the source of the quotation most likely was a little biased; but nonetheless, with some exceptions such as the Lyric Opera of Chicago and San Francisco Opera, regional opera companies during the first seventy-five years of the twentieth century had not made an impact on the opera world. Most smaller regional houses, such as St. Louis and Cincinnati, were merely stops on the Metropolitan Opera’s national tour, which would bring opera to the heartland. The opera that was performed was in no way “American.” When the Metropolitan Opera tour proved to be fiscally impractical, many of these opera train stops simply folded, while others developed their own companies that would rival the tour. By the 1980's, many of the cities, like Washington and Dallas, which had been tour stops for the Met, could routinely offer better casts.<sup>13</sup> In 1986, Bruce Crawford, the Metropolitan Opera’s president, announced the cessation of the tour and cited that “television productions would be a more efficient method of reaching the national public.”<sup>14</sup> He added that regional opera companies

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<sup>12</sup>Martin Mayer, “Opera America Turns 25.” Opera News 4 Feb 1995: 7 Aug. 2001  
<<http://www.operanews.com/archives/2495/operaamer.2495.html>>.

<sup>13</sup>Nancy Malitz, “Metropolitan Opera Company.” The New Grove Dictionary of Opera, vol. 3, (London: Macmillan Publishers Limited, 1992): 362.

<sup>14</sup>Malitz, “Metropolitan Opera Company,” 362.

would be an alternative for local audiences. The tour concluded on May 31, 1986 in Minneapolis.<sup>15</sup> Although the regional opera companies, both small and large, had now staked their claim as legitimate producing powers, there was no sense of unity among the various opera companies nationwide to establish an American opera scene.

It was not until Glynn Ross, who worked for the San Francisco Opera at the time and encouraged Seattle to start a company, and William Severns, who ran the Los Angeles Music Center, which did not have an opera company of its own, got together in 1967 that talks began as to the potential for a collaboration of American opera companies. Ross called it an “Opera Producers Entity for Related Activity in America”<sup>16</sup> (thus coining the acronym O.P.E.R.A. America). From there, twenty-five companies from the U.S. and Canada were invited to the premiere of Carlisle Floyd’s Of Mice and Men in Seattle, and also to take the opportunity to discuss how the companies could help one another. Bing chose not to attend or have representation from the Metropolitan Opera at the 1970 meeting. Not much organizationally came out of this session, except a five-company co-commission for a new production of Les Contes d’Hoffmann between San Diego, Houston, Seattle, Edmonton and Vancouver, but the idea of cooperation between companies had been planted.<sup>17</sup> A month following the Seattle meeting, Ross then met with several individuals, including representatives from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Metropolitan Opera assistant manager Herman Krawitz and the Central Opera Service, which was the national information center for such things as scores, stagings, productions in the planning stage, professional companies of varying

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<sup>15</sup>Malitz, “Metropolitan Opera Company,” 362.

<sup>16</sup>Mayer, “Opera America Turns 25.” (n. pag., online source)

<sup>17</sup>Mayer, “Opera America Turns 25.” (n. pag., online source)

sizes, and the programs at the university and conservatory level. The C.O.S. was also co-sponsored by the N.E.A. and the Metropolitan Opera.<sup>18</sup> From this meeting, OPERA America was born.

The organization began with twenty-one charter companies of various sizes and budgets. Missing from the original charter list were the Metropolitan Opera, New York City Opera, Lyric Opera of Chicago, and the San Francisco (despite Ross's involvement) and Dallas Operas. These companies made up the five highest budgets of any companies nationally at the time. Ross was able to bring in some notable members to add credibility to the organization: Kurt Herbert Adler of San Francisco Opera; Carol Fox, the founder of the Lyric Opera of Chicago; and Krawitz and Robert Herman of the Metropolitan Opera. With enthusiastic companies and well-known opera professionals as members, OPERA America had thirty-six members by the end of 1972.

Among the matters to which the organization had to turn its attention was the strain put on smaller regional companies in having to compete with the touring entities of the Metropolitan Opera, its tour and the National Company, which was a group of touring young artists from the Met. Besides the presence of the nation's largest company in towns across America, the company's Guild also solicited funds from across the country, which meant that local companies were in competition with the Met for fund-raising dollars. By the time of OPERA America's establishment, the National Company had lost a considerable amount of money and had been disbanded, and the Met's touring operations had been cut back considerably due to budget concerns, but the Metropolitan Opera was still a force to be reckoned with due to its exposure through nationwide broadcasts. It also did not help OPERA America that the company, with an operating

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<sup>18</sup>Mayer, "Opera America Turns 25." (n. pag., online source)

budget that represented one-third of all of the professional opera companies nationally combined, was not a member of the organization. This was also true for some of the other higher revenue companies, but this would change.

Although there were representatives who helped to steer the organization early on, it was not until years later that New York City Opera and the Lyric Opera of Chicago joined. Eventually, OPERA America would draw the attention of important individuals such as Beverly Sills, who had taken over as the general manager of the New York City Opera and subsequently joined the O.A. board, and Metropolitan Opera Board President Bruce Crawford, who attended meetings in 1984.<sup>19</sup>

The organization was better able to serve its members when financial resources and the responsibilities of the Central Opera Service were turned over to OPERA America by the Met in 1991. OPERA America also helped to group companies together by annual operating budgets, thus making it possible for companies working within the same financial parameters to exchange notes on things ranging from production costs to agreements with the local union of musicians. OPERA America places companies into one of four financial categories based on their annual operating budget: Level IV - budgets less than \$1 million; level III - budgets from \$1 million to \$3 million; level II - budgets from \$3 million to \$7.5 million; and level I - budgets more than \$7.5 million.<sup>20</sup>

Of all of the group's accomplishments, its most important work has been in developing programs to promote the writing and performing of American operas. In the 1950's, the Ford Foundation commissioned operas from American composers and

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<sup>19</sup>Mayer, "Opera America Turns 25." (n. pag., online source)

<sup>20</sup>1998-1999 OPERA America Fiscal and Operational Survey Report of Professional Opera Companies. Received from OPERA America 21 Aug. 2001.

librettists, and guaranteed revenue to companies that would perform them.<sup>21</sup> One of the only companies taking advantage of this offer was New York City Opera under the leadership of Julius Rudel. The major disappointment from these commissions was that other companies gave very few second productions of the operas. The Ford Foundation disbanded the program. It was not until the early 1980's that any significant initiative to promote the development of new American opera was put in place. Martin Kagan, OPERA America's executive director, and Howard Klein, Director of the Arts for the Rockefeller Foundation, with the help of O.A. president David DiChiera developed a grant program called Opera for the Eighties and Beyond (OFTEAB). The program was designed to serve multiple purposes. It would supply money first for exploration and then for team building, development, and finally the commissioning and producing of new works.<sup>22</sup> Kagan and Klein were not only to attract contributions from the Rockefeller and Ford Foundations, but also from the Pew, Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest and William and Flora Hewlett Foundations, as well as the National Endowment for the Arts. The program lasted about seven years and gave more than 365 grants to sixty-eight opera companies.<sup>23</sup> Some of the works that benefited from this program were Nixon in China (premiered in Houston, 1987), The Death of Klinghoffer (Théâtre de la Monnaie, Brussels, 1991; Brooklyn Academy of Music, 1991), The Aspern Papers (Dallas Opera, 1988), X, or the Life and Times of Malcolm X (New York City Opera, 1986), Under the Double Moon (Opera Theatre of St. Louis, 1989), McTeague (Lyric Opera of Chicago, 1992), ATLAS: an opera in three parts (Houston Grand Opera, 1991) and Esther (New

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<sup>21</sup>Mayer, "Opera America Turns 25." (n. pag., online source)

<sup>22</sup>Mayer, "Opera America Turns 25." (n. pag., online source)

<sup>23</sup>Mayer, "Opera America Turns 25." (n. pag., online source)

York City Opera, 1993).<sup>24</sup>

Opera for a New America (OFNA) was the next initiative begun by OPERA America with the support of the Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund. The program not only spent money on new works, but fostered audience development and educational outreach projects connected with the operas. During the 1995 season, the program assisted the world premieres of twenty-four operas in North American opera houses. Some of the premiering companies were Houston Grand Opera, San Francisco Opera, Opera Theatre of Saint Louis, Minnesota Opera and Vancouver Opera. One of the crowning achievements for the program was the world premiere of an opera about architect Frank Lloyd Wright entitled Shining Brow that brought international exposure to Madison Opera, a Level IV company with an annual operating budget of less than one million dollars.

To show how this type of support can be beneficial to all companies, but especially those with smaller annual operating budgets, of the 133 operas which premiered by 58 OPERA America companies from 1990 to 2001, 25 percent were produced by Level I companies while 46 percent were mounted by Level IV companies.<sup>25</sup> Contributions from the private sector directly to opera companies and through OPERA America from organizations such as Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund and the Rockefeller and Ford Foundations have become more crucial than ever to help support and encourage the creation of new works. With the fluctuation in the economy of the United States since 2000, governmental support for the arts has been on the decline. During the 2000-2001 season, support from the National Endowment for the Arts

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<sup>24</sup>Mayer, "Opera America Turns 25." (n. pag., online source)

<sup>25</sup>"Quick Facts on North American and New Works," OPERA America April 2001: 2 June 2003 <[wysiwyg://8/http://www.operaam.org/naquick.htm](http://www.operaam.org/naquick.htm)>.

represented less than .17 percent of all income reported by United States opera companies. There was a 7.6 percent decline in financial support in 2001 from the previous year.<sup>26</sup> There is nothing to indicate that this trend will adjust itself in the opposite direction. To put these numbers in perspective, the Canada Council provided 10 percent of total income for Opera.ca companies. This amount accounts for 37 percent of all public support provided these Canadian opera companies.<sup>27</sup> With this decline in public support for opera in the U.S., private support becomes all the more significant. According to OPERA America and its member companies, private support constituted 56 percent of the total income of these companies or \$466,005,727.<sup>28</sup>

With grant dollars available for developing, writing and producing new works, another important question that OPERA America had to answer was: “What constitutes an American opera?” During the era of the OFTEAB, OPERA America President David Gockley, who also served as general director of Houston Grand Opera, and the OA leadership treated American opera as a “big tent, with room for just about everybody who wanted to call what they were doing an opera.”<sup>29</sup> This “big tent” would include projects such as traditional and avant-garde operas, experimental music theatre works, as well as musical theatre.

After programs like OFTEAB and OFANA, the next goal for the organization would be to focus its attention on drawing in the untapped audience that conventional programming had not been able to attract in years past. Marc Sorca, OA’s CEO in the

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<sup>26</sup>“Quick Facts about Opera,” OPERA America n.d.: 20 Jan. 2004 <<http://www.operaam.org/quick.htm>>.

<sup>27</sup>“Quick Facts about Opera,” OPERA America. (n. pag., online source)

<sup>28</sup>“Quick Facts about Opera,” OPERA America. (n. pag., online source)

<sup>29</sup>Mayer, “Opera America Turns 25.” (n. pag., online source)



mid-nineties, said regarding OPERA America's goal for the future: "The next twenty-five years will have to cope with the increasing sophistication of a public that has new visual touchstones. With young composers working on synthesizers, opera companies with acoustical orchestras will have to come to terms with them."<sup>30</sup> Since 1980, opera audiences across the United States have been on the rise. In fact from 1982 to 1992, the U.S. opera audience grew 35 percent. From 1992 to 2002, that number escalated another 8.2 percent.<sup>31</sup> Although the median age for the U.S. opera audience is approximately 48 years old, the attendance rate for young audience members is among the largest of all the performing art forms. In 2002, it was estimated that 25.2 percent of the U.S. opera audience was under the age of 35.<sup>32</sup>

### **III. NORTH AMERICAN OPERA ON THE RISE**

According to OPERA America and the nearly 140 U.S. and Canadian professional companies that are members of the organization, the most frequently produced operas in North America are La boheme, Madama Butterfly, La traviata, Carmen, Il barbiere di Siviglia, Tosca, Le nozze di Figaro, Die Zauberflöte, Don Giovanni and Rigoletto.<sup>33</sup> This list is the basis of what will be called the "standard repertoire." These ten operas were composed by five different men: Gioacchino Puccini (3), Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (3) Giuseppe Verdi (2), Gioachino Rossini (1) and Georges Bizet (1). Besides the fact that all ten operas were composed more than one

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<sup>30</sup>Mayer, "Opera America Turns 25." (n. pag., online source)

<sup>31</sup>"Quick Facts about Opera," OPERA America (n. pag., online source)

<sup>32</sup>"Quick Facts about Opera," OPERA America. (n. pag., online source)

<sup>33</sup>"Quick Facts on North American and New Works," OPERA America (n. pag., online source).

hundred years ago, another thing that they have in common is that none of them is by an American composer. Opera companies in the United States have been producing American operas for more than two hundred years, and in that time only one title from its repertory, Porgy and Bess, has even come close to being in the top ten operas in any given season over the past twenty years.<sup>34</sup>

Although no American operas have made their way into the upper echelon of the standard repertory, this does not mean that there is a lack of American opera being produced nationally. From the 1990-1991 to 2000-2001 seasons, 133 new operas have premiered with OPERA America companies in North America. Thirty-three of these operas received subsequent productions by professional OPERA America members, and of these, twelve operas have received additional productions. In regard to new works in general, OPERA America companies increased their producing of new operas significantly over the same time span. In 1990-1991, there were 34 productions of North American works by OPERA America professional companies. This number escalated to 75 productions in the 2000-2001 season.<sup>35</sup> The most produced America operas over this period are: Porgy and Bess (Gershwin), Susannah (Floyd), Amahl and the Night Visitors (Menotti), Candide (Bernstein), The Ballad of Baby Doe (Moore), The Rake's Progress (Stravinsky), and Of Mice and Men (Floyd). Collectively these operas received 117 productions during the decade.<sup>36</sup> Though this number cannot rival the 190 productions of

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<sup>34</sup>“The ‘Top Ten’ Most-Produced Works in North America for 1980-1981 through 2002-2003 Seasons.” OPERA America n.d.: 6 June 2003 <wysiwyg://121/http://topten.htm>.

<sup>35</sup>“Quick Facts on North American and New Works,” OPERA America. (n. pag., online source)

<sup>36</sup>“Quick Facts on North American and New Works,” OPERA America. (n. pag., online source)

Madama Butterfly and 93 productions of Rigoletto<sup>37</sup> during this same period, it does show an increasing acceptance of these works into the repertory.

#### **IV. OPERA AMERICA: PROGRAMS FOR GRANTS AND FUNDING**

Despite the lack of American works (and twentieth-century operas in general), through the efforts of several companies and the support of OPERA America, the number of new works and new productions of existing works has grown tremendously over the past fifteen years. Programs such as Opera for the Eighties and Beyond and the Lila Wallace Reader's Digest Opera for a New America program have provided funds for companies to produce contemporary works. The Next Stage is OPERA America's latest program to help support the commissioning and production of contemporary works. According to the OPERA America web site:

These new operas need repeat performances so that works of merit will have a chance to undergo the process of reevaluation that could lead to their confirmation as opera masterpieces. [. . .]. The Next Stage has enabled opera companies to give recent and existing underperformed works subsequent hearing, either as they were first produced or in revised versions, allowing a second evaluation by critics and audiences.<sup>38</sup>

Since the 1996-97 season, The Next Stage has provided grant money to member companies for three different categories of the commissioning and production process.

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<sup>37</sup>According to the production rosters provided by OPERA America, Madama Butterfly was the most produced opera by OPERA America companies from 1990-91 to 2000-2001. Rigoletto was tenth on the list with 93 productions. "Quick Facts on North American and New Works," OPERA America.

<sup>38</sup>"The Next Stage: Building a North American Opera Tradition," OPERA America, n.d.: 2 July 2001 <<http://www.operaamerica.org/other.html#next>>.

First of all, there is the Research Grant. This type of grant provides funds to cover the initial expenses to see if a work is artistically viable and to estimate the possible cost of developing a co-production and partnerships. The range of the grant is up to \$2,500. The second type of grant is the Origination Grant. These funds are provided for companies that are attempting to create a new production of an existing work. Companies can apply for either sole applicant support or co-production support. The Sole Applicant support for this grant can receive up to \$40,000 and \$80,000 for Co-production Support. The final grant category of The Next Stage is the Presentation Grant. This grant is intended to “cover costs incurred by presenting performances of an existing production with all or most of the score and text, original production elements, and design elements intact, although casts may be modified.” The Presentation Grant can range up to \$25,000.<sup>39</sup>

Where former programs of OPERA America encouraged the commissioning of new works, The Next Stage is focused on the production of existing works. The main reason for this is that numerous operas produced throughout the twentieth century, but especially over the past twenty years or so, have premiered and then never received subsequent productions. Without additional productions of an opera, it may never have the opportunity to reach its full artistic potential. It is the hope of every producer that once the composer and librettist have turned the completed score over to the director and the production team that no further alterations will ever have to be done to the work. Unfortunately, this is a fantasy.

No matter how polished or seasoned a composer, the reworking of an opera during the initial rehearsal process and even following the premiere is more the norm than the exception. The history of opera has shown that revisions were commonplace.

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<sup>39</sup>“The Next Stage,” OPERA America. (n. pag., online source)

Giuseppe Verdi took detailed notes on the improvements of his operas from one production to another. The stories of Ludwig van Beethoven's alterations and rewrites to his lone opera, Fidelio, are well chronicled. What would make a person think that every aspect of the work (i.e. text, orchestration, vocal writing, dramatic intent, etc.) would be perfect without any sort of real test of the work in front of an audience? This is not to say that composers welcome the chance to alter their "children" following the opening. Many composers and librettists see it as interference and compromise. No matter the case, whether it is through the composer's drive for perfection or a producer's persuasive suggestion, most operas need the opportunity to be fine-tuned to some extent during their formative years.

One example of a work that was possibly fated for oblivion were it not for the willingness of the composer to make rewrites is Dominick Argento's Miss Havisham's Fire, which premiered with New York City Opera in 1979. According to William R. Braun's article, "Rekindling Miss Havisham's Fire," Argento wrote the opera as a "tour de force marathon piece" for Beverly Sills.<sup>40</sup> After much research and experimentation with various subjects, it was decided that Argento's Miss Havisham's Wedding Night, a thirty-minute mad scene for soprano with the libretto by John Olon-Scrymgeour,<sup>41</sup> would be the basis for a full-length work. Sills pulled out of the project prior to the premiere. Once the piece had been expanded into full form, it was determined that the role was so huge in size and vocal demands that it would be split between two singers. Because the opera takes place over several years of Havisham's life, the idea of the character changing physically to some extent was not that far out of the question. But the two-

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<sup>40</sup>William R. Braun, "Rekindling Miss Havisham's Fire," Opera News June 2001: 30-31.

<sup>41</sup>Miss Havisham's Wedding Night made its official premiere with the Minnesota Opera on May 1, 1981. This one-act opera serves as the epilogue to Miss Havisham's Fire.

singer approach did not seem to work. In Argento's words: "Because you get all the sympathy going for Gianna Rolandi (the first singer), who is adorable, and then on comes a completely different singer, Rita Shane, (who was) a wonderful singer. But what should have carried over from the heartbreak that you saw with the young singer is now sort of lost on a brand-new character who walks on stage (and) doesn't resemble the first one whatsoever."<sup>42</sup> There were other problems as well. The opera consisted of two eighty-minute long acts and sixteen scenes. Along with a very large cast, the scope of the piece was too huge. "Some people, such as Rudel (the conductor) and Christopher Keene (the NYCO general director), were feeling some weight in it," said Argento.<sup>43</sup>

Unfortunately for the production, cutting once an opera has opened and begun its initial run is a very difficult endeavor. An attempt was made to trim some length off of the piece, and by the closing performance twenty minutes had been removed from the opera. But as things go in the opera world, the damage has already been done once the review comes out. Despite having no firm offers to produce the opera in the future, Argento did not let the piece fade into oblivion as many new works do following a less than stellar premiere.

I just couldn't leave it that way. I've often told friends of mine that what hurt so much was that I thought it was the best music I could possibly write. The music in it I like possibly better than any music I've written. It became such a white elephant, and it sat there, and nobody was going to touch it in its present form. I thought, I just can't let it sit there like that. I just wanted to get it right.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup>Braun, "Rekindling Miss Havisham's Fire," 31.

<sup>43</sup>Braun, "Rekindling Miss Havisham's Fire," 31.

<sup>44</sup>Braun, "Rekindling Miss Havisham's Fire," 31.

Argento rewrote and tightened parts of the work with the revision of the piece dated 1996. A revival of Miss Havisham's Fire took place thanks to Argento and stage director James Robinson, who staged the revival of the opera with the Opera Theatre of St. Louis in June of 2001. Robinson, a former composition student of Argento, said: "It is such a beautiful piece, and it contains some of his best music. I started taking it around to every company I had an association with."<sup>45</sup> Argento used only the existing music of the piece for the revision. No new music was composed. When a composer lets a considerable amount of time go by between the original composition and work on a revised version, the composer's musical palette may have changed some. Composers evolve as all artists do. As they compose more and experience more, their musical style will change as well. Argento did not want to be accused of writing in a different musical language or the "style currently fashionable" in the revision, as Marvin David Levy had in his revision of his opera Mourning Becomes Electra.<sup>46</sup> In the words of Argento, "When you're trying to write new music (later), because you are a different person, it sounds like someone stitched a blue garment with a tear in it with red thread. There's no possibility that I would be able to go back and recreate music of that period."<sup>47</sup>

Whatever the process and the circumstances leading to the revision of the work were, the St. Louis revival proved to be a successful endeavor. In the review of the production, New York Times critic Paul Griffiths wrote:

Miss Havisham's Fire, the opera Dominick Argento drew from the most unfilled of Dickens's Great Expectations, has been cold a long time. More

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<sup>45</sup>Braun, "Rekindling Miss Havisham's Fire", 31-32.

<sup>46</sup>Braun, "Rekindling Miss Havisham's Fire," 32-33.

<sup>47</sup>Braun, "Rekindling Miss Havisham's Fire," 33.

than 20 years have passed since its unfortunate New York City Opera premiere. But now a vivid production by Opera Theater of St. Louis and a magnificent central performance have rewarded this composer for his patience and rewarded the stage director James Robinson for his faith in the piece and his persistence in persuading Mr. Argento to reconsider the score and tighten the seams. Miss Havisham's Fire rekindled is the hit of Opera Theater's 26<sup>th</sup> season.<sup>48</sup>

It is unfortunate that every opera that has potential does not have a champion to shop it around or a composer with the world-renowned reputation of Argento. Instead, most new operas that are given only a single production never get to realize their potential through rewriting and adjustments. This is why OPERA America and The Next Stage hold so much importance. According to OPERA America, prior to 1990, the number of American premieres was in the neighborhood of two each season. The late 1990's saw that number escalate as high as twenty.<sup>49</sup>

But the question still remains: What happens to these operas after their premieres? Some operas are fortunate enough to have subsequent productions thanks to co-commissioning and co-producing, but what about the other operas? Some operas are commissioned by one company with the sole purpose of celebrating something that either relates exclusively to that company or its constituents. This is the case of New Orleans Opera's recent commission of Thea Musgrave to write the music and the libretto for the opera Pontalba. The story is based on the life of the Baroness Pontalba and many of the

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<sup>48</sup>Paul Griffiths, "Opera Review: Never Got to Cut the Cake but Always a Bride." Rev. of Miss Havisham's Fire, Opera Theatre of St. Louis. New York Times 21 June 2001: 29 Jan. 2004  
<<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res+9D04EFDC1F31F9...>>.

<sup>49</sup>"The Next Stage," OPERA America. (n. pag., online source)



events surrounding the Louisiana Purchase in New Orleans. The timing for the world premiere of the piece in October 2003 coincided with the 200<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Louisiana Purchase and the statewide celebration commemorating that event. One can hope that the opera will stand up dramatically and musically to please audiences across the country and abroad, but it is possible that a company outside of the state of Louisiana due to its regional, and not national subject matter may never produce it.

## V. TRENDS IN AMERICAN OPERA SINCE 1980

Baroque composers such as Caccini and Peri set many of their operas to the stories of the ancient Greeks and Romans. Both composers, who wrote during the early portion of the seventeenth century, set the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. In later times composers derived stories for the operatic stage from literature, mostly plays and novels. As Mozart and Rossini set operas to controversial plays by Pierre-Augustin Caron de Beaumarchais, Charles Gounod is best remembered for his Faust (based on the plays Faust by Goethe and Faust et Marguerite by Michel Carré). Rossini also set two of the French playwright Voltaire's works to music for the operatic stage, Semiramis (Semiramide) and Tancrede (Tancredi). Sergey Prokofiev took on the daunting task of setting one of the masterpieces of world literature, Leo Tolstoy's epic novel, War and Peace. American Bernard Hermann encountered a similar task when he turned Emily Brönte's Wuthering Heights into an opera. And just to show that all literary operas do not have to lean toward the grandiose to be effective, one of the opera repertory's more horrifying operas, Britten's Turn of the Screw, is a setting of Henry James's novel of the same title, and calls for seven singers and uses a chamber orchestra.

Giacomo Puccini's masterpiece, La bohème, one of the most famous operas in the operatic canon, is based on the series of short stories by Henri Murger, Scènes de la Vie

de Bohème (Scenes of Bohemian Life). In fact, all of Puccini's most produced operas are inspired by or derived from works for the stage: Tosca is based on the play La Tosca by Victorien Sardou; Madama Butterfly is based on the play, Madame Butterfly, by David Belasco, which is based on a short story by John Luther Long; La fanciulla del West is based on the play The Girl of the Golden West by David Belasco; and one his most powerful works, Turandot, is based on a play by Carlo Gozzi.

Finally, the most notable example of literary influence upon an opera composer's works could be Giuseppe Verdi and his operatic settings of William Shakespeare's Macbeth, Othello and Falstaff. Besides his Shakespearean settings, other Verdi operas were derived from the dramatic stage. Ernani and Rigoletto were based on Victor Hugo's plays Hernani and Le roi s'amuse. Luisa Miller was inspired by Friedrich Schiller's Kable und Liebe, and Il trovatore was based on the play El trovador by Antonio Garcia Gutierrez. Probably Verdi's most famous and performed work, La traviata, had a literary basis, Alexandre Dumas' play La dame aux camelias.

Just as these operatic masters drew on established works of literature or theater, American composers have followed this same trend in great number, especially since 1980, in hopes of building on the familiarity of well-known stories to draw audiences to the opera house to hear new works. Of Mice and Men, which premiered in 1970, was to be one of the first operas to set the trend for the next wave of literary-based operas. Since that time, some literary-based novels have made memorable impressions on American opera audiences. Dominick Argento's Miss Havisham's Fire (1979) is inspired by Charles Dickens' Great Expectations, and The Aspern Papers (1988) is based on a story by Henry James. The Postman Always Rings Twice (1982) by Stephen Paulus, is based on the novel by James Cain, and Philip Glass drew on Edgar Allan Poe's horrifying story for Fall of the House of Usher (1988). The trend continued in the 1990's and into the

next millennium with such notable literary titles as: The Great Gatsby (1999) by John Harbison, based on the novel by F. Scott Fitzgerald; The Dangerous Liaisons (1994) by Conrad Susa based on the French 1782 novel by Pierre Choderlos de Laclos; and Cold Sassy Tree, based on the 1984 novel of the same title by Olive Ann Burns, and which made its debut with Houston Grand Opera in 2000. Even well known children's literature has been the basis for operatic works. Where the Wild Things Are (1980) and Higglety Pigglety Pop! (1984) are operas inspired by books by Maurice Sendak, who also contributed to the libretti with composer Oliver Knussen.

Some composers reach a little farther out of the mainstream to find their material. Philip Glass's The Juniper Tree (1985) is based on a fairy tale by the Brothers Grimm, and The Making of the Representative for Planet 8 is based on Doris Lessing's Canopus in Argas. Ashoka's Dream (1997) by Peter Lieberson is inspired by a Buddhist folk legend. Tod Machover, one of the contemporary opera world's more avant-garde composers, has two notable works that are based on non-mainstream literary sources: VALIS, which is based on Philip K. Dick's Sci Fi novel, and Resurrection, which is based on the 1899 Leo Tolstoy novella.

The task of creating a libretto from prose genres like the novel and short stories can be difficult and painstaking, especially when the work is well known and the librettist has to keep the opera true to the original spirit of the story. For this reason, some composers and librettists choose plays as the basis of their operas. Operas and plays correspond well to each other since they are both based in dialogue. Since it takes longer to sing a text than to speak it and since operas also use instrumental interludes, plays usually have to be trimmed, but with a well-crafted script already in place, the libretto may not take as long to construct. One significant drawback to using a play over a novel may be the restriction of creativity on the librettist when attempting to adapt the text to

make it less cumbersome for the composer to set or the singer to sing. In some cases, the librettist may not be allowed to alter or add text to make it more singable. The librettist may also be highly restricted in the cuts that can be made to a work. In the case of plays written during this century, the more famous the work, the more restrictions that may be placed upon the librettist by the playwright or his estate if he is deceased.

As was the trend in the middle decades of the century with operas such as Regina by Marc Blitzstein (The Little Foxes by Lillian Hellman), Miss Julie by Ned Rorem (Miss Julie by August Strindberg), The Crucible and Claudia Legare by Robert Ward (The Crucible by Arthur Miller and Hedda Gabler by Peter Ibsen), and Street Scene by Kurt Weill (Street Scene by Elmer Rice), famous plays became the basis of a few notable American operas during the 1990's. The two premieres that garnered the most attention in the later part of the 1990's were A View from the Bridge (1999) by William Bolcom, based on the play by Arthur Miller, and A Streetcar Named Desire (1998) by André Previn, based on what many critics feel to be the finest play in the American theatre by Tennessee Williams. A View from the Bridge received quite a bit of positive press and has the potential to receive numerous productions in the future.

A Streetcar Named Desire has been performed quite a bit for a work that was not originally a co-production. It was originally produced and commissioned by the San Francisco Opera and has aired on the Public Broadcasting System (PBS). One of the factors that might hinder the longevity of this piece is the length of the opera and its slow pace.

Philip Littell's libretto adheres faithfully to the play, with the result that the score resembles an accompanying soundtrack that illustrates rather than drives the action. There are some evocative moments, and Previn writes effective arias around Blanche's monologues, but the heartbreaking

story of failed dreams and lost love in the Deep South cries out for more than a score that trundles along efficiently calling at all stops from Copland and Barber.<sup>50</sup>

Among the causes for these weaknesses are the restrictions put on Littell and Previn by the Williams estate. They were instructed that much of the play was to remain unedited, in particular many of the monologues, which were quite lengthy. With such restrictions put on the writers, they could not easily take the piece in directions that they had originally planned.

There are those contemporary composers who still strive to find subject matter that may appeal to an audience without relying on name recognition from literary or dramatic sources. Many of these composers have taken to using historical and contemporary cultural icons as the subject matter for their operas in order to pique the interest of the contemporary American opera-goer. Some have referred to it as the CNN School of Opera.

Even in the days of the earliest dramatists, subjects that dealt with historical events appealed to audiences. In fact, a large number of the plays in the Shakespearean repertory are called “The Histories.” Most of them deal with the exploits of the various English kings, such as Henry IV, V, VI and VIII, but some of his plays even deal with more ancient rulers such as Julius Caesar and Antony and Cleopatra. Though many opera composers in Europe could not write about their current rulers without fear of consequences if the portrayal was less than flattering, many composers such as Handel, Monteverdi, Mozart, Rossini and Verdi, just to name a small few, all wrote one or more operas on famous or historic subjects.

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<sup>50</sup>John Allison, “André Previn,” The New Penguin Opera Guide. (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 2001) 689.

In an article entitled “Headline Muse”, discussing the opera Harvey Milk, Peter G. Davis lumped the new work in with a collection of “fact-based dramas about real-life American icons” that had been premiered by American opera companies since the mid 1970's. To better encapsulate this genre of operas, he called it “the CNN school of opera,”<sup>51</sup> paying homage in a tongue-in-cheek manner to the twenty-four-hour Cable News Network.

One of the first operas that can be placed into this group is Einstein on the Beach, which made its world premiere July 25, 1976, at the Theatre Municipal in Avignon and then its U.S. premiere at the Metropolitan Opera on November 21, 1976.<sup>52</sup> Einstein on the Beach is an avant-garde creation of Philip Glass and Robert Wilson. It has been described by many as more a piece of performance art than an opera in the traditional sense of the term. It does, however, concern itself with Albert Einstein, the German physicist, and the facts surrounding his discovery of relativity. The work, performed at the Metropolitan Opera House in 1976, but not as a presentation by that company (Glass had rented the theater for the performance), received a great deal of media attention and enthusiastic reviews that helped to put Glass on the American operatic map. Glass would go on to compose two more fact-based operas centering around the lives of historic figures: Satyagraha (1980), which is based on the life of Mahatma Gandhi, and Akhnaten (1984), on Egypt's monotheistic pharaoh.

Another American composer who has made a name for himself with such biographical works is Anthony Davis. His 1986 opera, X, The Life and Times of Malcolm X, centers on the life of the controversial black leader. It was Davis' first opera

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<sup>51</sup>Peter G. Davis, “Headline Muse,” New York Magazine. (April 10, 1995), n. pag.

<sup>52</sup>Keith Potter, “Philip Glass, Einstein on the Beach,” New Penguin Opera Guide, ed. Amanda Holden (London: Penguin Books, 2001), 305.

and he utilized the services of his cousin, poet Thulani Davis, to write the libretto. The piece received its world premiere with the New York City Opera. He later composed another fact-based opera in Tania (1992), which is based on the abduction of newspaper heiress Patty Hearst. Amistad (1997), considered by some to be his most mature work, dealt with the 1839 uprising by African captives on a slave ship and the trial that followed the event.

In addition to these operas, there have also been operas about celebrities, such as Marilyn (1993) by Ezra Laderman on the life of movie icon Marilyn Monroe, Dream of Valentino (1994) by Dominick Argento focusing on the life of silent film legend Rudolph Valentino, and Jackie O (1997) by Michael Daugherty, which focuses on the love triangle between former first lady Jackie Kennedy, multi-millionaire Aristotle Onassis and opera diva Maria Callas. Some of the other “CNN operas” which Davis mentions in his article center on the lives of historical figures as groundbreaking architect Frank Lloyd Wright (Shining Brow by Daron Hagen in 1993), Frederick Douglass (Frederick Douglass by Ulysses Kay in 1991), and Harvey Milk (Harvey Milk by Stewart Wallace in 1995), inspired by the life and death of the first openly gay elected official in San Francisco.

Of all the CNN operas, the ones that have made the most impact are those surrounding world events. There was Tonkin (1993) by Conrad Cummings that dealt with the Vietnam War, as well as The Death of Klinghoffer (1991) by John Adams. The Death of Klinghoffer chronicled the hijacking of a cruise liner, Achille Lauro, in 1985 by Palestinian terrorists and their murder of a paralyzed American Jewish tourist, Leon Klinghoffer. The year 1992 saw the world premiere of John Moran’s The Manson Family: an Opera, which chronicled Charles Manson and his “family” and the hideous murders that stunned Southern California and the world. Probably the most recognizable of the operas of the CNN school is John Adams’s Nixon in China (1987). Alice

Goodman's libretto is a freely based depiction of the events that surrounded President Richard Nixon's historic 1972 visit to China. The production made its world premiere in Houston under the direction of celebrated stage director Peter Sellars. Of the next decade of CNN operas, the one that has created the most talk and critical praise is Dead Man Walking (2000) by Jake Heggie. Actually based on the novel by Sister Helen Prejean, Dead Man Walking: an Eyewitness Account of the Death Penalty in the U.S., the opera tells of Sister Prejean's correspondence and meetings with convicted death row inmate Joe de Rocher. It is not a story of de Rocher's brutal murder of two teenagers, but rather focuses on the morality of the death penalty. In part due to the 1995 Academy Award-winning film version of the novel, the controversial topic, and Sister Prejean's nationwide visibility as an author and spokesperson against the death penalty, Dead Man Walking's premiere received unusual worldwide attention. One unique feature of the opera that differentiated its story from the one told in the film was in the depiction of de Rocher. For the better part of the film, one is never really sure if de Rocher actually committed the murders, and the film becomes the story of a man on death row who quite possibly has been wrongly convicted. In a way, it takes away slightly from the story of the relationship between de Rocher and Sister Helen and the convict's rehabilitation. The opera begins with the audience witnessing de Rocher committing the murders, so there is no doubt to his guilt. With his guilt as a matter of common knowledge between de Rocher and the audience, the transformation of the character through his meetings and correspondence with Sister Helen is even more remarkable and moving.

## **VI. THE DIRECTION OF AMERICAN OPERA**

Some in the world of professional opera feel that we have lost sight of what the real goals are in bringing new works to the stage. Many feel that American opera on the



whole is without identity. Is our goal to create a national identity for our opera? There seems to be no common musical language. In fact, some may ask: “Where is the music?” Christopher Keene of the New York City Opera said in a 1995 interview: “American operas are not music-driven in the sense that the works of the classic repertory are, and as a musician I regret that.”<sup>53</sup> Some feel that American opera is a melting pot of musical influences whose diverse styles stem from our multi-cultural society. American opera can possibly be more closely identified with a closer collaboration of the auditory and the visual, as in the case of Philip Glass’ operas. Most are in agreement that the primary purpose is to build a repertory of American works. But many question the value in developing and premiering a new work if it will only be produced once or twice.

Ian Campbell, General Director of San Diego Opera, approached the subject in a different manner. According to Campbell, many operas should be viewed as “disposable commodities.”<sup>54</sup> Now, such a notion seems to shock most opera aficionados, but there is a rationale behind it. Just because an audience appreciates a work does not mean they want to live with it for the next decade. In fact, if you look at the world of live theatre, most plays fall into the category of “disposable.” Rarely is a play that has its premiere one season brought back within the next three years. Mr. Campbell says:

In opera, for some stupid reason, we think that these works should have a lengthy life to be of any value, rather than treating them as passing entertainment and moving on to the next one. Since we don’t continually remount American operas, saying it is a failure is like saying that the film industry has failed because we don’t keep rerunning films three years

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<sup>53</sup>Davis, “Headline Muse,” n. pag.

<sup>54</sup>Ian Campbell, phone interview, 26 Sept. 2003.

later. What we need to adopt is a more disposable mentality as we do with plays. A theater director can sell a season of four plays and one to be announced. If an opera company would do this, they would not sell tickets. It takes so long to write an opera, to put the voice in the right part, to develop the work, that it is difficult to look upon it as disposable. If we had resident companies, as they do in Germany, with ensembles (of singers), we would all be running a group of composers through our theaters doing disposable operas, writing them for the casts that are in our company. In Mozart's time, people were not looking backwards, but rather were looking toward what he would be doing next. In Verdi's time, they would look to what he was doing next....In opera (today), we say "What was it we used to do?"<sup>55</sup>

Although Mr. Campbell's position is sure to raise debate, it does not address the reality that is opera in the United States. Since most opera houses for Level I and II companies<sup>56</sup> are larger than most of the average repertory opera houses in Germany and Austria, the notion of disposable opera in the major houses of North America is highly unlikely. Not only are the theatres larger and contain more seats that must be filled, but with a larger theatre comes larger stages and the grander productions to mount them. Larger sets and casts also require more lighting and costumes to accompany the other visual aspects. More stagehands have to be hired to maneuver these sets, and costume crews increase in size as well to help with the added burden of dressing the added numbers in the cast. The cost of opera is too expensive to risk failure, especially when a

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<sup>55</sup>Campbell, phone interview.

<sup>56</sup> The OPERA America "Level" system was defined earlier in Chapter 1 and will be redefined in Chapter 2.

company only mounts three or four operas at four performances each on an annual basis in a theatre that holds two or three thousand patrons. Besides the overwhelming need to sell large numbers of tickets, opera companies in the United States have to put a greater emphasis on fund raising from the private sector, since public support has decreased steadily over the past few decades.

We forget that although we still perform the operas of Handel and Mozart, like the plays of Shakespeare, this repertory is merely the tip of the iceberg when it is held next to the number of operas that were composed since the early seventeenth century that are no longer performed. The reason this idea of “disposable opera” is so upsetting to people is primarily the great expense of producing a single opera. To think that \$500,000 to \$1,500,000 would be spent on something that would be discarded after one production is appalling, but then one has to ask why are we producing new works at all. People say: “Why don’t you use that money to produce another La bohème?” The answer is simple: “If we don’t take a chance on these new works, where will we find the next La bohème?”

## **Chapter 2: THE LEAP OF FAITH**

### **Companies that Commission and Produce North American Works**

From 1910-1950, the Met was in the practice of producing an American opera every two seasons on average, but since the 1950's it has rarely produced, let alone commissioned, any new operas until The Ghost of Versailles in 1991. Other companies that were in the practice of presenting new works in the first half of the century also shied away from new works from the 1950's on. In the last two decades of the twentieth century, we can see that the production of American opera is on the rise again, but the questions still remain: "What was the root cause of this decline and what led to the resurgence of the art form?"

Some critics have tried to blame the decline on the musical climate of the 1940's and 50's with the ascendancy of the followers of the Second Viennese School of Schoenberg, Berg and Webern.<sup>57</sup> Although their approach to composition sparked discussion and controversy among the music theorists of the day, it did little to draw traditional opera-going audiences. Likewise, composers who stayed true to tonality did nothing to ingratiate themselves to the new breed of music critics and composers who were crying out for a new sound, or rather a departure from the one of centuries past. No matter the actual cause, one must remember that opera companies are in the business of selling tickets. If a new work cannot get a fair review with the critics for whatever reason or if a new atonal opera does not sit well with a traditional opera audience, the company has little choice but to give its audience what it wants and program more traditional

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<sup>57</sup>Peyser, "Future Indefinite," (n. pag., online source).

works.

In order to chart some of the progress of new operas across North America, the following is a survey of some of the most prominent opera companies in the United States and a look at their commissioning and producing practices. A few smaller companies with distinctive track records in producing new operas are included as well. The companies are arranged according to size of their annual operating budget, and grouped in categories set forth by OPERA America. As provided in the previous chapter, the OPERA America levels are:

Level I: Expenses above \$7.5 million

Level II: Expenses from \$3 to 7.5 million

Level III: Expenses from \$1 to 3 million

Level IV: Expenses below \$1 million<sup>58</sup>

## **I. METROPOLITAN OPERA**

From its first season of 1883-84, the Metropolitan Opera scheduled relatively new works in its early years. Of the first twenty operas in the company's repertory, only four of them were older than fifty years.<sup>59</sup> None of the operas were from composers of North America. Although in its early years the company was never a champion of American opera, it was responsible of bringing some of the most important European operas of the later nineteenth and early twentieth century to this country. Among the operas that made their American premieres at the Met were Richard Wagner's Die Meistersinger, Das

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<sup>58</sup>2001-2002 Fiscal and Operational Survey Report of Professional Opera Companies, OPERA America, received 5 Feb. 2004.

<sup>59</sup>"Metropolitan Opera History," Metropolitan Opera (company web site): 7 March 2004 <<http://www.metopera.org/history/week-961202.html>>.

Rheingold, Götterdämmerung, Siegfried, Tristan und Isolde, and Parsifal. Turandot, Boris Godunov, Simon Boccanegra and Arabella were among the other operas that the Met brought to America for their American premieres. Although the company did not make its reputation on premiering new works, especially those by American composers, it does have twenty-nine world premieres to its credit.<sup>60</sup> Among the most notable of the company's premieres was Samuel Barber's Antony and Cleopatra, which opened the new Met at Lincoln Center in 1966.<sup>61</sup> The production, directed by Franco Zeffirelli, was regarded as a failure due to criticism of the grandiose spectacle of the production, which some critics felt "submerged" the score beneath the "glitter and complexity" of the production.<sup>62</sup> Unfortunately, following the demise of Antony and Cleopatra, American operas did not find much favor with the company for nearly twenty-five years, until the 1990's.

The artistic leadership of the Metropolitan Opera seems to have changed its position on the importance of American opera over the past fifteen years. Although it is noted for the world premieres of such mainstay titles as Puccini's La Fanciulla del West and Il Trittico, the Met had been fairly silent in its premiering of new American works until it commissioned and premiered John Corigliano's The Ghost of Versailles in 1991. The company then followed the success of that world premiere with the production of Phillip Glass's The Voyage in 1992. The 1999 season featured the company's third world premiere in less than ten years with John Harbison's The Great Gatsby. One cannot be sure if the company, which produces on average 24 operas per season, will

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<sup>60</sup>"Metropolitan Opera History." (n. pag., online source)

<sup>61</sup>Peyser, "Future Indefinite." (n. pag., online source)

<sup>62</sup>Peter Dickinson, "Samuel Barber, Antony and Cleopatra," The Penguin Opera Guide (London: Penguin Books Ltd., 2001): 35.

continue the trend of bringing new American works to the stage, but according to a company official there are plans in the near future for two more commissions.<sup>63</sup> A statistic that does not speak favorably for the world-renowned company is the number of American operas that are on the production schedule, but are not “premieres.” From the 1996-97 season through the 2000-2001 season, the Met has only mounted two American operas, Igor Stravinsky’s The Rake’s Progress and Carlisle Floyd’s Susannah. One must understand of course that the Metropolitan Opera is a repertory company. This means that the company will mount a certain number of new productions each season (on average four), and then fill the remainder of the schedule with the recent productions from the previous two or three seasons and popular productions from past seasons which the company keeps in storage. The truth is that the Metropolitan Opera does not have many productions of American works in storage because they have not made the producing of American opera a priority until the past decade.

## **II. SAN FRANCISCO OPERA**

San Francisco Opera, founded in 1923, is the second largest opera company in North American and the largest performing arts organization on the West Coast.<sup>64</sup> Its operating budget (approximately \$56 million in 1998-1999<sup>65</sup> and \$63.5 million in 2002-03<sup>66</sup>) is one-third of that of the Metropolitan Opera. Although over the course of the

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<sup>63</sup>Peter Clark, Metropolitan Opera, response to e-mail company questionnaire of the author, 7 Feb. 2003.

<sup>64</sup>“San Francisco Opera - Press Release on the Company for 2003-2004 Season.” (Supplied by Bob Cable, Public Relations Office, San Francisco Opera).

<sup>65</sup>1998-1999 OPERA America Fiscal and Operational Survey.

<sup>66</sup>2001-2002 OPERA America Fiscal and Operational Survey.

company's history American operas have not taken a prominent place in the company's repertoire, since the 1990's SFO has become one of the most aggressive champions of commissioning original large-scale American operas, second only to Houston Grand Opera. At the conclusion of the 2002-2003 season, of the one hundred and ninety-six operas in the company's repertoire, twenty-five have been American premieres and five have been world premieres.<sup>67</sup>

In the company's inaugural season of 1923, eleven productions were mounted, of which ten were Italian (four by Puccini) and one was French (Gounod's Romeo et Juliette). This trend of producing nine to eleven operas per year in either Italian or French continued until 1927, when San Francisco Opera mounted its first German opera, Wagner's Tristan und Isolde. One of the primary reasons for this European-based scheduling can be attributed to SFO's founder, conductor and first general director, Italian Gaetano Merola. As was the case with the Lyric Opera of Chicago, the European taste of the artistic or general director did not make the roster of this company a welcoming environment for American works. From Merola's death in 1951 through the 1981 season, Kurt Herbert Adler held the position of general director. Though SFO maintained its reputation for high quality productions, only one American opera entered the repertoire during his tenure. It was not until 1955 when an English opera, William Walton's Troilus and Cressida, graced the stage of the War Memorial Opera House, where it made its American debut. SFO followed this up with American premieres of Francis Poulenc's opera, Dialogues of the Carmelites (1957), performed in English, and Die Frau ohne Schatten (1959) by Richard Strauss. In 1961, nearly forty years since the inception of the company, it presented its first opera by an American composer with the

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<sup>67</sup>San Francisco Opera - Press Release for 2003-2004 season.



world premiere of Norman Dello-Joio's Blood Moon. Although there were no world premiere's of American operas from the 1960's until well into the 1990's, the company was a place for early twentieth-century European works to make their American debuts: A Midsummer Night's Dream (Britten) in 1961; Katerina Ismailova (Shostakovich) in 1964; The Makropulos Case (Janacek) in 1966; the world premiere (of the revision of) Royal Palace (Weill and Schuller)<sup>68</sup> in 1968; The Visit of the Old Lady (Von Einem) in 1972; Lear (Reimann) in 1981; The Midsummer Marriage (Tippett) in 1983; and Das verratene Meer (Henze) in 1991. The only exception to this onslaught of European titles was the world premiere of Angle of Repose by American composer Andrew Imbrie in 1976.

During the thirty-three year span from 1961-1994, the company rarely had any American title active in its repertoire. During the Adler reign (1951-1981) and that of his successor, Terence A. McEwen (1982-1988), no significant gesture was ever made to promote native operas. With the exception of Angle of Repose, the only American operas to be presented during this period were Stravinsky's The Rake's Progress (1962, 1970, 1982, 1988), which some may argue cannot be considered an "American" opera, Gunther Schuller's The Visitation (1967), Menotti's The Medium (1986), Philip Glass's Satyagraha (1989) and John Adams' The Death of Klinghoffer (1992), which was a co-commission with six other companies.

In 1992, General Director Lotfi Mansouri, who succeeded McEwen in 1988, introduced a new initiative for the company, Pacific Visions. The program was designed to "maintain the vitality of the opera repertoire through new commissions and the

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<sup>68</sup>Royal Palace originally premiered at the Staatsoper in Berlin on March 2, 1927. The piece was lost during World War II. Upon recovery of the opera, Gunther Schuller reorchestrated the opera for post-war revivals, such as the 1971 Holland Festival. (New Penguin Opera Guide, 1059).

presentation of unusual repertoire.”<sup>69</sup> It was from this initiative that American opera began to take root in San Francisco with the world premiere of Conrad Susa’s and Philip Littell’s The Dangerous Liaisons in 1994. The production, which was a solo commission for the company, attracted worldwide attention due in part to its literary source, the novel, Les Liaisons Dangereuses by Pierre Choderlos de Laclos, which had recently experienced a successful stage adaptation and two different film versions of the original story, Dangerous Liaisons and Valmont. The original production also boasted a star-studded cast of American and international singers including Renee Fleming, Frederica von Stade and Thomas Hampson. Following the success of The Dangerous Liaisons, San Francisco went on to take part in three more highly visible projects. The next production was a three-company co-commission on the life of assassinated San Francisco commissioner Harvey Milk. Harvey Milk by Stewart Wallace and Michael Korie was presented in San Francisco (November 1996) following productions in Houston and New York. With revisions being made to the opera between each production, the San Francisco production was well received by the San Francisco critics and audience. With a successful commission (The Dangerous Liaisons) and two co-commissions (The Death of Klinghoffer and Harvey Milk) produced within a five-year period, San Francisco Opera went on to commission and produce one of the most anticipated operas of the decade, if not the past fifty years, A Streetcar Named Desire. André Previn composed Streetcar, based on the Tennessee Williams play, with a libretto by Philip Littell. It made its world premiere with the company during the 1998-99 season. The production went on to air on PBS. The final production that Pacific Visions has successfully brought to the stage was another solo commission, Dead Man Walking. This first opera by composer Jake Heggie

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<sup>69</sup>“History of San Francisco Opera,” San Francisco Opera (company web site) n.d.: 23 Dec. 2003 <[http://www.sfopera.com/mi\\_history.asp](http://www.sfopera.com/mi_history.asp)>.

was based on the non-fiction book by Sister Helen Prejean, from which Terrence McNally created the libretto. The opera premiered during the 2000-2001 season and was an immediate success. Numerous companies across the United States have since produced the opera, including New York City Opera (September 2002), Cincinnati Opera (July 2002), Austin Lyric Opera (January 2003), and Michigan Opera (June 2003). It has also been produced abroad by the State Opera of South Australia (September 2003).

The company's success in staging new works is partially due to a very sophisticated and progressive audience base, but more importantly a credit to the Board of Directors, who according to Musical Administrator Kip Cranna, is very committed to commissioning and producing new works.<sup>70</sup> To foster this commitment, San Francisco Opera sets aside funds from the annual budget earmarked strictly for new works. It also has individual and foundational benefactors that donate funds to the specific area. Over the years, SFO has received some support from OPERA America and the Lila Wallace/Readers' Digest Fund, which promotes the development of new projects. To gain audience support for new works such as these, SFO institutes special public relation campaigns in area magazines and newspapers, as well as television and radio ads. In the case of an opera like Harvey Milk, the company did a great deal of outreach into the city, especially the gay community, through lectures and discussion panels. Unlike some companies that have experienced a dip in ticket sales of new operas, San Francisco did not feel much of a box office hit, and in the case of Dangerous Liaisons and Streetcar actually reported sold out houses.

Mansouri stepped down from his leadership role of San Francisco Opera in 2001 and was succeeded by Pamela Rosenberg. With the production of five notable new

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<sup>70</sup>Kip Cranna, response to e-mail company questionnaire of the author, 8 Feb. 1999.

American operas since 1992 and a reputation for utmost quality and professionalism, San Francisco may very well be the center of the next wave of American opera in the new millennium.

### III. LYRIC OPERA OF CHICAGO

Because of its stellar international reputation, one might assume that the Lyric Opera of Chicago (LOC) had been in business as long as the Metropolitan Opera. On the contrary, LOC, which was founded under the name of The Lyric Theatre of Chicago by Carol Fox (who also served as general director), Lawrence V. Kelly and Nicola Rescigno, presented its first season in 1954. Since that time, it has grown to become the third largest opera company in the United States with an annual operating budget of \$55 million dollars for a season of 8 productions.<sup>71</sup> Upon the departure of Kelly and Rescigno the following season, the company was renamed the Lyric Opera of Chicago for the 1956 season.<sup>72</sup> During the 1956 season, LOC presented nine operas. Eight of the nine works performed were from the traditional repertory: Don Giovanni, Norma, Carmen, Tosca, Il barbiere di Siviglia, La bohème, La traviata, and Lucia di Lammermoor. The only piece that did not fit with this programming was Taming of the Shrew by American composer Vittorio Giannini. Although the number of operas fluctuated slightly from season to season, the scheduling of a heavily European, primarily eighteenth- and nineteenth-century repertoire would continue throughout the next two decades until the end of the 1960's.

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<sup>71</sup>2001-2002 OPERA America Fiscal and Operational Survey.

<sup>72</sup>“Lyric Opera of Chicago - Historical Overview.” Received 12 June 2003. (Supplied by Mary Franklin of Lyric Opera of Chicago. Source: [www.LyricOpera.org](http://www.LyricOpera.org)).

One reason for this could have been the leadership of the company. In the early years of the company, figures such as Maestro Bruno Bartoletti, who joined the company in 1956, and Pino Donati, who became general manager in 1958, were artistic and managerial forces behind the company. In 1964, the two men were named co-artistic directors of the LOC. Donati's death in 1975 led the company to name Bartoletti as the company's sole artistic director and principal conductor.<sup>73</sup> Although Carol Fox served as general director of the company, a post he occupied from 1954-80, the European influence on the company is very apparent since it's founding. Not only was the repertoire European, the company began to make close ties with overseas opera companies and countries. In 1958, the Italian government gave the company a \$16,000 grant, which was the first of its kind to be presented to a company from the United States. These funds helped to make up the financial burden created by a lack of U.S. funding for the arts at that time.<sup>74</sup> The company also presented the first production of Jenufa in English. The goodwill with Europe continued in 1966 when the company presented a benefit concert to raise funds for the victims of the Arno River flood in Florence, Italy. In 1960, the company presented New York City Opera productions of The Ballad of Baby Doe, Susannah and Street Scene in the city's Civic Center, but no American titles graced its own repertoire list with the exception of Taming of the Shrew. There were some examples of twentieth-century works, such as Berg's Wozzeck, Strauss' Salome, Stravinsky's Le rossignol, and the world premiere of Vittorio Giannini's The Harvest (1961), but even the pieces by Stravinsky can be said to be European. Giannini was the only American composer to have his works produced by LOC during this period.

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<sup>73</sup>"Lyric Opera of Chicago - Historical Overview." (n. pag., online source)

<sup>74</sup>"Lyric Opera of Chicago - Historical Overview." (n. pag., online source)

The rarity of American titles continued throughout the 1970's and well into the 1980's. Operas by British composer Benjamin Britten (Billy Budd and Peter Grimes), as well as operettas, lesser known works by composers such as Donizetti (Maria Stuarda), and rarely performed twentieth-century works by composers such as Francis Poulenc (La voix humaine) would occasionally appear on the season's roster to introduce a kind of "change of pace" from the standard repertoire. In fact, Krzysztof Penderecki's Paradise Lost, which made its world premiere with the company in 1978, was also one of its first commissions. The production reaffirmed the company's close ties with Europe by having it travel to La Scala in Milan. While in Italy, it was also presented for Pope John Paul II at the Vatican in Rome. The strong ties with Italy continued as well. In 1974, LOC hosted the 4<sup>th</sup> International Verdi Congress, marking the first time the function had been held in the United States,<sup>75</sup> and in 1980 the company hosted the Italian Earthquake Relief Concert, which was broadcast via satellite.

The 1980's did seem to mark a significant turning point for the company's identity. Following the retirement of general director Carol Fox in 1981, Ardis Krainik succeeded as general director, and William Mason was named Director of Operations, covering all artistic and production areas. That same year the apprentice program, which was founded in 1973, was renamed the Lyric Opera Center for American Artists to reflect more fully the organization's activities.<sup>76</sup> In 1984, the company began a Composer-in-Residence program and appointed William Neil to the first post. The fruits of the Composer-in-Residence program were realized when Neil's opera The Guilt of Lillian Sloan was performed by the Lyric Opera Center for American Artists. Though this was

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<sup>75</sup>"Lyric Opera of Chicago - Historical Overview." (n. pag., online source)

<sup>76</sup>"Lyric Opera of Chicago - Historical Overview." (n. pag., online source)

not a main-stage production for the company, it was one of the few American pieces it had produced since it's founding some thirty years before. Not since The Harvest by Vittorio Giannini was produced in 1961 had the work of an American composer appeared on the company's schedule. LOC presented the United States premiere of Philip Glass' Satyagraha during the 1987-88 season. The next American opera to be produced by the company was The Voyage of Edgar Allan Poe (Dominick Argento) in the 1990-91 season. Two seasons later, William Bolcom's McTeague became the sixth American opera to join the company's repertory and a trend had been established. From the 1992-93 season until today, Chicago Lyric Opera has averaged the production of at least one American work every season. The Composer-in-Residence program continued to foster the work of American composer's when it presented the 1989 world premiere of The Fan, composed by Lee Goldstein on a libretto by Charles Kondek. Since that time the Composer-in-Residence program has generated such works as The Song of Majnun by Bright Sheng (1992), Orpheus Descending by Bruce Saylor (1994), Between Two Worlds (The Dybbuk) by Shulamit Ran (1997), and Lovers and Friends (Chautauqua Variations) by Michael LaChiusa (2001).<sup>77</sup>

This change in attitude toward American operas became official in 1989 as part of a new artistic initiative put forth by the company, Toward the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. The initiative called for the production of 20 main stage twentieth-century productions during the 1990's with additional contemporary works presented by the Center for American Artists.<sup>78</sup> Besides performing an American opera in almost every season of the 1990's (the 1991-92 season was the exception), the company commissioned three works during

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<sup>77</sup>"Lyric Opera of Chicago - Historical Overview." (n. pag., online source)

<sup>78</sup>"Lyric Opera of Chicago - Historical Overview." (n. pag., online source)

the decade: McTeague by William Bolcom; Amistad by Anthony Davis; and A View from the Bridge by William Bolcom based on the Arthur Miller play. In the company's own informational materials, *Toward the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* is described as "the most important artistic initiative the company had undertaken to date, and one with far-reaching impact on American opera in North America as well as in the international opera community."<sup>79</sup> Despite the great momentum the company has with its producing and commissioning of contemporary works, it continues to break ground with its traditional repertoire as well. In 1996, LOC produced its first complete Ring Cycle. The company presented the work three times in March of that year, practically selling out all of the performances seven months in advance.

Although the Lyric Opera of Chicago existed over thirty years, presenting only one American opera during that time, the 1990's established Chicago Lyric Opera as one of the companies which was going to lead the way in the commissioning and producing of new works for the decades to follow. Upon the retirement and subsequent death of well-loved general director Ardis Krainik in 1997, William Mason was named to the post. That same year, Mason announced the appointment of an entirely new artistic administration for the company. Following the retirement of longtime artistic director Maestro Bartoletti in 1999, the new artistic administration of the company, artistic director Matthew Epstein, music director Sir Andrew Davis and general director William Mason, took office. This new artistic voice of the LOC put into practice two new initiatives for the future of the LOC: The Renaissance Project and American Horizons. The goal of the Renaissance Project "calls for a rejuvenation of several productions in the standard repertoire."<sup>80</sup> The American Horizons program is committed to producing at

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<sup>79</sup>"Lyric Opera of Chicago - Historical Overview." (n. pag., online source)

<sup>80</sup>"Lyric Opera of Chicago - Historical Overview." (n. pag., online source)



least one American opera every season, “including three world premieres over the first decade of the new millennium.”<sup>81</sup> Since its inception, The Great Gatsby (2000-2001 season), Street Scene (2001-2002), Susannah (2002-2003) and Sweeney Todd (2002-2003) have been produced under the American Horizons banner. The first world premiere expected to premiere under the program will be The Wedding by William Bolcom, based on the 1979 film by Robert Altman. The anticipated world premiere for the opera is the 2004-2005 season.

#### **IV. NEW YORK CITY OPERA**

New York City Opera, founded in 1944, was more aggressive in its commissioning and producing of new works than the Met in its early years. The company has a grand history of presenting and premiering new works during the period from the mid 1940's through the 1960's. In fact, one might say that New York City Opera (a.k.a City Opera) is somewhat of a forefather among American opera companies in presenting new American works. Besides being the strongest champion of American opera among Level I companies based upon longevity of activity, New York City Opera continues to be one of the most active companies when it comes to the number of productions mounted per season. Although its 2002-03 annual operating budget of approximately \$35.4 million dollars placed it fifth among OPERA America's Level I companies,<sup>82</sup> City Opera's 15 productions that season placed it second only behind the 24 productions presented by the Met.

As early as the company's fourth year of operation, City Opera presented works

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<sup>81</sup>“Lyric Opera of Chicago - Historical Overview.” (n. pag., online source)

<sup>82</sup>2001-2002 OPERA America Fiscal and Operational Survey.

by Gian Carlo Menotti. The following year, in 1949, NYCO presented its first world premiere, William Grant Still's Troubled Island. This was followed by another world premiere in 1951, The Dybuk by David Tamkin. The Tender Land by Aaron Copland also made its world premiere with the company in 1954. In the 1950's and 60's, the company presented traditional works translated into English to bring in new audience members. Under artistic director, Julius Rudel, the company presented seasons of operas originally written in English in 1958 and 1959, featuring works such as The Ballad of Baby Doe (Douglas Moore), Tale for a Deaf Ear (Valentino Bucci), Trouble in Tahiti (Leonard Bernstein), Lost in the Stars (Kurt Weill), The Rape of Lucretia (Benjamin Britten), Wuthering Heights (Carlisle Floyd), and the world premiere of the twelve-tone opera Six Characters in Search of an Author (Hugo Weisgall). From 1960-70, NYCO produced ten world premieres, including The Wings of the Dove by Douglas Moore (premiered with NYCO October 12, 1961), The Crucible by Robert Ward (October 26, 1961), The Golem by Abraham Ellstein (March 22, 1962), The Passion of Jonathan Wade by Carlisle Floyd (October 11, 1962), Gentlemen, Be Seated! by Jerome Moross (October 10, 1963), Natalia Petrova by Lee Hoiby (October 8, 1964), Lizzie Borden by Jack Beeson (October 25, 1965), Miss Julie by Ned Rorem (November 4, 1965), The Servant of Two Masters by Vittorio Giannini (March 9, 1967), and Nine Rivers from Jordan by Hugo Weisgall (October 9, 1968).

The 1970's did not see the same output in world premieres as the previous two decades. Between 1970 and 1979, New York City Opera produced only three world premieres: The Most Important Man (Menotti) in 1971, Lily (Kirchner) in 1977, and Miss Havisham's Fire (Argento) in 1979<sup>83</sup>, but its commitment to presenting twentieth-

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<sup>83</sup>This was the original production and world premiere Miss Havisham's Fire by Dominick Argento.

century works continued. Another interesting fact regarding the productions of the 70's was that although overwhelming majorities of the works were performed in English, most of the repertory was native to Europe. It seemed as though the encouragement and promotion of American and English works were on the decline.

Following Rudel's tenure with the company, Beverly Sills took the helm as general director in 1979. She was succeeded by Christopher Keene in 1988, who acted as both the company's general and music director. During the 1980's and 1990's under Keene's leadership, the company returned to its roots of producing American works prominently alongside titles from the traditional opera repertory. Although there were not as many commissions and world premieres as there had been in the 1960's, more American titles populated the season rosters. The additions to the NYCO repertoire included Of Mice and Men (Carlisle Floyd), Akhnaten (Philip Glass), Casanova's Homecoming (Dominick Argento), The Rake's Progress (Igor Stravinsky), Mother of Us All (Virgil Thomson), Where the Wild Things Are (Oliver Knussen), Harvey Milk (Stewart Wallace), The Festival of Regrets (Deborah Drattell), Strawberry Fields (Michael Torke), and The Food of Love (Richard Beaser). The company also presented the world premieres of eight new titles during this twenty-year period. The one-act operas, Madame Adare (Stanley Silverman), Before Breakfast (Thomas Pasatieri) and The Student from Salamanca (Jan Bach) premiered together on October 9, 1980. In 1986 and 1988, NYCO then premiered X, The Life and Times of Malcolm X (Anthony Davis) and Rasputin (Jay Reise), respectively. October of 1993 saw the premieres of three new operas on consecutive evenings, Marilyn (Ezra Laderman), Griffelkin (Lucas Foss) and Esther (Weisgall).

One of the more interesting decisions made by the Keene administration was to present not only American operas, but to include American classic musicals in their

seasons in the 1980's and early 90's. Many opera purists were critical of the move to include these titles within the repertoire of one of the country's most prestigious companies. What the naysayers failed to see was the bigger picture. In order for audiences of all ages, economic levels and ethnic backgrounds to appreciate opera, it had to become accessible. One way of doing this was to present European works in English, which NYCO has done since its founding. The other was to welcome a non-opera audience into the front doors with titles that they are familiar with and not threatened by in hopes of their returning for more traditional operatic fare.

From the look of the company's repertoire thus far in the new millennium, it seems as though the New York City Opera will continue its tradition of presenting American opera for years to come. In the 2003 season, NYCO had not only scheduled American works, but also revived two works from the 1960's. To foster the continuation and growth of American works, City Opera has also implemented two programs. Since the 1997-98 season, NYCO has presented an annual Composers' Showcase each May. The program presents unstaged, open-to-the public orchestral readings of new, unproduced American operas featuring the NYCO orchestra and soloists for a two-week period. In 1997, the season also began a Composer-in-Residence program. Based on attendance records from the company and NYCO seasonal scheduling, the public still remains open to and accepting of the new works presented by the New York City Opera.<sup>84</sup>

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<sup>84</sup>2001-2002 OPERA America Fiscal and Operational Survey.

## V. THE WASHINGTON OPERA

Washington Opera, located in Washington D.C. and ranked as the fifth largest opera company in the U.S. during the 1998-99 season<sup>85</sup>, has had a consistent record of producing American works. Since its opening season in 1956-57, Washington Opera averaged nearly one twentieth-century work a year for the first ten seasons. This is even more notable since the company only produced three operas per season. During that span, the company boasted two world premieres, Hindemith's The Demon and a revised version of Menotti's Maria Golovin, and three American premieres. Over the next ten active seasons (the company was dark during the 1967-68 season), Washington kept on its progressive way by giving two more world premieres, Ginastera's Bomarzo (1966-67) and Beatrice (1971-72), and five American premieres.

During the 1979-80 season, the emphasis on twentieth century works seemed to diminish. The company expanded its season from three operas to eight, extending its season into the summer months. The company continued to feature one twentieth-century work per season for a few years, such as Britten's The Turn of the Screw and Stravinsky's The Rake's Progress, but both works were composed a few decades before and for all intents and purposes cannot be classified as "new." There were no new works being premiered whether they were American or European, with the exception of Menotti's Goya, which made its world premiere with the company during the 1986-87 season. Following that season, Washington Opera could have gone the way of scheduling solely standard repertoire and an operetta thrown in to appease the light opera

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<sup>85</sup>Ranked as the fifth largest company in the United States based on the 1998-99 OPERA America Fiscal and Operational Survey Report of Professional Opera Companies.

crowd, but the management seemed to take the progressive path and search for newer titles to put on its season. With the exception of only one season, from the 1987-88 season through the 2000-2001 season, Washington Opera featured an opera from the Menotti repertoire, an American opera (such as Paulus' The Postman Always Rings Twice, Conrad Susa's Dangerous Liaisons, Ward's The Crucible, The Ballad of Baby Doe by Douglas Moore and Argento's The Aspern Papers), or an American premiere of a foreign opera (Savage Land by Jin, Betrothal in a Dream by Krasa and Sly by Wolf-Ferrari). During this period, they also mounted the world premiere of Dominick Argento's The Dream of Valentino in the 1993-94 season<sup>86</sup>.

Although Washington Opera has commissioned and produced a considerable number of American titles in its nearly fifty years of operation, American operas composed over the past twenty years or so seem to hold only a minimal amount of importance for the company. From their consistent average of scheduling one American work per season, Washington has proven to be a supporter of the American genre. On the other hand, the fact that the company has had few commissions and world premieres over the past twenty years has given it the reputation not of a company that augments the American operatic repertoire, but rather one that perpetuates it through performance.

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<sup>86</sup>“Washington Opera, Company History.” Washington Opera (company website) n.d: 5 June 2003 <<http://www/dc-opera.org/main.htm>>.

## VI. LOS ANGELES MUSIC CENTER OPERA

Of the top seven companies nationally in 1999<sup>87</sup> (the Metropolitan Opera, San Francisco Opera, Lyric Opera of Chicago, New York City Opera, Washington Opera, Los Angeles Opera and Houston Grand Opera), all of them gained notoriety during the 1990's by associating themselves with at least one high-profile premiere.<sup>88</sup> Of these companies, Los Angeles Opera made a name for itself with its co-commission and production of John Adams' Nixon in China, which was filmed for television and aired on the Public Broadcasting System (PBS) in 1991. In all honesty, the real credit for the production needs to go to or at least be shared with its commissioning partner, the Houston Grand Opera, which actually gave the world premiere of the work at the Brown Center on October 22, 1987 and was the lead commissioner on the project. Although Los Angeles Opera has numerous twentieth-century titles on its repertory list, such as Albert Herring, The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny, Wozzeck and Salome, the representation of recent American operas is rather minuscule. Los Angeles Opera's world premieres of Tobias Picker's Fantastic Mr. Fox (1998-99) and Deborah Drattell's Nicholas and Alexandra, which made its world premiere in 2003, constitute the company's only American repertoire composed since 1990.<sup>89</sup>

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<sup>87</sup>1998-99 OPERA America Fiscal and Operational Survey.

<sup>88</sup>In 2001-02, Seattle Opera joined and Washington Opera dropped from the list.

<sup>89</sup>"Los Angeles Opera Production Repertoire List." Los Angeles Opera (company web site) n.d: 7 Dec. 2003 <[http://www.losangelesopera.com/company/production\\_list.asp](http://www.losangelesopera.com/company/production_list.asp)>.

## VII. SAN DIEGO OPERA

San Diego Opera is one of the numerous regional opera companies that originally was founded to serve as a stopping place for a tour by a larger opera company. In 1950, the organization was established and presented productions by its neighbor from the north, San Francisco Opera. It was not until 1965 that the company began to produce on its own. From 1965-75, General Director Walter Herbert produced a balance of standard repertoire and new works.<sup>90</sup> Upon taking the helm, General Director Tito Capobianco began an annual Verdi Festival in 1976 featuring international singers such as Joan Sutherland, Luciano Pavarotti and Beverly Sills. In 1983, Ian Campbell, formerly Artistic Administrator for the Metropolitan Opera, succeeded Capobianco and brought the company back to fiscal stability. Mr. Campbell also increased the company's audience base by expanding the season, bringing in internationally recognized singers to sing concerts, bolstered the educational outreach program into one of the finest and most respected in the United States, and set into motion an aggressive program to promote American works, North American Voices Project. As of 1998-99, San Diego Opera was the eleventh largest opera company in the United States and one of the fastest growing. Its budget has climbed from just over \$10.5 million dollars in 1998-99<sup>91</sup> to approximately \$14.6 million for the 2003-04 season.<sup>92</sup>

From its third producing season in 1967, San Diego Opera was already promoting twentieth- century opera when it presented the U.S. premiere of Hans Werner Henze's

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<sup>90</sup>"Overview of San Diego Opera." San Diego Opera (company web site) n.d.: 20 Dec. 2003 <<http://www.sdopera.net>>.

<sup>91</sup>1998-99 OPERA America Fiscal and Operational Survey.

<sup>92</sup>Ian Campbell, Response to e-mail company questionnaire of the author. 24 Nov. 2003.



The Young Lord. In that season, it was one of only three operas presented. Two seasons later, in 1969-70, San Diego Opera's season was expanded to five offerings with Carl Orff's The Moon being the second contemporary work to join the company's repertory. In the company's eighth season, 1972-73, San Diego presented its first world premiere, Alva Henderson's Medea. Although the company would fluctuate in the number of operas it presented in each season (anywhere from two to six) in the 1970's, the administration continued to strive to bring the company into the major ranks by producing the four operas of Richard Wagner's Ring Cycle, one opera per season for four consecutive seasons, and programming American works, such as Menotti's The Saint of Bleeker Street (1976) and La Loca (1979), as well as Frederick Delius's A Village Romeo and Juliette (1975).<sup>93</sup>

By the 1980's, San Diego Opera had expanded its seasonal offerings to eight operas per season (reduced, however to five or six operas by the end of the decade) and continued to promote twentieth-century opera, especially that from the United States. Titles such as Carlisle Floyd's Susannah, Gian Carlo Menotti's The Telephone and The Medium, George Gershwin's Porgy and Bess, and Peter Maxwell Davies' The Lighthouse all entered the company's repertory during this decade. San Diego Opera has also produced relatively obscure works from the European repertoire, presenting the United States premiere of Gwendoline by Emmanuel Chabrier during the 1982-83 season and the world premiere of Riccardo Zandonai's Giulietta e Romeo in the 1982-83 season.<sup>94</sup>

In the succeeding decade, the company would stake its claim as a leader in

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<sup>93</sup>Ian Campbell, company questionnaire.

<sup>94</sup>Ian Campbell, company questionnaire.

promoting American and international contemporary works. During the 1990's and into the next century, San Diego Opera produced at least one American or contemporary work per season with the exception of the 1992-93 and 1997-98 seasons. During this period, San Diego Opera presented Carlisle Floyd's The Passion of Jonathan Wade (1990-91, 1995-96) and Of Mice and Men (1998-99), Benjamin Britten's The Rape of Lucretia (1991-92), the United States premiere of Daniel Catan's Rappaccini's Daughter (1993-94), another production of Gershwin's Porgy and Bess (1994-95), the world premiere of Myron Fink's The Conquistador (1996-97), Andre Previn's A Streetcar Named Desire (1999-2000), and Carlisle Floyd's Cold Sassy Tree as part of a five-company co-commission.<sup>95</sup> In the 2002-03 season, San Diego Opera presented another co-commission, Therese Raquin by Tobias Picker.<sup>96</sup>

From its humble beginnings San Diego Opera has grown into one of the most respected opera companies in the United States. Despite the company's overwhelming success, new works still are not a solid cornerstone of San Diego Opera's mission, and the Board of Directors is unsure of American opera and remains skeptical. A primary reason for this could be that despite educational outreach and other programs designed to draw audiences to these new works, the audience size is generally twenty-five percent smaller for such pieces than for productions of the standard repertoire<sup>97</sup>. Since ticket sales make up nearly forty-two percent of the company's annual budget, such a dip in ticket revenue might make a board member take pause. This being said, Ian Campbell, having been with SDO for twenty years, is a general director committed not only to his

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<sup>95</sup>Ian Campbell, company questionnaire.

<sup>96</sup>Ian Campbell, company questionnaire.

<sup>97</sup>Ian Campbell, company questionnaire.

company, but also to the growth of American opera. In this statement from the company's public relations department, it is clear to see that this is a company that wants to challenge itself and its audience: "Our passionate belief in our mission and our art compels us to seek new audience for opera, to enrich lives and stir the imaginations of all who open themselves to its uniquely magical allure."<sup>98</sup>

## VIII. MINNESOTA OPERA

For a company of its size (a Level II company with an annual operating budget of just over \$5 million in 1998-99<sup>99</sup> and expanded to just under \$7.3 million in 2002-03<sup>100</sup>), the Minnesota Opera has earned a reputation as being a major supporter of American opera by independently commissioning six operas from 1988 to 1995. Since its inception in 1963, Minnesota Opera has been one of the more daring companies when it comes to the scheduling of new works. Since the commission of its first opera, Dominick Argento's The Masque of Angels, in its first season of operation in 1963-64, Minnesota Opera has gone on to be one of the most active commissioning companies in the United States over the past forty years. Some of their works have been major world premieres by notable composers, while other have been smaller and at times experimental works by less well known composers for the educational or new music branches of the organization. Minnesota Opera's commissioned works include: The Horspfa by Stokes (1968-69); Oedipus and the Sphinx (1969-70 season), Christmas Mummers (1970-71 season), and The Business of Good Government (1971-72 season) by Marshall; The

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<sup>98</sup>"Overview of San Diego Opera," San Diego Opera, <<http://www.sdopera.net>>.

<sup>99</sup>1998-99 OPERA America Fiscal and Operational Survey.

<sup>100</sup>2001-2002 OPERA America Fiscal and Operational Survey.

Wanderer by Paul and Martha Boesing(1969-70); Faust Counter Faust by Gessner (1970-71); Transformations (1973) and Black River (1975-76) by Conrad Susa; PDQ Bach's The Abduction of Figaro (1983-84); The Music Shop by Wargo (1985-86); Jargonauts, Ahoy! by McKeel (1986-87); Fly Away All by Hutchinson and Shank (1987-88 season); Cowboy Lips by Green and Madsen (1988)<sup>101</sup>; Without Colors by Wellman and Shiflett (1988-89 season); Red Tide by Selig and Sherman (1988-89 season); Frankenstein: The Modern Prometheus by Libby Larson (1990); Snow Leopard by Harper and Nieboer (1990); From the Towers of the Moon by Moran and La Chiusa (1992); The Diary of an African American by Peterson (1994); The Bok Choy Variations by Chen and Simonson (1995); and Dominick Argento's Postcard from Morocco (1971-72), Casanova's Homecoming (1984-85) and The Voyage of Edgar Allan Poe (1975-76).<sup>102</sup>

Over the life span of the company, it has not only commissioned, but produced many twentieth- and twenty-first-century works as well. In this time, the company has gone on to receive an international name for its world and American premieres of operas such as Dominick Argento's Miss Havisham's Wedding Night (1980-81), William Mayer's A Death in the Family (1982-83), George Antheil's Transatlantic (1998), Edward Barnes' Feathertop (1981-82), Robert Ward's Claudia Legare (1977-78), Henry Mollicone's The Mask of Evil (1981-82), Easley Blackwood, Elliot Kaplan, Frank Lewin, Lewis Phillips and Robert Karmon's Gulliver (1974-75), Lars Werle's Animalen (1984-85), Eric Stokes' The Jealous Cellist (1978-79), Franz Lehar's The Hollywood

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<sup>101</sup>Cowboy Lips was a joint venture between the Minnesota Opera and New Music Theatre Ensemble. Information attained via phone conversation with Dale Johnson, February 4, 2004.

<sup>102</sup>“The Minnesota Opera Repertory (List).” The Minnesota Opera (company web site) n.d.: 22 Dec. 2003 <[http://www.mnopera.org/Company\\_info/repertory.htm](http://www.mnopera.org/Company_info/repertory.htm)>.

Tycoon (1994), Marc Blitzstein's The Harpies (1966-67), Carla Alcorn's How the Camel Got His Hump (1999) and The Cat That Walked by Himself (2000), Oliver Knussen and Maurice Sendak's Where the Wild Things Are and Higglety Pigglety Pop! (1985-86), and The Handmaid's Tale by Poul Ruder (2003).<sup>103</sup>

Minnesota Opera has also furthered the life of many American operas since 1987 with titles added to its repertoire such as John Adam's Nixon in China, Argento's The Aspern Papers, Paulus' The Postman Always Rings Twice, Glass and Moran's The Juniper Tree, and Mark Adamo's Little Women. For a company, which produces an average of four to five operas, a year, Minnesota Opera, which is located in the rather conservative north central United States, averages almost one new American work per season. According to Dale Johnson, who has been Minnesota's artistic director since 1995, not only is the production of American opera important to the company, but it is something to which its board of directors is very committed as well. He also went on to state that the audience is still a little wary of anything new, despite the company's history. They are increasingly receptive to new pieces, though. Also, thanks to the company's history and success with new works, their loyal audience members do give the company the benefit of the doubt in most cases when it comes to this kind of programming. But to insure audience education to new works, Minnesota Opera provides classes and lectures on new works. To support these endeavors, Minnesota Public Radio also quite often provides the company with airtime to promote the new works and reach out to potential new audience members, as well as their loyal following.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>103</sup>“The Minnesota Opera Repertory (List).”

<sup>104</sup>Dale Johnson, phone interview, 26 Sept. 2003.

## IX. OPERA THEATRE OF ST. LOUIS

Like other Level II companies such as Minnesota Opera, Opera Theatre of St. Louis has distinguished itself as a commissioner and producer of new works. In fact, over the past thirty years OTSL, which operated on an annual budget of approximately 6.3 million dollars during the 2002-03 season<sup>105</sup>, could well be the most consistent producer of twentieth-century works, with the exception of companies like Music-Theatre Group and Tapestry New Opera Works that specialize solely in that genre. Since its first season in 1976, Opera Theatre of St. Louis has presented 115 operas<sup>106</sup>. Of that number, 42 of those operas were composed since 1930. That represents thirty-seven percent of the company's total repertoire. The company has also presented 15 world premieres, and of those only one opera was not commissioned by OTSL. These operas include: The Village Singer (1979), The Postman Always Rings Twice (1982), The Woodlanders (1985) and The Woman at Otowi Crossing (1995) by Stephen Paulus; Margot La Rouge (1983) by Frederick Delius, which was not an OTSL commission; Jorui (1985) and The Tale of Genji (2000) by Minoru Miki; Love, Death and High Notes (1988) by Claude White; Under the Double Moon (1989) by Anthony Davis; Laclede's Landing (1989), by James Meyer; The Very Last Green Thing (1992) and The Thunder of Horses (1995) by Cary John Franklin; The Midnight Angel (1993) by David Carlson; The Merchant and the Pauper (1999) by Paul Schoenfield; and Joshua's Boots (1999) by

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<sup>105</sup>2001-2002 OPERA America Fiscal and Operational Survey.

<sup>106</sup>MacKay, Charles. "The Importance of New Works at Opera Theatre of Saint Louis." Public relations document for Opera Theatre of St. Louis, n.d.. Provided by Mr. McKay (via fax) 10 April 2003.

Adolphus Hailstork.<sup>107</sup>

The company also lists 19 American premieres among its achievements.<sup>108</sup> Among these titles are rarely performed European operas by such composers as Jean-Philippe Rameau, Carl Maria von Weber, Sergei Prokofiev, Benjamin Britten, Gioacchino Rossini, George Friedrich Handel and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart<sup>109</sup>. Of what may be of even greater importance to American opera composers, librettists and companies are the revivals of American operas that OTSL has produced. Offering an opera a chance to be revived in many cases means a chance for a revitalized life. A company has to have a great deal of confidence in the potential of a piece in order to revive it. Among the OTSL revivals are A Death in the Family (1986) by William Mayer, Samuel Barber's Vanessa (1988), Black River (1994) and Transformations (1997) by Conrad Susa, Treemonisha (2000) by Scott Joplin, and Miss Havisham's Fire (2001) by Dominick Argento. The number of world and American premieres over the last thirty years or so by the Opera Theatre of St. Louis rivals only that of Houston Grand Opera as a sign of commitment to new American opera during the final two decades of the twentieth and first years of the twenty-first centuries.

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<sup>107</sup>“OTSL (Opera Theatre of St. Louis) World and American Premiere Productions since 1976,” provided by Charles McKay, General Director of Opera Theatre of St. Louis. Received via fax 10 April 2003.

<sup>108</sup>Charles MacKay. “The Importance of New Works at Opera Theatre of Saint Louis.”

<sup>109</sup>“OTSL World and American Premiere Productions since 1976.”

## **X. LYRIC OPERA OF KANSAS CITY**

Lyric Opera of Kansas City is unique among American opera companies. It was founded in 1957 by conductor Russell Patterson and J. Morton Walker. Their plan was to establish an opera company in the European style. The budget for the first season was \$34,000. The company would perform works in repertory, which means that they would run different operas during the same period of time on alternating dates. In such a situation, the company would consist of a core group of singers that would take on whatever roles were needed during the four-week repertory season. This is much different from most American companies that bring in the majority of their principal singers on a “per production” basis and use local singers and apprentice singers to round out the chorus and smaller roles. This is more the practice of larger European opera companies. In the European “House” system, there is really not a “star system” in place, where marquee singers are brought in to star in single productions for these smaller regional opera companies. In a situation such as this, it would be possible for an audience member to view four different operas on four successive nights. Since opening its inaugural season, the Lyric Opera of Kansas City has built a repertory of 88 productions in 46 seasons.

What is even more interesting about this company is that of the 88 productions, 27 are American operas; however, most of these were composed between 1940-70: Amahl and the Night Visitors, The Ballad of Baby Doe, Candide, The Crucible, The Devil and Daniel Webster, Down in the Valley, The Medium, The Mother of Us All, Of Mice and Men, The Rake’s Progress, Regina, The Saint of Bleecker Street, Susannah, The Sweet Bye and Bye, Transformations, and Vanessa. Although Kansas City continued to produce these works decades after their premieres and helped to keep these



titles active, with the exception of the world premiere of Beeson's Captain Jinks of the Horse Marines in 1975, the Lyric Opera of Kansas City had not been very active in fostering newly composed works until recently.<sup>110</sup>

Since the mid 1980's, the Lyric Opera of Kansas City has not only continued to produce American works that have fallen out of the active repertoire of most American companies, but it has taken a revitalized approach toward recent repertoire. In 1998, the company gave its second world premiere, Coyote Tales by Henry Mollicone with a libretto by Sheldon Harnick. The company has also co-commissioned two new operas for its educational touring program. The company produced newer American works, such as Where the Wild Things Are by Knussen and Sendak in 1986, Lee Hoiby's The Tempest in 1988, and a new co-production of Carlisle Floyd's Cold Sassy Tree in 2002. Since its humble beginnings, functioning on a meager budget in a system that few thought would last and producing American titles on a regular basis, the Lyric Opera of Kansas City has grown to a Level II company operating on a budget that grew from about 3.5 million dollars a year in 1998-99<sup>111</sup> to over \$4 million in the 2002-03 season.<sup>112</sup>

## **XI. UTAH OPERA, NEW ORLEANS OPERA AND AUSTIN LYRIC OPERA**

Minnesota Opera, Opera Theatre of St. Louis and Kansas City Lyric Opera are regional companies that have received recognition for commissioning new works for the sake of expanding the American opera repertory, but there are numerous opera

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<sup>110</sup>“Lyric Opera (of Kansas City) Repertoire 1958-2003.” Lyric Opera of Kansas City (company web site) n.d.: 22 Dec. 2003 <<http://www.kcopera.org/s/about/repertoire.htm>>.

<sup>111</sup>1998-1999 OPERA America Fiscal and Operational Survey.

<sup>112</sup>2001-2002 OPERA America Fiscal and Operational Survey.

companies that commission strictly for the sake of creating a special event for their company. Such was the case of Utah Opera and its commission of The Dreamkeepers by composer David Carlson and librettist Aden Ross. This is an opera that has its roots in Native American culture and the prejudices and difficulties it has encountered over the past two centuries. With such subject matter, the opera was a natural fit for the community where the company is located. The premiere of the opera was primarily an event for Utah Opera, a Level II company operating on a budget of \$4 million per year,<sup>113</sup> to celebrate the centennial of Utah statehood in 1996.<sup>114</sup>

New Orleans Opera Association recently premiered a new work to celebrate a special event in Louisiana history. In October 2003, New Orleans Opera, a Level III company, presented the world premiere of the opera Pontalba by composer Thea Musgrave to commemorate the 200th anniversary of the Louisiana Purchase. The opera, based on the events and political climate surrounding the Louisiana Purchase, centers on the life of one of Louisiana's most important women, the Baroness Pontalba. The production was promoted as a celebration of Louisiana and its history and heritage. The production was built in the New Orleans Opera Scenic Studio, many of the principal singers for the production were natives to the state, and the premiere was being done in conjunction with the State of Louisiana and its festivities of the bicentennial celebration.

Operas such as The Dreamkeepers and Pontalba may not be of great interest to audience members from other states such as California or New York due to the regional aspect of the subject. The primary hope is that a great deal of attention will be paid to the project by the hometown audience who have familiarity with the subject matter and by

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<sup>113</sup>OPERA America 1998-99 budget figures \$3,718,114 in 1998-99 and \$4,175,009 in 2002-03.

<sup>114</sup>"The Dreamkeepers," OPERA America's Encore Magazine.  
<[www.operaamerica.org/encore/dream.htm](http://www.operaamerica.org/encore/dream.htm)>.

the national media who will assess the opera's artistic merits. If the opera receives favorable notices and draws interest from other opera companies wishing to produce the piece, it only helps the company in the long run because it will have its name attached to the opera, as well as the possibilities of renting sets and costumes from the original production. If the production is viewed as successful locally or through subsequent productions by other companies, its board of directors may be more open to the prospects of commissioning a new work in the future, as its audience may be more amenable to attending.

In other cases, a company may be trying to grow and challenge its audience by bringing new works to its season. Austin Lyric Opera is one such company attempting to venture in this direction. Austin Lyric Opera, which was founded in 1986 by Dr. Walter Ducloux and Joesph McClain, had not produced an American opera until 1997, when it mounted Douglas Moore's The Ballad of Baby Doe. Although the tonal Baby Doe is regarded by many in the America opera community as a middle-of-the-road, non-controversial piece, there were some associated with the company who regarded the selection as risky for an audience who was used to hearing nothing but the most popular titles in the operatic repertoire. Interestingly enough, although there was some opposition by members of the ALO board to the selection of this opera, there had already been discussions prior to the Baby Doe production of commissioning an opera on the life of President Lyndon Baines Johnson by Carlisle Floyd, who would eventually turn down the project.<sup>115</sup> Baby Doe was only the first step.

The company, which at the time of the Baby Doe production was ranked as a high

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<sup>115</sup>Carlisle Floyd, interview via fax, 11 May 2003, and Joe McClain, personal interview, 14 May 2000.

Level III company and has since grown into a healthy Level II<sup>116</sup>, then became involved in the world of commissioning. With its Artistic Director Joseph McClain becoming increasingly involved with OPERA America and its push for the producing of new American works, the company drawing attention for producing good quality productions while remaining fiscally healthy, and Houston Grand Opera less than two hundred miles away, it made sense that this company on the rise would become part of a co-commission with HGO. During its 2000-2001 season, ALO became the second company to produce Carlisle Floyd's Cold Sassy Tree. Cold Sassy Tree attracted reasonable-sized audiences and mixed local reviews. Once Cold Sassy Tree was completed, McClain then turned his attention to new American operas that were getting a great deal of attention due to their subject matter and literary source, A Streetcar Named Desire and Dead Man Walking. Prior to these productions, changes occurred with artistic personnel of the company, including the removal of McClain as artistic director. Since McClain was one of the driving forces behind ALO's involvement with new works, the prospects for the company presenting American works on a regular basis are uncertain.

## **XII. LEVEL IV COMPANIES**

Although the premieres by large-budget companies of operas such as Cold Sassy Tree, Dead Man Walking, The Great Gatsby and A Streetcar Named Desire gain international recognition by the media, Level I companies do not do the bulk of the commissioning and producing of new works. According to OPERA America, since 1990, 46 percent of all of the new works produced by OPERA America member companies were done so by Level IV companies. Of the 58 companies that produced

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<sup>116</sup>Susan Threadgill, phone interview, 5 March 2002, and 1998-1999 and 2001-2002 OPERA America Fiscal and Operational Surveys.

new works during that time, 18 percent were produced by Level III and 11 percent by Level II companies. Level I companies made up the final 25 percent of the producing companies.<sup>117</sup>

Many of the operas produced by these Level IV companies may never be produced by another company. This fate has been shared by numerous American operas throughout the century, such as William Grant Still's Troubled Island, which premiered with New York City Opera and then faded into obscurity. Operas commissioned, work shopped and premiered by these smaller companies may be labeled as "experimental" or "avant-garde." Some may say that many of them are produced simply to stretch the parameters of the medium. Just as a new opera commissioned by Houston Grand Opera may have aspirations of being the next American opera to join the standard repertory, these new works, produced on a fraction of the budget of their Level I or II counterparts, may aspire to being performed by larger companies or possibly joining the ranks of the most well know American operas, such as Susannah and Porgy and Bess.

Companies such as the Music-Theatre Group, Musical Traditions, Inc. and Center for Contemporary Opera in the United States and Tapestry New Opera Works, Vancouver New Music and the Banff Centre for the Arts in Canada have just as much a chance of discovering the composer that will yield the next "great" opera as any of their larger colleagues do.

Tapestry New Opera Works (known previously as Tapestry Singers and then Tapestry Music Theatre) is one such company that is committed to the nurturing and development of new opera and music theatre. "Beginning with composers and writers, Tapestry provides development, grants financial support through the often lengthy,

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<sup>117</sup>"Quick Facts about Opera," OPERA America.

ultimately rewarding, new works process. Tapestry pilots new works through to production by securing the venue, production partners and financial resources.”<sup>118</sup> The company started by Artistic Director Wayne Strongman in 1977 as an 8-member vocal ensemble that performed completely staged, sometimes scripted theme programs.<sup>119</sup> Since that time, Tapestry has premiered works such as Still the Night by Theresa Tova and Elsewhereless by Rodney Sharman and Atom Egoyan. During the 2001-2002 season, Tapestry had not produced any works for its main stage.<sup>120</sup>

Music-Theatre Group of New York, founded by Lyn Austin in 1970, is one of the oldest and most active companies internationally specializing in new opera. Music-Theatre Group’s mission statement is very similar to that of Tapestry New Opera Works:

From the initial idea to exploratory work, from the developmental rehearsal period to the performance, MTG provides a safe environment that combines artistic freedom and discipline. It is our considerable support that allows artists to engage in significant creative development. MTG furthers the creative process by probing the artist’s singular vision, and inviting collaborators from diverse backgrounds to form unique teams.<sup>121</sup>

In the 2001-2002 season, Music-Theatre Group mounted four productions. The total attendance number for the season was 6,050. This means that on average these

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<sup>118</sup>“Tapestry New Opera Works - What We Do,” Tapestry New Opera Works (company web site) n.d.: 15 June 2003 <[http://www.tapestrynewopera.com/tapestry/what\\_we\\_do.htm](http://www.tapestrynewopera.com/tapestry/what_we_do.htm)>.

<sup>119</sup>Wayne Strongman, e-mail correspondence to the author, 30 Sept. 2003.

<sup>120</sup>2001-2002 OPERA America Fiscal and Operational Survey.

<sup>121</sup>“About MTG,” Music-Theatre Group (company web-site) 19 Dec. 2003: 3 March 2004 <[http://www.musictheatregroup.org/general\\_info.html](http://www.musictheatregroup.org/general_info.html)>.

operas reached less than 150 people per performance. Although such as number cannot compare with the likes of the Metropolitan Opera, the number is comparable to other Level IV companies such as Lake George Opera (4,200 for 3 productions), Madison Opera (6,572 for 2 productions), Opera Birmingham (5,580 for 2 productions) and Ash Lawn Highland Opera Festival (7,575 for 3 productions).<sup>122</sup>

The main obstacle for these companies may be getting the work noticed in an effective manner due to the lack of publicity and notoriety the premieres of operas performed by these smaller companies receive. Notoriety may not be the goal for these companies though. The realization of the completed work seems to be their primary goal, and if the opera continues to flourish once it has left the nurturing arms of the developers, all the better. But with so many critics saying that the new operas being produced today by larger companies are lacking in the elements that will make them desirable to the mass opera-going audience (melodic content, strong storylines, dramatic intensity), who's to say that the next opera to enter the standard repertory and be played alongside operas such as La bohème and Rigoletto will not come from Music-Theatre Group, Center for Contemporary Opera or Tapestry New Opera Works?

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<sup>122</sup>2001-2002 OPERA America Fiscal and Operational Survey.

## **Chapter 3: The Process and Risk of Commissioning and Producing New Opera**

### **I. THE COMPOSER AND LIBRETTIST - CREATING THE OPERA**

The project of commissioning a new work is a multifaceted task for an opera company. First of all, a composer and librettist must be lined up and approved to write the opera. This process happens in a number of ways. A company could actually be approached by the potential creators and pitched an idea for an opera. This does not happen very often, usually because a company has to decide if it is in the proper position both fiscally and structurally to commission and produce a new work in the first place, before ever taking proposals on a piece. But now and then samples of writing submitted to a company may also help make a company aware of undiscovered talent. San Francisco Opera commissioned an opera from someone who actually worked for the company. Jake Heggie, who now is considered one of the most promising in the pack of up-and-coming American opera composers, was given a commission to compose the opera Dead Man Walking after writing some songs for Frederica von Stade, while she was engaged with the company, and then inviting members of San Francisco Opera administration to hear various performances of his work around the San Francisco area. He did this while employed by the company as part of its public relations department.<sup>123</sup>

In many cases, the company may have a relationship with the composer or librettist through a previous commission or they may choose to contact a composer or librettist based on reputation. Once the connection is made, the opera company may ask

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<sup>123</sup>Kip Cranna, personal interview, 23 Nov. 1998.



the team (or individual) if they are interested in working on a new piece, and if they may possibly have some ideas. The artistic director may come across an idea for an opera and approach a composer directly. An outside source may approach the company or an event may be coming up in the city or state, such as a centennial or bicentennial, where the company is located, and the group may decide that a commission may be the best way of commemorating the event.

Companies that commission on a frequent basis may be interested in pursuing work from musicians and writers who do not normally work in the operatic medium. Such was the case with San Francisco Opera and their attempt to team up jazz musician Bobby McFerrin and noted playwright Tony Kushner. McFerrin, an African-American who is noted for his inventive use of the voice as both a wind and percussive instrument, and Kushner, a Jewish homosexual from New York who burst onto the theatre scene with his controversial dramatic offering, Angels in America, seemed as unlikely a pairing as one could find. But that is probably what made the proposition even more attractive to San Francisco. Each pitched the other ideas, but the difference in backgrounds between the two made the finding of a subject that would serve as common ground between them difficult.<sup>124</sup> Caroline was the title of the project that was agreed upon, but McFerrin eventually dropped out of the project. Kushner pursued the project as a musical entitled Caroline and Change, which has since played in New York.<sup>125</sup>

Once the composer and librettist have signed on to the project, and all parties have agreed upon the material, the financial considerations have to be worked out. The fee for commissioning a work is rarely disclosed. According to Ann Owens, Director of

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<sup>124</sup>Kip Cranna, personal interview.

<sup>125</sup>Kip Cranna, phone conversation, 4 March 2004.

Production for Houston Grand Opera, the company has paid anywhere from \$75,000 to \$150,000 to the composer and librettist or to the composer/librettist for a main stage work. The fee for a short opera for the educational program may be anywhere from \$15,000 to \$30,000.<sup>126</sup> That fee also includes the orchestrating of the work, which is normally handled by the composer. The composition team will deal personally with a publishing company as to preparation and rental of materials for subsequent productions, since the commissioner holds no rights over the work itself. The opera, score and libretto, is the property of the creators, unless some other agreement has been reached. The fee for the preparation of the musical materials (printing and copying of scores, etc.) will in most cases be the responsibility of the commissioner.

Once the business side of the commission has taken place, the opera itself must be written. According to composer/librettist Carlisle Floyd, it takes him anywhere from two and a half to three years to finish an opera and have it ready for performance. In Floyd's case, as well as that of Michael Korie on Harvey Milk, the libretto is written prior to the composing of the music. Once the libretto is finished, the composer sets the text to the music. When the score is complete, there will most likely be further revisions, but for the most part the work is complete. In order to do this, the commissioner may take some steps to insure that the work gets completed by the planned date. Since opera companies have to do their programming and hiring for an opera three years in advance, it is very important that a new work be ready on time. This is not only important for the company's production schedule, but also for the marketing, development and sales departments, who will have to make special plans to present the piece to the public and gather potential donors and underwriters.

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<sup>126</sup>Ann Owens, phone interview, 6 Feb. 2004.

In order to insure the timely completion of the opera, the company may put the librettist and composer on a time line or completion schedule. By doing this, the company is asking the librettist and composer to complete various stages of the work by particular dates over the prescribed duration of the total compositional period. Since there is no concrete formula to guarantee the success of an opera, this gives the commissioner a chance to see the development of the piece and make suggestions along the way, and act as an objective (as objective as one can be who is paying for the work) observer.

Houston Grand Opera has found this to be helpful for their purposes, as well as for the composer and librettist. Based on all their years of commissioning, HGO claims that they have never commissioned a work that has failed to make it to the stage. This could mean a number of things. First of all, it says quite a bit for the composers and librettists in whom they put their trust to create these operas. It also may mean that the care and nurturing that the company takes in working with these artists pays off. It could also be interpreted as a sign that the company, who during the 1990's averaged mounting 1.5 new works per season of 8 productions, was very lucky.<sup>127</sup>

All opera companies do not have such luck. Minnesota Opera's Artistic Director Dale Johnson told of the case where they put the creative team on a completion schedule for the commission of the opera, Children of Troy. Unfortunately, the librettist ignored the deadlines. When the company finally received the first draft of the libretto of Act I, they pulled the plug on the commission.<sup>128</sup> Opera Memphis, a Level III company that has done its fair share of co-commissioning new works over the years, had a commission

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<sup>127</sup>David Gockley, response to e-mail company questionnaire of the author. 6 April 1999.

<sup>128</sup>Dale Johnson, response to e-mail company questionnaire of the author. 24 Nov. 2003.

where the writers became too demanding, so the company had to cancel the project.<sup>129</sup> Even the Metropolitan Opera had to end a commission with Jacob Drucker and the composing of his opera Medea.<sup>130</sup>

Besides guaranteeing that the work will be completed on time, a time line also gives the commissioner a chance to get an idea about the piece during its progression that will aid them in other ways. The company will have to hire a cast at least a year out from production. As stated earlier, this process usually takes place two to three years prior to a production from the standard repertoire, but because the new work is still in progress early on, the characters and their vocal demands are not fully fleshed out. When the rough draft of the libretto is complete, it will give everyone a good idea of what characters are involved in the story and their level of involvement. The composer can also tell early on what voice type will probably be used for each character. Since there is so much editing and revising done on a new work, especially in its earlier stages, it would be premature for the company to hire a performer two years out, unless the character was very far along in development. In some cases, if the composer has written initial sketches for certain characters and the general voice quality and persona can be established, the company may try to contract their leading singers a little earlier just to make sure that they have them under contract and secure them for the production dates. Also, if the role is sizable enough, they will want to get the principal singers engaged with the music as soon as possible. Although it was the case with most opera composers before 1890 that composed works for the favored singers of the region or opera house, most contemporary composers do not compose roles with specific singers in mind. This being said, the

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<sup>129</sup>Michael Ching, response to e-mail company questionnaire of the author. 9 March 1999.

<sup>130</sup>Peter Clark, e-mail company questionnaire.

composer, librettist, producer, representative from the musical staff, and possibly director may all have some say in the casting decisions for the opera.

## **II. THE PRODUCTION TEAM AND THE DESIGN OF THE OPERA**

The production elements, direction and design, are put in place once the commission of the music is under way. The producing company hires the “artistic team,” consisting of the stage director, conductor or musical director, set designer, lighting designer, costume designer and the prop designer or master. It is the responsibility of the producer or producing company to compile names, interview potential personnel, and assemble the team. In most cases, the stage director is brought on board first. Depending upon the opera, a director whose staging style matches that of the opera will be sought out. The hiring of a director in the operatic world is different than that of a singer. The director’s involvement with the work will be extended over a longer span of time, since the director will be on board well before the casting of the work. The director will, in many situations, have a say or at least input into the hiring of the designers in order to form a more cohesive bond for the artistic vision of the production.

Once the artistic staff is in place, the entire production team will be brought in by the producing company for an initial concept and design meeting with the production staff of the company and most likely the composer and librettist. Such a meeting may take place as long as a year and a half prior to the production. This time line is necessary to insure that communication begins almost immediately with the various designers and the production wing of the producing company. The planning is vital to the success of the production for a number of reasons.

First of all, a budget for all of the different design areas must be solidified and adhered to. The budget for the set and scenery alone will be broken down into numerous

sections including: cost of materials; labor hours for construction; cost of machinery, such as turntables or any other equipment of this nature that may be necessary for the scenic design; painting, both cover and scenic; transportation of the set from scene shop to the theatre space; labor hours for assemblage and repair or alteration once the set has made it into the theatre; and of course the fee for the design. Matters may be even further complicated when the producing company does not run its own scene shop where the set is to be built and painted. In this case, the job of the construction and painting of the set may be “shopped out” to one or more scene shops run by other opera companies or independently. In this case, the technical director and production manager from the producing company, as well as the designer, have to be in close contact with the contractor in charge of the construction. Such contracting may actually save the company money, since they are not paying for rental, staffing and maintenance of their own facility year round, but other costs may be incurred down the line. The technical director must make sure that the project is staying on schedule, much in the same way the general director must stay on top of the composing of the opera. If for some reason one of the shops falls behind or begins to accrue additional expenses for whatever reason, the remainder of the design elements could be put in jeopardy.

Barring such an occurrence, once all of the set pieces have been transported from their points of origin and arrive in the theatre, they then must be assembled. This is the moment of truth for the designer because if the set has been built in different locations there is no guarantee that pieces will fit or function properly once assembled. If there are problems at this stage, it will be up to the technical director, the designer, the production staff of the presenting company, and any representatives from the contracted companies who may be traveling with the set, to find remedies to make the set function properly in the shortest amount of time. This is where some of the money that the company is saving

by not running its own scene shop may have to be spent.

The lighting and costuming of the opera does not undergo such potential risks or hardships, but the jobs of their designers are by no means without stress or importance. The color palette of the design is as important to the lighting as it is to that of the set and costumes. The style of all of the elements (lighting, costume, set) must work in tandem as well. If the set design is of a surreal nature and the costumes are of a realistic fashion, one design may completely offset the other. If the costumer does not give the lighting designer a specific concept of the colors and materials with which the costumes will be made, there is a good chance that the lighting plot will not do anything to accentuate the costumes, and may very well lessen their effect on stage.

The lighting designer must also concern himself with numerous considerations, such as the specifications of the theater in which the opera will be taking place. No two theaters are designed exactly the same. The way the lighting supports or scaffolding from which the lights will be hung in the house (i.e. audience area) may differ greatly from theater to theater, which affects the throw and angle of the lights. This will in turn affect the manner in which the light will hit the stage. Also, the lighting grid or electric beams on which the lights will be hung over the stage may differ in length to the stage deck and spacing.

Various companies will own different lighting instruments as well. For example, a Level III company that runs on an annual operating budget of 1.5 million dollars a year for a three production season may not own any robotic lighting instruments or projectors, but may be doing an opera which is highly technical in its design and calls for something along the lines of “rock show” lighting. In order to achieve this effect, the equipment will have to be purchased, rented or borrowed. Along with this, a special operator and additional technical time to program the lights may be needed, which will affect both the

budget and the production schedule.

A major concern for the costume designer is to have access to the performers. In the case of a new production, all costumes have to be built from scratch. But, prior to any construction, the designs have to meet with the approval of the stage director and the producing company. Once the designs for all of the characters have been approved, the designer must go through the arduous task of compiling the measurements for all of the principal singers, chorus members and supernumeraries. A cast may number from ten performers to three hundred depending on the grandeur of the opera. Many of the performers may wear multiple costumes throughout the course of a performance. Planning must start well in advance. Since the principal performers may be performing in various locations, possibly around the world, measurements may be sent to the designer from the current production in which the performer is working. If the designer is fortunate, the performer may have them on file with the company's costume department if they have performed there before, but then he or she has to check to see if that person's body has undergone any significant change (i.e. weight loss or gain) since the original measurements were taken. The company's wardrobe personnel, who may possibly have these measurements on file, but would then have to update them, will supply measurements for the chorus.

It is also important for the costumers to have a working knowledge of the opera, not only for the setting and style of the piece, but also for the functionality of the costumes. If there are physical acts that the performers must do, such as fighting or dancing, or if the costume has to be put through any sort of special circumstance like being torn or getting wet, it is vitally important for the designer to know before actually constructing the garment.

Another situation that the costume designer may face, which greatly affects the



costume budget as well, is the double casting of a production. Due to the demands on the voice, opera singers usually will take one or two nights off between performances. What larger companies, such as Houston Grand Opera or the Lyric Opera of Chicago, do on the off-nights is run one or possibly two more productions in repertory so there will be something playing during the “dark” nights. In order to do this, the company must have control of the theater space, a facility to store multiple productions of sets and costumes (as well as lighting) running concurrently, and also have an audience base that will support this amount of performances. Unfortunately, most Level II and III companies do not have this sort of freedom with their facility or an audience base that will support a production schedule that performs with this kind of frequency. So, to make sure that the dates of the production can be placed closer together, the company may opt to hire two performers for all of the principal roles. Since opera singers are customarily paid by the performance, rather than by the week, as is the case with stage actors who belong to Actors’ Equity, there really is not that much added expense in bringing in a second cast. The additional cost may include more expenditure on housing or travel, but there will most definitely be a considerable increase in the costume area of the budget. Since opera singers are not all built the same, and more often than not the physical attributes of a performer may take second consideration to the performer’s talent, in most cases a second set of costumes will have to be constructed.

In a new production, the position of “assistant” takes on even greater importance than in the remounting of an existing production. In this case, the assistant director or designer may act as the conduit to the production in their given area since many designers and directors involved with world premieres of new works quite often are professionals of solid reputations and busy schedules. If another company wishes to mount the new production, in most cases the original artistic personnel may not be available for the

remount or the budget may not be such that the original director could be brought in to restage the opera. In that case, the assignment may then fall to the assistant director or designer who was privy to all of the original work on the production. If it is the case of a remounting of the full production, the original artistic team would all get credit and most likely a royalty fee for use of their original creation. Such arrangements for creation credit and royalty fees are built into the rental agreement from the primary company. It is also part of the rental agreement that personnel associated with the production from the originating company will accompany the set and the costumes to the renting city to help organize the assemblage of the set and maintenance of the costumes. This personnel is brought in at the expense of the renting company. So even if a company wishes to rent a new production, there are a number of fees compounded upon the base rental fee.

### **III. CASTING OF SINGERS AND PREPARATION OF ROLES**

A major factor regarding casting that is not common knowledge to the average audience member is the length of time it takes a singer to learn a new role and the rehearsal time in mounting a new piece. Quite often with regional opera companies, principal singers cannot be brought in for extended amounts of time for rehearsal due to the expense, as well as the demands on the singers' schedules. Many companies must mount their productions in anywhere from two to four weeks with the principal singers. This does not allow a tremendous amount of time for the singers to receive extensive coachings on the music or to do dramaturgical research in order to prepare adequately the role. So, it becomes the responsibility of the singer to learn the piece prior to arriving for rehearsals. With pieces from the standard repertoire, like La bohème and Die Zauberflöte, this is the expectation. When a singer has been contracted two years prior to perform a work from the standard repertoire or even one that is a little more obscure,

such as Giacomo Meyerbeer's Robert le diable, there is suitable time to coach the piece, work out any difficulties with the language, and research the role. When a new work is presented to a singer with a shorter time line before beginning production, the period of preparation in which the singer has to learn the piece becomes greatly compressed. One must also remember that the singer will have to be able to be flexible and learn the numerous revisions that may come his or her way once the rehearsal process begins.

The opera will usually go through several transformations during the composition period. Over this time, the piece may be presented using members from the company's apprentice program or "workshopped" with young singers for members of the administration and design team. Sometimes recordings will be made as well to chronicle the progress of the piece, as well as to supply the company with something tangible to use as reference materials for artistic and support staff.

Once in rehearsals, the opera as a composition is not complete by any stretch of the imagination. At the beginning of the rehearsal period, music will be coached by the conductor or a member of the music staff. For a new work, quite often the composer and librettist will be on hand to make adjustments and discuss alterations with the performers and conductor. A sing-through will often take place once all coaching has commenced and staging has begun. Further tailoring of the music may be necessary during the technical period of the opera, where set changes and lighting elements are added to the production. It is at this point that the artistic staff, including the compositional team, may discover that additional music may be needed in certain places to accommodate scenic transitions and such. Music may also be omitted if it is discovered that some scenes may be sluggish and need tightening. Any editing of the music at this point in the process is extreme due to the time restrictions placed upon the singers for re-memorization and the orchestra with limited rehearsal time to put changes in place. Most alterations of this

kind are done in run-through rehearsals prior to “tech” or the material is simply left in for the premiere and possibly changed for the subsequent productions.

#### **IV. THE CO-COMMISSION AND CO-PRODUCTION**

With the great expense incurred through all of the facets of creating and mounting a new work, the cost and coordination may be too much for one company endure. It is for this reason that many companies join forces and “co-commission” new works or “co-produce” new productions of existing titles. According to HGO’s David Gockley, all companies share equally in the expense of commissioning and producing a new work.<sup>131</sup> One should take into account that besides the cost of paying the composer and librettist to create the opera, there are numerous other expenses that will arise in the commissioning and producing an opera. For instance, if a company commissions a new work, besides paying a composer and librettist, the company also incurs the following expenses: a music copyist; travel expenses to assemble the artistic team periodically to hear and make comments on the work in progress; singers to learn and perform the music if the company is “workshopping” the opera; salaries for all members of the artistic team and those who work under them; the production staff - stage managers, chorus master, a rehearsal accompanist, lighting hangers and electricians, carpenters and painters, a prop master and crew, a backstage running crew, orchestra members, costume builders and seamstresses; rental of rehearsal facilities; production support staff such as marketing and publicity personnel; and finally, the singers - both principal and chorus. Since the work is newly in existence, everything has to be created. For this reason, many companies have looked to co-commissioning and producing in order to be part of the premiere of a new work.

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<sup>131</sup>David Gockley, interview via e-mail, 10 Jan. 2003.

Although this seems like a logical solution to the financial dilemma that most companies are facing today, there are some drawbacks to co-commissioning. One reason a company may not want to join with other companies to share the piece is the “performance order”. “Performance order” refers to the order in which each company will get to present the work. A reason this is significant is the right to claim the “premiere” of the opera. A draw for the media and audience members, as well as both private and corporate benefactors, is the chance to be associated with the opera’s world premiere. Robert Lyall, artistic director of New Orleans Opera, explained that the key to gaining funding for Pontalba was the fact that the opera was going to have its world premiere with the company.<sup>132</sup>

In the case of a co-commission, the premiere usually goes to the lead company on the commission, thus putting the other companies involved in the position to sell their benefactors on the idea that they are taking part in the producing of a new American work, or something to that effect. The same rationale applies to the audience. Unless there is something that can draw an audience to a new opera such as name recognition, like A Streetcar Named Desire or Of Mice and Men, there may not be anything to attract the average audience member to the production. In this instance, the billing “World Premiere” can be of great benefit when selling tickets. Some American companies have commissioned works with their European counterparts, so if they do not get the world premiere, they can still boast the “American Premiere.” This was the case with John Adams’ The Death of Klinghoffer, which was a co-commission between Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie, Brooklyn Academy of Music, Opéra de Lyon, Glyndebourne Festival, Los Angeles Festival, and the San Francisco Opera. The world premiere was presented

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<sup>132</sup>Robert Lyall, personal interview, 13 March 2002.

by Théâtre Royal de la Monnaie in Brussels on March 19, 1991, and the U.S. premiere was given by the Brooklyn Academy of Music in New York on September 5, 1991. If an opera company is involved with a project, but not fortunate enough to present either the world or U.S. premiere, it might try to distinguish its production as a regional premiere, such as “West Coast Premiere” or “Southwest Premiere.”

There is yet another drawback to being the third or fourth company in line for a new opera. With the tremendous advancements in technology over the past fifty or so years, the critical success or failure of an opera will be world news the morning following its premiere. It is true that composers such as Handel, Mozart and Donizetti faced premature closings if their operas did not win favor with the audience, but the news of the opera’s promise could only reach so far across the region and would most likely take a matter of days to reach its destination. A composer from previous centuries, such as Rossini, could make revisions to his works and open the improved opera in another town, or in some cases the same city. Such a scenario is not necessarily true for opera composers today. Revisions can be made to the score between productions if the composer is willing to make them, but the news of the opera’s success or demise at its premiere will be public knowledge in the town in which the next production is scheduled, which can greatly affect advance ticket sales.

A disadvantage for the co-producers is the added expense to the companies with the subsequent productions. Robert Lyall expressed that quite often the companies that were not “the lead” on a production do not have a say on many of the decisions regarding the artistic team and the design of the production.<sup>133</sup> But on the contrary, Greg Weber, Technical Director of Stage Operations of Houston Grand Opera, said that in his

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<sup>133</sup>Robert Lyall, personal interview.

experience the other companies have always been kept abreast of how the design elements of the opera come along. General/artistic directors and their technical directors are invited to periodic meetings with the design team to discuss their concerns and opinions on the look of the piece in the beginning of the process and at periodic stages of progression. Mr. Weber went on to say that in the case of Houston Grand Opera, the technical staff works with the various designers as well to make sure that they are keeping all of the companies in mind while making design choices for each individual theatre in which the opera will be performed. For example, in the case of a recent HGO co-commission with Skylight Opera of Milwaukee, there was a great deal of concern over the size of Milwaukee's Skylight Theatre space and the lighting equipment that the smaller company had in its inventory. Weber and his staff reminded the lighting designer that if he was going to design with robotic equipment for the HGO production, he would have to come up with an auxiliary plan for the Skylight production, since they would not have access or the budget for that equipment. The designer went back and made a design that could work in both venues. In this case, the secondary company's needs were just as important as those of the lead company.<sup>134</sup>

An advantage that may also come with the second and third productions of an opera may be the ability to make revisions to the technical aspects of the opera following the premiere. Lighting can be adjusted between performances on a premiere production, but alterations in the set design or its functionality take longer to accomplish and may have to be done in the periods in between productions. For example, if a large piece of scenery does not function as easily as it was thought it would in the design process, the alterations may be very time consuming and additional work may have to be done that

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<sup>134</sup>Greg Weber, personal interview, 12 March 2003.

cannot take place in a timely matter at the facility of the lead presenter. But with this knowledge in hand, when the set gets to the next city where it is to be performed, plans can already be set into motion to make any alterations to the piece that will make it function better and that meet with the approval of the designer.

Such a case will be illustrated in more detail in a later chapter, but Cold Sassy Tree presented many problems for the set designer. The opera had five producing companies that all had to be taken into consideration. For the most part, Set and Costume Designer Michael Yeargan with the aid of Greg Weber and his HGO staff were able to create a master design, which would work for the five different venues of varying stage dimensions.

Another of the added expenses that subsequent co-producers incur is additional personnel brought in for the production, such as the set designer, lighting designer, costume designer, director. The question may be raised as to why these specific people would have to be hired for the next production. The set and costumes are already designed and built, the physical dimensions of a new venue will change the lighting plot, and company may opt for a new stage director. So why is it necessary to bring back the original artistic team? One answer is so the artistic vision and integrity of the first production remains in the subsequent productions. A more practical answer is to help the production team in the next city achieve the same artistic product that the lead company experienced. The stage director, while collaborating with the composer, librettist, and the design team, conceived the original staging for the production. Insight is achieved during those meetings that cannot be easily replicated through correspondence. Since this is a new work and research may not be readily available to a secondary artistic team following the opening, it is in the best interest of the first production of the work that the original artistic team will have the option of working on the subsequent productions. In



the contract that each company signs, with the approval of the members of the artistic team, the original designers are given “first refusal” to work on the subsequent production. This not only happens on new operas, but also on new co-productions of standard repertory where a new set, costumes or lighting is designed.

“First refusal” means that a co-producing company, which is going to produce the opera following the premiere, has to offer contracts to certain members of the artistic team. This is not a hard and fast rule, but it is the customary practice. This is one of the problems that Artistic Director Robert Lyall of New Orleans Opera highlighted. The cost of bringing in a director of the status of a Bruce Beresford or a lighting designer with as demanding a schedule as a Duane Schuler might not be practical for a smaller regional company (of a Level II or III classification) simply to stage a “remount.” When presented with this scenario, Ann Owens, Houston Grand Opera’s Producing Director, explained that quite often the assistant director or an equivalent member of the design team might accompany the production to the next city if the company cannot afford the fees of the original personnel. In that case, the original director would receive a royalty fee for the use of his original staging and the assistant director would receive the fee for an A.D. and an extra stipend for taking on the added responsibility of the remount.

Susan Threadgill, production stage manager for Austin Lyric Opera for over fifteen years, explained the transfer of production from city to city in these general steps. First of all, the stage director who is hired for the premiere production is given the “first refusal” prerogative when the other co-producing companies are hiring their stage director. If he is not available for their production or if his fee may be out of line with the company’s budget, the company will then hire that director’s assistant from the first production. The assistant will use the notes from the primary production and stay in contact with the original director during the rehearsal process. The secondary producing

company may fly the original director in for the final dress rehearsals and the opening night as a courtesy to view the restaging of his original setting. The secondary company would also pay the director a daily fee, housing, travel and a per diem.

In the case of the costume designer, the secondary producing company may be required to have the original costume designer come in to work on the production during two occasions: once for the fittings and once during tech week. The secondary company incurs the price of the designer's fee for those visitations, plus the travel, housing and per diem costs. If a company double casts a production, the designer may have to be brought in for additional time since new costumes would have to be constructed for the additional artists. The company using them, since it would be out of the scope of the co-production would most likely incur the cost for the second set of costumes. This would also be the case if many of the costumes constructed for the premiere production did not fit the artists for the second production, and alterations were out of the question. By bringing in the designers for a project such as this, it ensures the overall look of the costuming will remain consistent with the designer's original concept.

The subject of the set and the obligations of the set designer are very interesting. Besides costuming, this is where the subsequent producing companies may realize hidden expenses. One of the most demanding responsibilities that the primary company must look after is the set design. It takes a considerable amount of time when a designer has to create an overall look and feel of a show that works well into one theatre space, but the job becomes dramatically more complicated when co-producing companies are brought on board. The expense that falls to the subsequent companies in the co-production, in addition to their equal amount paid to create the co-production, is the transport of the set, the cost of bringing in personnel from the lead company to help with the reconstruction of the set, and any added expense incurred if the set does not fit or function as well in the

new space. If any alterations have to be made due to poor planning on the part of the design team or if the set is damaged or malfunctions in some way, such costs may be shared equally among the producing companies.

The hiring of the lighting designer may be different in each case. Since the lighting plot is designed for the first production, only part of it may be usable for the following production. As Greg Weber of HGO explained it, you may find some dimensional differences, but if the theatre is of the same type<sup>135</sup> for all of the productions, a similar overhead lighting effect can be achieved for each with the original plot as the guide. Unfortunately, since most houses are of varying sizes and throws, the original lighting plot may have to be completely altered to fit into the new space. With this scenario in place, a “first refusal” statement may be added for the original lighting designer or his assistant on the project, but not necessarily. Since many companies have their own resident lighting designers, who are more familiar with their theatre, a company may choose to use their own person if the situation allows. Even if the original lighting plot is used minimally in the subsequent production and an agreement has been made the secondary company can use their own designer, it is customary still to give credit in the program to the designer for his “original design” and possibly pay him a royalty fee for the use of the schematics from the original lighting plot.

Commissioning and producing new works, whether it is an individual venture or a partnership between companies, is a time-consuming and expensive ordeal. In regard to co-commissions, some general directors choose to dwell on the drawbacks, while others embrace the concept and have taken part in numerous ventures. Besides Houston Grand

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<sup>135</sup> “Type” of stage refers to the theatrical category in which a stage may be placed. The primary three categories are proscenium, thrust, and in-the-round or arena. Most theatres where professional operas are performed are proscenium.

Opera, which has been the leader in co-commissioning and premiering new works over the past twenty-five years in the United States, there are numerous companies across the country that have taken to the co-commissioning and co-producing of new American works with fervor. In addition to the companies discussed in Chapter 2, such as San Francisco Opera, New York City Opera, Minnesota Opera, Opera Theatre of St. Louis, Lyric Opera of Kansas City, Austin Lyric Opera, Utah Opera, Tapestry New Opera Works and Music- Theatre Group, Sante Fe Opera, Glimmerglass Opera, The John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, the Brooklyn Academy of Music, Dallas Opera, Opera Omaha, American Music Theater Festival, Baltimore Opera, Opera Carolina and Opera Memphis have all taken part in co-commissioning American Operas over the past twenty years as well. Many of these companies have gone on to commission other works, some as co-commissions and some independently. According to Ian Campbell, when he came to San Diego Opera over twenty years ago,” the company did not do co-productions with anyone. Few companies did.” Campbell attributes a great deal of the success and rise in the number of co-commissions and co-productions to Houston Grand Opera, and the partnerships and support for such endeavors from OPERA America.<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>136</sup>Ian Campbell, phone interview, 26 Sept. 2003.

## Chapter 4: Houston Grand Opera, Opera New World and The Vanguard

Walter Herbert and Mrs. Louis B. Lobit founded Houston Grand Opera in 1955. The company had very modest beginnings, producing a mere two operas in its first season with two performances of each. The budget for that inaugural season was reported to be nearly \$40,000.<sup>137</sup> Since the beginning, Houston Grand Opera has produced American and other contemporary operas when it really was not in vogue. In fact, one of Walter Herbert's first acts as general director was to choose Salome as the opera with which to open the company's inaugural season. Although Salome, which was still very controversial when it premiered in 1955-56, was not as avant-garde as many of the works being written in the 1950's, the opera was still a challenging work, especially for less experienced opera attendees. This first production sent a message to the populace of Houston and the opera world at large that this would be a company unafraid of taking risks. During his tenure with the company, Herbert produced such contemporary works as The Young Lord (Hans Werner Henze), Street Scene (Kurt Weill), The Consul (Gian Carlo Menotti), and The Ballad of Baby Doe (Douglas Moore).

In 1972, Herbert stepped down as general director of Houston Grand Opera and was replaced by the company's business director, David Gockley. Even though he was given the reins to lead the company at the tender age of 27, Gockley was no stranger to the world of opera. He had been an apprentice singer for Sante Fe Opera before becoming the house manager for that company. Deciding against a singing career, Gockley went on to study finance at Columbia University. In 1970, he was hired as

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<sup>137</sup>Rich, An American Voice, 11.

Houston Grand Opera's business manager.

Although a majority of the opera companies in the United States filled their seasons with traditional European repertoire, under this new management, Houston Grand Opera took a different path to distinguish itself. Since the 1972 spring season, when David Gockley took over as managing director of HGO, producing and commissioning new operas, particularly those by American composers, has become one of the major priorities of the company. During that spring season, which featured performances in the park, free-of-charge, and was known as the Spring Opera Festival, Gockley scheduled performances of Dominick Argento's Postcard from Morocco and Carlisle Floyd's Susannah. An admirer of Floyd's work prior to taking his position with HGO, in his first full season (1972-73) Gockley presented Floyd's opera Of Mice and Men, based upon the John Steinbeck novel. The output of the company had also grown. Under Gockley, the company was now producing six to eight operas a season, up from the two per season under the Herbert regime.

Besides producing extant American works, Gockley soon commissioned the first opera in the company's history. Keeping with the unofficial youth movement of the company, 28 year-old composer Thomas Pasatieri was given the first commission. On March 5, 1974, The Seagull by Pasatieri and librettist Kenward Elmslie, based on Anton Chekov's classic play, made its world premiere with Houston Grand Opera. The Seagull was the young composer's seventh staged opera.

Including this first successful commission, between the years 1975 and 2000, twenty-five operas would make their world premieres with HGO. Twenty-three of these operas are by American composers. HGO also had six productions make their American premieres during this period. Some of the operas adhered more to traditional style and form, such as Bilby's Doll (1976), Willie Stark (1981), the revised version of The

Passion of Jonathan Wade (1991) and Cold Sassy Tree (2000), all by Carlisle Floyd, and Mark Adamo's Little Women (1998). Some of the other commissioned operas stretched the definition and scope of the genre, like The Making of the Representative for Planet 8 (1988) by Philip Glass and Doris Lessing, and Meredith Monk's ATLAS: an opera in three parts (1991).

Along with these operas, other works were born that brought more challenging subject matter and a theatricality that has helped to make American Opera a genre of its own. John Adam's Nixon in China (1987) chronicled the first visit of a United States president, Richard M. Nixon, to the People's Republic of China. The Outcast (1994), by Noa Ain, was based on the Biblical figure Moabite Ruth (or Ruta) and featured a predominantly African-American cast. The 1995 production of Harvey Milk by Stewart Wallace was a three-company co-commission that retold the life of America's first openly gay official and the circumstances leading up to his assassination. Other works were intended for younger audiences as part of HGO's educational outreach program, such as Cinderella en España (1998) and TEXAS! (1993) by Mary Carol Warwick and Kate Pogue, the Stewart Wallace and Michael Korie collaboration Where's Dick? (1989), or The Achilles Heel by Craig Bohmler and Mary Carol Warwick (1993). Through it all, Gockley and Houston Grand Opera have challenged their audience and introduced them to the genre of American Opera. "A major opera company has the responsibility of furthering the art form by encouraging contemporary composers to write operas, and by producing these operas for audiences to witness."<sup>138</sup>

Besides their own audience base, HGO has paved the way for companies across the country to commission and produce new works that thirty years ago would have been

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<sup>138</sup>Graeme Kay, "Championship Seasons," Opera News Sept. 2000, 7 Aug. 2001  
<<http://www.operanews.com/archives/900/championshipseasons.900.html>>.

viewed as too risky to put on a standard opera season.

## **I. OPERA NEW WORLD**

To help the development of newer works, in the fall of 1990 Houston Grand Opera began a program entitled Opera New World. According to an information packet produced by HGO, “Opera New World’s goal is to encourage the creation and production of new and increasingly accessible operas, particularly works that hold appeal for groups who may have felt culturally, socially or economically removed from the traditional American opera audience.”<sup>139</sup> One of the first operas presented under the Opera New World banner was Meredith Monk’s ATLAS: an opera in three parts, which premiered in the Wortham Theater Center’s new Cullen Theater in February of 1991. The opera was written to take the audience on a search for truths beyond its actual events, “some meaning that underlies everything else in the context of a modern, materialistic world.”<sup>140</sup> The opera contained no words and some of the “singing” required the performers to use the vocal technique of “throat-singing,” also used by Tibetan monks. According to Alan Rich, in this minimalist opera “... her ‘tunes’ take on a child-like character, not unlike jumping rope chants. Typically, too, there are no words, only a kind of cooing interspersed with woofs and meows and a vast array of sub-verbal speech.”<sup>141</sup> A similar avant-garde approach to the medium was Ricky Ian Gordon’s The Tibetan Book of the Dead, which premiered in 1996 at the Wortham Opera Theater on the campus of Rice

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<sup>139</sup>1998-99 Season Company Information Packet. Provided by Houston Grand Opera Association, Inc. n.d.

<sup>140</sup>Alan Rich, An American Voice, 22.

<sup>141</sup>Rich, An American Voice, 22



University. Although neither opera is conventional in comparison to the standard works in the repertoire or even those of composers such as Carlisle Floyd and Mark Adamo, Opera New World gave composers a chance to push the envelope and explore the boundaries of the medium and possibly find a new audience for the genre. With the help of a \$1-million challenge grant from the National Endowment for the Arts and individual and corporate support, by the 1998-99 season, HGO had produced twenty-six operas under the Opera New World program.

Corporate funding is not only important for the annual budget, but greatly supports initiatives such as Opera New World. One of the most staunch corporate supporters and endorsers of this program is Philip Morris Companies, Inc. In An American Voice, Stephanie French, Vice President of Corporate Contributions, gave the following endorsement:

Success in business as well as in the arts depends on a continual exploration of fresh and innovative ideas. Support for Opera New World and other new and contemporary works has given Philip Morris the ability to exhilarate, educate, and liberate the human spirit. In 1992, we formed a partnership with Houston Grand Opera and have been inspired by the extraordinary vision of David Gockley to maintain a program that not only supports more frequent and diverse creation and production of contemporary music theater, but also embraces all people.<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>142</sup>Alan Rich, American Voice, 51.

## II. COMMUNITY AND EDUCATIONAL OUTREACH

Opera New World is not the only program that has nurtured the creation of new works or encouraged the performing of traditional works with a contemporary approach. Some of the operas the company has commissioned were specifically for its outreach and educational programs. One of the most popular has been the Community Connections Initiative, which was in operation from 1996 to 2000. This program's goal was to move HGO closer to the center of community life. As was done when Gockley first took charge of the company, operas were presented at the Miller Outdoor Theatre free-of-charge to the public. One of the things that made the program unique was the staging of the operas. Modern technology met with traditional opera in a way that made it accessible to the media-saturated populace. The program that attracted the most national attention was HGO's production of Carmen. The production featured an updated telling of the story depicting Carmen as a pop music diva. Robotic lighting, numerous television monitors, and flashy costumes added to the MTV-like experience.

Besides the free access to opera that the Miller productions have provided, the company has also commissioned works that have reached out to the diverse demographic of the city of Houston. Florencia en el Amazonas by Daniel Catán was presented in the Brown Theater (the largest space) in the Wortham Theater Center in 1996. Florencia en el Amazonas, the story of "an aging opera singer who journeys up the Amazon to recapture a romanticized past - showcased in its 'magic realism' the talents of a Mexican composer with a story likely to appeal to both Anglophone and Hispanic communities."<sup>143</sup> Since making its world premiere with HGO, it has been performed in Los Angeles, Seattle and Bogotá, Colombia.

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<sup>143</sup>Kay, "Championship Seasons."

For the youth that the company could not reach through their main stage performances, HGO produced operas that would tour throughout Houston and the surrounding areas to help broaden the scope of the company's outreach and bolster opera education. This wing of Houston Grand Opera was called Texas Opera Theatre (or "TOT"). This subsidiary touring company was founded in the 1973-74 season that was created to bring opera to some large cities, but mainly to smaller cities where opera would not be otherwise available.<sup>144</sup> Besides the scaled-down productions of familiar titles from the standard repertory, TOT performed operas that were commissioned for the group, Starbird by Henry Mollicone, The Achilles Heel by Craig Bohmler, and the Stewart Wallace and Michael Korie collaboration Where's Dick?. Starbird, which deals with homelessness, was performed at St. John the Divine School in 1981, and The Achilles Heel made its debut at the Heinen Theater at Houston Community College. Where's Dick? made its world premiere with the TOT at the Miller Park Outdoor Theatre in 1989.

Following the tenure of Texas Opera Theatre, HGO developed another partnership with an established educational opera touring company, Opera to Go! Cinderella in Spain (Cinderella en España) was commissioned by the company and was contracted to be performed by Opera to Go!, which presented the production at area schools. Mary Carol Warwick's bilingual retelling of the classic fairy tale offered students the opportunity to experience the timeless classic while improving the English and Spanish vocabularies of the young audience members. Other new operas that were commissioned by the company to be toured to local school children such as TEXAS!, which highlights the 400-year history of the state, and Puppy and Big Guy, with its anti-

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<sup>144</sup>Robert I. Giesberg, Houston Grand Opera: A History (Houston: Houston Grand Opera Association, 1981) 40-41.

drug moral, have benefited the educational outreach initiatives of the company, not only by providing positive messages to the students it served, but also by nurturing future opera audiences by making the medium accessible and unpretentious. As with most companies, HGO offers students an opportunity to see main stage operas at greatly reduced prices.

Though getting students to see opera is vitally important to building an audience base for the future, the HGO Educational program has also endeavored to educate students about opera with a more hands-on approach. Since 1997, Dr. Gary Gibbs, director of Education and Outreach, has implemented Opera Camp, which includes experiential training for students from kindergarten through high school in musicianship, vocal technique, and song interpretation, and the HGO form of “Create and Produce,”<sup>145</sup> where children are assembled as a team to create and perform their own opera. The educational wing of the company has even implemented very successful programs directly into the school with the help of the Houston Independent School District and other municipal arts organizations. STARS (Students Through Arts Reaching Success) and Project Bravo, as well as its Residency Artist and Residency Company programs have all made Houston Grand Opera an educational force in the community and brought the company many accolades for its efforts in enriching the lives of the area’s residents through music and exposure to the world of opera. The company even started a training program for promising high school singers to go along with their highly respected Houston Grand Opera Studio, which boasts some of the finest young vocal talent in the United States.

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<sup>145</sup>“Create and Produce” is a program created by OPERA America used by opera companies across the United States, including Austin Lyric Opera.

### **III. THE DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM, FUND RAISING, AND TICKET SALES**

Fund raising is a major concern for every opera company. The commissioning of works is an expensive proposition. Even when Houston Grand Opera participates in the co-commissioning of a new opera where the expense is divided between two or more companies, the responsibility of being the lead partner in the commission (which has been HGO's position in each of its commissioning projects) carries the added burden of administrative support throughout all areas of the company. In order to make sure that the company can efficiently present standard repertory operas, oversee the works in progress from the Opera New World program, and maintain all of the other programs, such as Community and Education outreach, a creative and aggressive development office has to be in place.

Although grants from various foundations, such as the National Endowment for the Arts and Opera America, help to fund new works, the major support for the company and its producing endeavors must come from within its own fund raising activities. As mentioned earlier, ticket sales cover only a portion of a company's cost of mounting a season. One must remember that besides the cost of mounting productions, a company must also pay a support staff and maintain its facilities, not just a theater, but rehearsal halls, office space, meeting rooms, pianos, restrooms, technical equipment for both office use and production use, and so forth. The cost of running a company the size of Houston Grand Opera or any of the Level I companies is extremely expensive.

In 1999, the annual operating budget of Houston Grand Opera was approximately \$19 million to mount a season of eight productions.<sup>146</sup> During the 2001-2002 season, that figure escalated to over \$21.6 for 7 productions.<sup>147</sup> The misconception that many in the

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<sup>146</sup>David Gockley, company questionnaire.

<sup>147</sup>2001-2002 OPERA America Fiscal and Operational Survey.

lay sector have is that high dollar ticket prices for opera, which can range from \$15 to \$200 per ticket, more than pay for a production. Even if the company could sell each of the 2300 seats in the Brown Theater for every performance, the company would still not turn a profit, nor is that what they are in the business to do, according to HGO Producing Director Ann Owens.<sup>148</sup> Tickets sales are indeed a significant part of the annual operating budget, but they come nowhere close to satisfying the financial burden of Houston Grand Opera's production costs and daily operating expenditures. According to HGO Technical Director of Stage Operations Greg Weber, as of the 2003-2004 season, HGO spends between \$1.2 and \$1.9 million dollars per production that is mounted in the Brown Theatre. (Productions mounted in the Cullen Theater generally are produced for between \$.9 and \$1.2 million dollars).<sup>149</sup> Of this budget, only 42 percent comes from ticket revenue, which includes season ticket and single ticket sales. This figure falls somewhere in the middle of what other companies nationwide anticipate toward ticket revenue in their seasons. As of 2003, San Diego Opera's operating budget had risen significantly to over \$14.5 million per season to present 5 operas and 3 recitals. Of that amount, approximately 43 percent of that figure came from ticket sales.<sup>150</sup> San Francisco Opera, the nation's second largest company, had an annual operating budget in 1999 around \$50 million, of which 43 percent came from ticket sales.<sup>151</sup> Opera Theatre of Saint Louis operates just below the Level I cut-off line with annual expenditures of approximately \$6.5 million for four productions. An estimated thirty-six percent (\$1.8

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<sup>148</sup>Ann Owens, phone conversation with the author, 6 Feb. 2004.

<sup>149</sup>Greg Weber, e-mail correspondence to the author, 20 Jan. 2004.

<sup>150</sup>Ian Campbell, company questionnaire.

<sup>151</sup>Kip Cranna, company questionnaire.

million) of the company's revenue is generated through ticket sales.<sup>152</sup>

#### **IV. CORPORATE GIVING**

A greater fallacy is that the government keeps arts organizations (primarily opera, ballet and symphonies) alive. In the case of HGO, only two percent of its budget comes from public or governmental funding, such as that provided by the National Endowment for the Arts. Since public funding is not a means of significant support for the company, HGO relies heavily on the corporate sector for support. Gifts by companies such as AT&T, Shell Oil, TEXACO and Exxon-Mobil make up approximately twelve percent of the operating budget.

In order to maintain support for new commissions and productions, as well as productions from the standard repertory, Gockley and the HGO development wing have to find ways of promoting their various projects, as well as the numerous other programs that the company supports on an annual and semi-annual basis. Besides partnering individuals with particular projects when soliciting larger gifts, the same type of procedure is done with corporate benefactors. Houston Grand Opera has numerous corporations that support the company on an annual basis through financial support (approximately 15 percent of the annual operating budget) and in-kind gifts (services offered instead of money, such as air transportation or advertising).<sup>153</sup> Once Houston Grand Opera builds a working relationship with a corporation, the Development Office, in particular the staff involved with corporate giving, tries to find out if the company has any special interest in giving to non-profit organizations. An example of this would be a

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<sup>152</sup>Charles MacKay, response to e-mail company questionnaire of the author, 10 April 2003.

<sup>153</sup>David Gockley, response to e-mail company questionnaire of the author, 6 April 1999.

corporation that may view education as their sole interest when it comes to giving. Such a corporation may give a nominal amount to the opera company each season due to the influence of a board member or such, but the major donations that are made by this company are toward programs that further educational needs in the community. With this knowledge, the Development Office would then present particular education programs to this corporation in hopes of soliciting additional moneys beyond its annual gift. In order for the production/artistic staff to do their jobs effectively, there has to be a hard-working team of professionals bringing funds into the coffers to make the productions possible.

Giving by corporations is not only important for things like “tax breaks,” but act as a way for a company to reach out into the community. By funding special events or acting as an underwriter for the opera season, a company can also reach out to a specific demographic group that may benefit it in some way. In the case of opera, which has an audience-base made up primarily of upper middle class to affluent patrons, it may benefit a company greatly to have its name visibly associated with HGO.<sup>154</sup>

## **V. PRIVATE AND INDIVIDUAL GIVING**

Private or individual giving is extremely important to the company for a variety of reasons. The twelve percent that individual giving accounts for in the HGO annual operating budget<sup>155</sup> helps to subsidize the six to nine productions that Houston Grand Opera produces annually from its various wings, but it also funds the special projects that the organization implements, such as educational and community outreach, marketing,

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<sup>154</sup>Susan Bell, phone conversation with the author, 16 Feb 2004.

<sup>155</sup>Gockley, company questionnaire, 6 April 1999.



and the day-to-day working of the company. Individual benefactors have proved invaluable in the commissioning and producing of new works. Without generous donations from the private sector, programs such as Opera New World would never be possible. However, individual giving works in different ways.

First of all, there are the annual donations to keep the company functioning properly on a daily basis. The giving is tiered and donors receive special recognition and other benefits based upon their annual contribution. Some of the benefits may include valet parking, invitations to private recitals, access to the green room, backstage tours, brunches, and lectures, just to name a few. For the most part, special benefits begin on the Patrons Level. The more money one donates, the more recognition and benefits one receives. During the 1999-2000 season, the giving began on the “Members” level with contributions ranging from \$100-249. From there, the amounts increased considerably: Contributing Members (\$250-499), Fellows Circle (\$500-900), Associate Patrons Circle (\$1,000 and up), National Patrons Circle (\$2,500 and up), Patrons Level (\$3,000), Artists Circle (\$4,000 and up), Bronze Circle (\$7,500 and up), Silver Circle (\$10,000 and up), Golden Circle (\$20,000 and up), and the Platinum Circle (\$35,000 and up).<sup>156</sup>

In March of 2003, HGO had 329 patrons over the varying levels. Based on one’s perspective, this number may not seem that impressive until one realizes that the majority of these people are season ticket holders, and the price of tickets is separate from that of donations. The way this money is divided varies. According to former Director of Development, Laura Bodenheimer, if a patron donates a large amount to the annual fund that is earmarked for a specific department (production, education, etc.), the money has to be used for that purpose. Otherwise, Gockely and the staff will decide how the money is

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<sup>156</sup>Laura Bodenheimer, personal interview, 12 March 2003.

to be used.<sup>157</sup>

To make sure the company runs correctly and stays healthy, Houston Grand Opera depends greatly on its Trustees and Board of Governors. These individuals act as an advisory committee to the administrative staff to help make decisions on the functioning of the company as a business and guarantee that it is upholding all of its obligations to its season ticket holders and benefactors, as well as the community, which it serves. To become a Trustee, an individual must donate at least \$5,000 annually to the company. An individual who serves on the Board of Governors, which is the board of directors of the company, has to donate at least the same as the Trustees. A governor, of which there are approximately 30 or so, also is required to work actively for the company by serving on sub-committees that oversee the various events and programs that the company sponsors. In Bodenheimer's words, they are a "working board." Gockley serves on and primarily controls the functioning of the board. Gockley also helps to choose board members and does so based on what that individual can bring to the board, whether it be in the area of business, public relations or some other expertise that could benefit the organization.

It is worth noting that people give to people, not organizations. Fund-raising is a difficult task for any non-profit organization, and those who are successful usually have a point person whom all of the benefactors, private or corporate, can believe in and trust. Besides helping to find Board members and serving on the Board of Governors, David Gockley is also the company's most important fund-raiser. From Patron or Silver Circle down (\$10,000 or lower), the development director and staff help to solicit these individuals for donations. For those who give substantially larger amounts, Gockley

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<sup>157</sup>Bodenheimer, personal interview.

deals with them personally. People who contribute such sizable gifts want to know what will happen to the money, and as the general director of the company, Gockley is the best person to handle such questions or concerns. A more important reason is that with so many financial needs for the numerous projects that the organization has going at any given moment, he needs to keep track of who is donating to what areas of the company and how much they are giving. This type of financial tracking is extremely important.

Consider the following scenario. A particular donor gives the company \$20,000 annually and serves on the Board of Governors. This individual is also a big fan of American operas and the Opera New World initiative. If the general director is aware that the company has a chance to commission a new work from a composer of the stature of a Carlisle Floyd or Gian Carlo Menotti, Gockley may want to make sure that benefactor is not receiving other solicitations from the Development office that could be construed as an annoyance and turn that person away from giving. Instead, Gockley may want to speak to the donor personally and suggest that he or she may want to minimize their annual giving slightly in hopes of making a very sizable donation down the line to help fund the future commission. The idea of being a major benefactor of such a project may even give the individual more of a sense of philanthropy and also garner a much larger gift than they may have given by just donating to the annual fund. By doing this, Gockley is partnering the patron with the project.

## VI. OTHER SOURCES

According to Gockley, the remaining balance of the budget comes from “other” or “alternative” sources. These sources account for 29 percent of the company’s annual operating budget.<sup>158</sup> Every opera company has alternative sources of revenue to keep the company operational, and the sources come in many forms. Many of these sources also support special programs for education, the HGO Studio and commissioning new works. One of the most popular ways of raising additional capital for the company is through “special events.”<sup>159</sup> Annually, the company hosts various functions such as Concert of Arias (a vocal competition featuring the finalists for the HGO Studio), Opera Ball, Family Opera Brunch, and opening night galas. These “special events” are important not only to generate revenue through admission sales and silent auctions, but also to establish a rapport with the HGO donor base. Relationships established at these events open the door for the Development office to make closer contacts with individuals who could potentially give on a larger scale. Some of the most important giving happens through “planned giving” and “major gifts” to the HGO Endowment. To guarantee continued success over a long period of time, the company has to have money to fall back on for long-term projects, such as building or other types of expansion. Many contributors to the annual fund, whether they be individual or corporate, are also encouraged to give to the endowment.

With so many opera companies and other arts organizations across the United States struggling to keep their doors open, how has this Texas city come to support one of

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<sup>158</sup>Gockley, company questionnaire 6 April 1999.

<sup>159</sup>Bell, phone conversation, 16 Feb. 2004.

the fastest growing opera companies in the United States, even in a down-turned economy? Susan Bell, Director of Individual Giving, said the city of Houston describes itself as the “Can Do City.” It may not seem that a state best known for its oil and cattle enterprises would really be the place to support grand opera. But Bell describes Houston as an international city with residents that have relocated themselves there from all over the world. Houston also boasts the seventh busiest port in the U.S., making it accessible to international resources. Houstonians will support something if it is special, even in financially challenged times. It is a city that has maintained the spirit of the West. For instance, the \$72 million dollar Wortham Theater Center was constructed with private funds during one of the worst economic periods in Houston’s history.<sup>160</sup>

“The company has to act as a corporation.” Bell went on to say that “organizations that are successful in Houston rely on the personnel and who the CEO is. Someone at the top has a strong vision, has a mission, and can make the board of Governors believe in that vision and feel part of the team. He (Gockley) has built a team in house that believes in the vision as well. The staff believes in what the company is doing and will do whatever it takes to see their goals achieved.”<sup>161</sup>

As previously mentioned, David Gockley quite often will contact donors directly if there is a need in a specific area of the company's operations, such as the Studio program or perhaps commissioning a new work. By partnering the patron with the project, the benefactor will feel more like part of the team than just someone contributing funds. In the case of new works, Bodenheimer said that they quite often scare patrons

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<sup>160</sup>Susan Bell, personal interview, 12 March 2003.

<sup>161</sup>Bell, personal interview, and Paul Cooper, “Houston,” *The New Grove Dictionary of Opera*, vol. 2, (London: Macmillan Publishers Limited, 1992): 755-56.

and audience members. "If they want Lucia (di Lammermoor), they only want Lucia."<sup>162</sup>

## VII. VANGUARD

Within the donor base of HGO, there is a contingent of patrons that like and support new works on a regular basis. At one point in the company's history, there was such a drive for the commissioning of new works that a fund- raising initiative was implemented to attract funds strictly for the purpose of commissioning, producing and studying new works. The affinity program, entitled Vanguard, began in 1991. The major financial supporters behind Vanguard were Drs. Susan and Dennis Carlyle, who have been patrons of the company since the early 1980's. They are also originators of the Carlyle Fund, which grants up to \$100,000 for the institutional support of new musical works.<sup>163</sup> The company's promotional materials for the program stated that Vanguard would "enable us to gain familiarity with new works before they premiere - thereby deepening our love for the new."<sup>164</sup> Patrons were promised numerous benefits such as special interactions with composers, librettists, designers and performers, invitations to rehearsals and workshops, special educational programs, a member resource service for HGO and U.S. contemporary opera productions, in addition to the standard social events that accompany every premiere. When asked if their own companies had any sort of fund-raising initiative like Vanguard, several artistic and general directors that were polled thought the idea of such an affinity group was wonderful and exciting, but none had such a group with their own organizations.

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<sup>162</sup>Bodenheimer, personal interview.

<sup>163</sup>Kay, "Championship Seasons."

<sup>164</sup>Vanguard Brochure

There are some very good reasons for the absence of other groups like Vanguard. In order to have such a group, a company has to dedicate a great amount of time, energy and finances to foster new works. For the majority of opera companies nationally, new works appear on their seasons as such a low percentage of their output that it would make no sense for them to spend this kind of investment on such projects. Vanguard was different from other donor groups in that it involved individual donors with a special passion for new works, especially those by American composers. The membership donations to Vanguard were used through the Annual Fund to support new works for Houston Grand Opera.<sup>165</sup> According to Melinda Guthrie, Coordinator of Vanguard, the interest in new works for many of the members went beyond the projects that HGO was developing. Some would travel around the country to view new operas presented by other companies. In 1999, the membership was estimated at 90 members.<sup>166</sup> Although this may be a small number in comparison to some other affinity groups with the company, it probably was one of the most loyal and active memberships.

The Vanguard initiative was suspended in 1999, though the support for new works for HGO has not subsided. Little Women and Cold Sassy Tree were among the final new operas that garnered attention from this program. Gockley and many of those associated with the program felt that it was a good idea for that particular time in the history of Houston Grand Opera and Vanguard simply ran out its course.<sup>167</sup> Even though the life of Vanguard was not overwhelming in length, its existence was very important. It solidified the company's reputation as the nation's leader in its commitment to the success and longevity of American opera.

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<sup>165</sup>Melinda Guthrie, e-mail correspondence to the author, March 22, 1999.

<sup>166</sup>Guthrie, e-mail correspondence.

<sup>167</sup>Gockley phone interview.

## VIII. THE CONTINUATION OF SUPPORT FOR NEW WORKS

Although the Vanguard program no longer exists, the patrons of Houston Grand Opera have continued their support for the development and producing of additions to the American opera repertory. Gockley is the driving force and inspiration that keeps this support alive. Bell said, “Gockley has a vision for building an American repertoire of opera. His passion is respected by the donors.”<sup>168</sup> This passion and sincerity speaks volumes, but the hands-on approach that is taken with donors is the secret to HGO’s success. When a new work is in the planning or early stages of development, potential donors are invited to presentations by the composer and librettist to make them feel part of the process. These individuals will meet the members of the artistic team and learn first-hand about the work that they plan to create. Once a rapport is developed between the parties, patrons may be more willing to contribute to the project because they feel part of the team.

The same attention toward partnering is paid to potential corporate sponsors. Many corporate entities like the idea of premieres because of the event status that is placed on them. It gets the company’s name out in front of the public eye. The more successful the work and the more attention that is paid to it, the more positive the exposure the opera draws for the corporation. “It is important to match the temperament of the company and the individuals to that of the opera,” Bell stated.<sup>169</sup> This same practice even takes place with productions of standard repertory. In the case of AT & T, over the years the HGO development department has built a strong relationship with this

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<sup>168</sup>Bell, personal interview.

<sup>169</sup>Bell, personal interview.



company and has teamed up with it on many projects. AT &T is a company that likes more cutting-edge pieces. The same cannot be said for other donors that prefer to see their money go towards more standard repertory or possibly pieces with an educational thrust to the project. Sometimes a project may have specific characteristics that may open up an opportunity to bring a new corporate partner on board or one that has been only slightly active.

This was the case with the commission of The Little Prince, which premiered with HGO in 2003. Since the story is taken from the French children's book by Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, companies that are French or have ties with French products were singled out to approach as potential sponsors. Also, since the book is thought to be a piece for children (which is open to debate due to its sophisticated message), companies that generally like to give to educational projects were also approached.

Even though the climate for American operas has become more welcoming over the past ten years, most companies that produce them only mount one American opera every two or three seasons. One must remember that for a Level II company that produces three works a year, producing one American work over two seasons still represents a high percentage of its producing (just over 16 percent). Keeping in mind that opera patrons, especially those who do not view them or learn about them on a regular basis, do not always receive new works enthusiastically, the risk for the company is great even at that percentage. It is now commonplace for a Level I company to produce one contemporary work, not necessarily a brand new opera (but one from the past twenty years or so), per season. The larger company can do this primarily because it operates with a larger audience base that most likely has purchased a bulk of the season already through season ticket sales. Also, a Level I company, such as Houston or San Diego for example, will produce anywhere from five to nine operas per season. By producing one

contemporary work in a season of this size, the percentages is the same, if not lower, than that of the Level II company that produces a work of this type every other season.

Although the percentage may be similar, the risk is not nearly as great. For the smaller company, presenting a new work as one part of its season may interest some of its existing season ticket holders, but it may actually turn some of them away. They may not be interested in directing one third of an investment toward something in which they have little interest. It is true, though, that a new work does stimulate interest for the company, but most of this interest from new audience members results in single ticket buyers for the particular opera and may not draw them towards the rest of the season. When a new work is presented within a larger season, a season ticket holder, who is already paying anywhere from \$110 to \$1,500 per seat,<sup>170</sup> may not look upon the contemporary opera as such a large investment in comparison and possibly choose to attend or decline, but still purchase the season seat. If this sounds a bit cynical, it should be kept in mind that not every season ticket holder will attend every opera during a six- or seven- opera season, even though he or she has purchased the seats for all of the productions. If a season ticket patron loves Puccini and Verdi, but is bored by Baroque opera, he may choose to take a pass on the company's production of Handel's Xerxes. (It should also be noted that season ticket holders for Houston Grand Opera do not have to buy all of the productions for the season to be a ticket holder. Packages of four or five operas are also available, but purchasers of a full season are more apt to do so because of preferential seating).

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<sup>170</sup>Figures provided by the Houston Grand Opera Box Office.

## IX. MARKETING

A key to success with any of the performing arts is marketing and advertising. If the general public does not know an event is taking place, they will not attend. With newer works publicity is even more crucial. In the case of standard operas, such as The Barber of Seville or Tosca, there is name recognition for the average audience member. With a new opera, unless it is based on some other work that is recognizable to the public, a skilled marketing campaign must be implemented to draw the audience to the opera house. Rodi Franco, Marketing Director of Houston Grand Opera said that “selling a subscription and selling (individual) tickets are different. Four of the seven (or six) operas of note sell the season. One big gun and three other marketable (operas) and it can be sold.”<sup>171</sup>

In the case of new operas, Ms. Franco feels that they must have a “hook” to attract audience members. Single ticket sales rely on three factors: subject matter, the composer (and librettist), and the material. There are segments of the Houston Grand Opera audience that will come and see anything new. From their past exposure with the company’s offerings of such works, they have grown accustomed to them and actually look forward to these productions. Some audience members will only come if it is an opera by a specific composer, such as Carlisle Floyd, whose works they have come to know and admire over the years and from whom they can also expect to hear a certain level of quality. For other audience members, as well as novices to American opera, name recognition and subject matter are very important.

The planning of a marketing campaign for a company can have its complications. The producers of the opera within the company can make the job of the marketing team

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<sup>171</sup>Rodi Franco, personal interview, 12 March 2003.

very problematic. There are instances where the marketing team can only promote aspects of the opera for which they are provided information. Since the marketing team is not in rehearsals or constantly exposed to the progress of a new work, it does not know all of the aspects of the work. For example, in the case of the opera Maria de Buenos Aires, the opera was performed at Miller Park, where operas are presented to the public free-of-charge. It was a Tango opera and the company thought that the nature of the piece would be good outreach to the Hispanic audience. Unfortunately, the opera was about a Spanish prostitute, and the piece with not child-friendly.

Marketing has no control over the scheduling of the season. Its job is to promote the operas that are scheduled. Bill T. Jones' multi-media dance opera, Mother of Three Sons, presented other challenges for the marketing team. The work is based on an African myth and contained many situations and themes pertinent to the African-American community. The opera also contained mature subject matter and material, such as a filmed sequence that showed a naked man swimming. In this case, Franco cited the marketing dilemma as two-fold. The first problem involved the selling of a non-conventional opera, which involved a great deal of dance and other facets not commonly found in traditional opera. New works are difficult enough to sell to the opera-going public, but pieces that lean more toward the avant-garde do not lend themselves to ticket buyers unless there is some other hook, such as name recognition of the piece or its composer. Although an opera with African-American themes is good for the climate of representation and diversity in the American opera repertory, one that also contains adult material makes the opera even more difficult to sell. A goal for putting an opera such as Mother of Three Sons on the company's season is not only to promote diversity, but hopefully to draw in new audience members who do not usually attend the opera. Because the percentage of minority season ticket holders is rather low, the marketing

department had to reach out into the community to market the piece.<sup>172</sup> One group that it sought out was mature affluent African-American adults. To do this, the opera was promoted through Houston-area churches with large African-American membership. According to Franco, political candidates do the same type of promotion.<sup>173</sup>

Sometimes the opera itself or the production of a piece can kill the enthusiasm that a good advertising campaign can create. In the case of HGO's production of the operetta Babes in Toyland, there was a great deal of publicity surrounding the production due to the name recognition of the work. Unfortunately, in the opinion of Franco, the production did not live up to the expectations created from the marketing. There are other times that the audience just does not identify with the opera. Such was the case with Meredith Monk's ATLAS. The opera had no text, a male soprano, and was visually difficult. On opening night, one patron stood up in the middle of act one, cursed at the stage and stormed out.<sup>174</sup> In situations where the production may not live up to expectations or if it is too avant-garde for the average audience member, the word of mouth or critical attention may not be flattering and in turn hurt the ticket sales for the remainder of the run of the production.

Other factors can affect the marketing of an opera as well. The world premiere of the revised version of The Passion of Jonathan Wade drew a great deal of attention to Houston Grand Opera because of Carlisle Floyd's name and his following with the company's fan base. In this production, the composer and the marketing department did not see eye-to-eye on how the production should be promoted. By Franco's

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<sup>172</sup>Rodi Franco, phone conversation with the author, 17 Feb. 2004.

<sup>173</sup>Franco, phone conversation.

<sup>174</sup>Franco, personal interview.

recollections, the marketing department surmised the strengths for the promotion of the piece as its musical accessibility and Southern historical subject. Floyd wanted the marketing to reflect the emotional struggle that the title character endures in the opera, and not the historical aspect. The ticket sales of the opera were respectable, but most likely because of Floyd's name more than anything else.<sup>175</sup>

The manner in which the public perceives a new work can also be influenced by the location where the production is presented. Since Houston Grand Opera has moved its production activities to the Wortham Theater Center, it has produced operas in two primary venues, the 2,346-seat Alice and George Brown Theater and the 1,065-seat Lillie and Roy Cullen Theater. According to Franco, new works that are performed in the smaller Cullen Theater are in a way looked down upon because they are new works and also because they are being presented in the smaller venue. To the outside observer, when a work is premiering in the Brown Theater, like Nixon in China or Cold Sassy Tree, it is more of an event. Pieces premiering in the Cullen Theater are smaller in nature and often produced using members of the HGO Studio program in many of the primary roles. The opera-goer may view this as less important than a main stage work. To overcome this sort of skepticism or lowered expectation, the advertising for the opera must find something about the work to help make the production a premiere in its own right. One such work that had its premiere in the Cullen was Mark Adamo's Little Women. The name recognition factor of Louisa May Alcott's timeless novel was a major drawing point for the Studio production. Since its premiere in the smaller venue, Little Women has proved to have staying power and has been produced in the Brown Theater, as well as by companies across the United States.

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<sup>175</sup>Franco, personal interview.

## **X. NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL EXPOSURE**

Houston Grand Opera has also spread American works across the United States and abroad through touring productions. Nixon in China, one of HGO's most famous commissions, made its European premiere at the Edinburgh Festival in Scotland and helped to solidify the company's reputation internationally. The HGO-commissioned ATLAS made its European premiere in the cities of Berlin and Paris. In 1996, HGO took its production of Four Saints in Three Acts to the inaugural Lincoln Center Festival in New York, and then to the Edinburgh Festival. Another commission that fell short in the eyes of many was Leonard Bernstein's and Stephen Wadsworth's sequel to Bernstein's Trouble in Tahiti, A Quiet Place. Although the opera did not meet expectations, it still garnered international attention. The Making of the Representative for Planet 8 helped to broaden HGO's international exposure by being co-produced by three European theatres. Another overseas connection for the company was its commissioning a non-American composer for one of its operas. Although New Year by the respected British composer Michael Tippett did not have an American composer to its credit, the piece was set in America.

Although neither is a commissioned work, HGO took great interest in two works of differing status in the annals of American opera. One was Scott Joplin's all-but-forgotten ragtime opera, Treemonisha, and the other, George and Ira Gershwin's Porgy and Bess, considered by some as the greatest American opera. Though the former was written in 1911 and performed as a concert work in 1915 in Harlem,<sup>176</sup> according to Elise Kirk in American Opera, Treemonisha was first staged in Atlanta in 1972, and later that

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<sup>176</sup>Peter Dickinson, "Treemonisha," New Penguin Opera Guide, 448.

year at Wolf Trap near Washington D.C..<sup>177</sup> But according to several sources, HGO presented the first professional fully-staged production of Treemonisha on May 23, 1975 in Miller Park.<sup>178</sup> For the occasion, composer Gunther Schuller, a ragtime expert in his own right, was commissioned to orchestrate the opera. The HGO production of Treemonisha also was broadcast on PBS, produced on Broadway and recorded.<sup>179</sup>

In 1976, HGO's production of Porgy and Bess won a Tony Award for its run on Broadway. HGO later went on to spearhead a thirteen-company co-production of the opera that toured the United States in 1987. After conquering Broadway and the success of a U.S. tour, Houston Grand Opera did themselves one better by coordinating a new multi-company production of Porgy that toured nationally and also included international performances in Japan, Italy and France.<sup>180</sup>

The question lingers as to why this sort of programming has been so successful in a city such as Houston. Some critics of the company suggest that the emphasis on new works is simply a marketing tool to draw attention to itself. If this is the case, commissioning strictly for the sake of having the opportunity of presenting world premieres, why would a company take the financial risk season after season? To some extent it can be said that a world premiere draws in interested patrons and those simply attracted to the spectacle of an opening night. It also can attract financial backers to the project because of the pageantry and attention brought to a world premiere nationally, as

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<sup>177</sup>Kirk, American Opera, 194.

<sup>178</sup>Alan Rich, An American Voice (9) and Peter Dickinson, New Penguin Opera Guide (448) credit HGO with the first fully-staged production. Elise Kirk does say that the HGO production was the most successful of the stagings.

<sup>179</sup>Press Release from Houston Grand Opera Association, Inc. June 1998.

<sup>180</sup>Press Release from Houston Grand Opera Association, Inc. June 1998.



well as internationally. These are the “upsides” to commissioning. The “downsides” greatly outnumber the more positive view on the matter. Opera companies by their very nature are not in the business to make large profits. Ticket revenues do not cover the cost of productions. Funds from the private sector and corporate underwriters cover the remaining portion of the deficit, as well as funds raised through grants from organizations like the National Endowment for the Arts and OPERA America.

Not only is there the cost entailed in mounting a new production with original sets and costumes, the company has the added burden and expense of the commission, which is a lengthy process. There is some possible revenue that can be attained following the initial production of a new opera, such as the rental of the set and costumes for subsequent productions. Revenues can also be drawn from possible residuals if the company shares in any of the publishing rights of the work or rental of the orchestration. But the potential earnings from a venture such as this are by no means certain. If the opera is not well received during its first production (or series of productions in the case of a co-commission), the likelihood of future productions is diminished greatly.

Keeping all of this in mind, especially the lack of profit potential and great financial risk, a company that commissions works on a yearly basis for over a twenty-five year period, as is the case of the Houston Grand Opera, is doing this for some other reason. In 1974 David Gockley said: “A major opera company has the responsibility of furthering the art form by encouraging contemporary composers to write operas, and by producing these operas for audiences to witness.”<sup>181</sup> What the critics of Houston Grand Opera and David Gockley fail to recognize is that there is a larger purpose to be considered - the promotion, creation and preservation of an American form of art. “Our

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<sup>181</sup>Rich, An American Voice, 65.

work with new opera is no longer primarily concerned with attention-getting, as it was during my ambitious youth,” Gockley says. “Rather it is to develop a stable of professional operatic composers - not academics - whose primary objective is success with the public, not in fifty years, but now. We want to give our composers the chance to write a series of works, learning from their mistakes in the way that Verdi and Wagner did...works that make a compelling case for revival and productions elsewhere, as well as further commissions.”<sup>182</sup>

As mentioned above, one of the primary barometers of an opera’s success has to be the box office. After all, Verdi and Puccini did not write to have their operas performed to empty houses, merely for the satisfaction of creating their own art. Of course, throughout the course of opera history, there have been works written to challenge the audience into hearing and seeing what they may not be ready for. As stated earlier in this study, composers who dared to write in a more tonal vein during the 1940's and 50's were often met with harsh criticism by critics and musicologists for not attempting to advance the theoretical elements of the form. But one also has to realize that most of the operas from this generation that have survived today were not the ones that made the earth-shattering changes to the medium. They were perhaps new in different ways, visually or musically, but they were still audience-friendly.

Some of the works that have been commissioned by HGO since its inception of the practice over twenty-five years ago may never be performed again. But if the operas had never been written, we would never know what appealed to an audience and what did not. Some of the operas may be reworked and find a second life through revision, like The Passion of Jonathan Wade. Perhaps a handful of these operas simply were meant to

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<sup>182</sup>Rich, An American Voice, 48.

be performed at the time of their premiere and that is where they should stay in the history of the medium. Operas, such as Puppy and Big Guy or Cinderella in Spain, may serve their purpose of educating young audiences for years to come and never make it to any larger venue than an elementary school auditorium. Since that is the audience those operas were written for, that should be their destiny. But of these new operas and other new works that have come from commissions of companies that have taken a cue from Houston, the operas that will survive and make their way into the repertory are the ones that can relate to audiences, musically, emotionally or on some other plane. Many in the opera world, such as composer Carlisle Floyd, who has been composing operas for the past 50 years, can see what works in order for a new work to enjoy success. “I’ve grappled with this throughout my career. More and more it doesn’t make sense to me to think we can do opera in a highly recondite style of writing and still attract the kind of audience that operas need in order simply to survive. I think that what American companies have done is simply to go back to the fact that Verdi and Donizetti wrote for the box office. Opera was a popular entertainment or it simply didn’t exist. And the notion of ‘popular entertainment’ was in no way demeaning.”<sup>183</sup>

To find this “popular” audience, many composers have found their ways to stories with familiarity on which to base their operas. Musical styles within these pieces may vary from atonal to popular music, and some may rely more on spectacle than others, but without a story and characters with whom an audience can take the journey, the viewers more often than not will become bored and disinterested. This is not to belittle the role of the music by any stretch of the imagination, but if the music is not attached to compelling drama, it ceases to be a dramatic art form.

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<sup>183</sup>Floyd, interview via fax.

In order to find subjects that would draw the attention of the Houston Grand Opera audience, many of the commissioned works were derived from well-known literature or contemporary historical events (earlier categorized as the CNN School of Opera). Ever since HGO's first commission in 1974, works based on pieces of literature have become a trademark for these new additions to the repertory. After Thomas Pasatieri's The Seagull, based on the Anton Chekhov play, premiered in Jones Hall on March 5 of 1974, many literature-based operas followed, though some of the sources were less well known. Philip Glass's opera The Making of a Representative for Planet 8, which made its world premiere in the Cullen Theater on July 8, 1988, is based on Doris Lessing's original story. Lessing was also retained to write the libretto. The opera is not only an allegorical story about the death of a planet that reaches to the audiences on a different level by making them contemplate their own mortality, but also is a highly theatrical piece utilizing masks and other images inspired by Japanese Noh drama. Playwright Jean-Claude van Itallie's libretto for The Tibetan Book of the Dead is taken from ancient writings that were meant to be read to people who were dying and after their death as they made their journey toward reincarnation. Florencia en el Amazonas is based on the writings of Latin-American author Gabriel Garcia Márquez and the story of Noa Ain's The Outcast is biblically influenced. Some of the other commissions enjoyed name recognition and familiarity either from the original story or from the author. Desert of Roses, by Robert Moran, premiered in the Cullen Theater in 1992. Moran would follow this commission with another for the company entitled The Dracula Diary. With a lavish score and contemporary sound sources such as synthesizers, Desert of Roses is a retelling of the timeless classic Beauty and the Beast. As mentioned earlier, Cinderella en España or Cinderella in Spain by Mary Carol Warwick was commissioned for HGO's Education and Outreach branch in 1998. Though the title was less well known, Tod Machover chose

Leo Tolstoy's 1888 novella as the setting for his 1999 opera, Resurrection, which premiered in the Brown Theater. Louisa May Alcott's Little Women, composed in 1998 by relative newcomer Mark Adamo, was originally presented by the members of the HGO Studio members in 1998 in the more intimate Cullen Theater and was such a success that the production was then produced for the 1999-2000 season for the Brown Theater and licensed by three other companies. (Of all of the previously mentioned works with literary foundations, Little Women has been the most frequently produced outside of the company.) Finally, Olive Ann Burns' best-selling novel was the basis of Floyd's Cold Sassy Tree, a five-company commission that made its premiere in the Wortham Theater Center's Brown Theater in April of 2000. At the time, it was rumored to be the last opera that the great American composer would pen.

Willie Stark, the company's third commission, blurs the line between literature and contemporary topic. Carlisle Floyd's 1981 opera is a "fictionalized bio-opera about the Louisiana politician Huey Long, based on Robert Penn Warren's book All the King's Men."<sup>184</sup> Following this, Houston Grand Opera commissioned and produced several other works that would go on to attract a great deal of attention to the company internationally and even create some controversy. The most talked about commission in the company's history is most likely John Adam's Nixon in China, which was the first new work presented in the Brown Theater in 1987. The minimalist opera has been performed across the United States and received numerous performances in Europe. Jackie O, based on a segment of the life of the former First Lady, made its debut in the Cullen in 1997, and then was produced by its co-commissioner, the Banff Centre for the Arts in Canada. Harvey Milk, by Stewart Wallace and Michael Korie, is a quasi-

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<sup>184</sup>Kay, "Championship Seasons." (n. pag., online source)

biographical account of the first openly gay elected official in the city of San Francisco. The three-company co-commission with New York City Opera and San Francisco Opera attracted a great deal of attention in the opera world and was received well for the most part, but created a great deal of discussion in the media as to the subject matter and the under-playing of the assassination and the famous “Twinkie” trial that followed.

After viewing the history and workings of Houston Grand Opera, one may ask: “Should pieces like TEXAS!, Cinderella in Spain, and Puppy and Big Guy be included on the company’s roster with world premieres like Nixon in China and Harvey Milk?” “Is Houston Grand Opera in the business of premiere new works simply to make a name for the company or is it really concerned with fostering the repertory of American Opera?”

As for the importance of the outreach of their educational offerings, the number of audience members that they reach in a year may far exceed that of works presented in the Brown or Cullen Theaters. Should the fact that they are performed in classrooms and small school auditoriums be of significance? Some may argue that these are merely short pieces of music theatre (approximately 45 minutes in length) presented to students in elementary school by less-than-world class singers. On the other hand, one must remember that these are “operas” serving an educational mission of teaching not only about the art form of opera, but helping to address moral issues that these young audiences face either in their daily lives or in the years to come as during their maturation into adulthood.

There are those in the national opera community who feel that using the educational titles is a way of padding Houston Grand Opera’s claims of being the number one commissioner of new works by laying claim to anything new the company produces. This being said, there are many companies, including Opera Theatre of St. Louis and

Minnesota Opera that have also received recognition for commissioning efforts that include educational titles in their company repertory. The reason that HGO, as well as these other companies, choose to include these titles is to promote all of the company's producing efforts, as well as stress the importance of these pieces.

Although other companies may question their motives, thanks to the work of Gockley and his diligent staff at Houston Grand Opera, and strong relationships with artists such as Carlisle Floyd, American opera, once regarded as a poor relation to the grand masterworks of past centuries, is on the path of finding a regular audience base.

The future of American opera in the twenty-first century at this point looks remarkably bright given the large new audience which has been developed around the old core audience, an audience which has a genuine enthusiasm for the art form itself and which goes to opera with far fewer predispositions as to what they expect, and are more open and welcoming in their response. This for the most part should translate into stable support for opera although [. . .]. Certainly the climate for new and unfamiliar operas is more cordial today than I ever dreamed it would be in my lifetime [. . .]. What David (Gockley) has accomplished in Houston everyone in opera agrees is extraordinary. He has tenaciously and tirelessly built an audience that has by now come to expect new and less familiar works each season [. . .]. He has also managed to create a large heterogeneous audience, which obliges him to continue the tradition of mixed repertoire of the familiar, the less familiar, and the new.<sup>185</sup>

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<sup>185</sup>Floyd, interview via fax.

## **Chapter 5: Case Study of Harvey Milk**

### **I. THE CO-COMMISSIONING OF HARVEY MILK**

Commissioning can be a painstaking and time-consuming venture for all of the parties involved, composers, librettists, artistic directors, etc. Not only are there matters of artistic vision and freedom, one must consider many other factors when undertaking the production of a new work. Companies must consider their audience and its possible reaction to the material. The approval of the Board of Directors of an opera company is also significant since they help guide its financial future. A company's development department has to have an idea of the possible significance of a new work in order to apply for grants and to solicit corporate contributions and individual donations. The artistic and production staffs have to take the time to watch, nurture and critique the evolution of the new piece as it progresses, usually over the period of a few years. Since the opera is not fully developed, the design team has to be flexible enough to change ideas midstream as the opera itself evolves in ever-changing directions. Also, the marketing wing of the company has to come up with a campaign in order to sell a new work. Companies, such as Houston Grand Opera and San Francisco Opera, who have been presenting American operas over the past few decades if not longer, have had varying levels of success with new works and selling them to their audiences is not as difficult as it once was.

Harvey Milk, based on the life of San Francisco's openly gay councilman, overcame a great number of obstacles to get to the stage. The opera was co-commissioned by Houston Grand Opera, San Francisco Opera and New York City Opera.



The score was composed by Stewart Wallace to a libretto by Michael Korie. It made its premiere at the Wortham Center of the Houston Grand Opera in January of 1995, with subsequent productions mounted in New York and then San Francisco.

## II. BACKGROUND AND DEVELOPMENT OF HARVEY MILK, THE OPERA

In 1989, Stewart Wallace and Michael Korie's opera, Where's Dick?, made its premiere with the Houston Grand Opera. On the basis of the successful run of the production, David Gockley, HGO's artistic director, promised the team of Wallace and Korie a commission for another opera with subject to be determined later. Following the initial agreement, Korie and Wallace approached Gockley with Sarah Schulman's novel, People in Trouble, as the possible subject of the new opera. Korie even made the suggestion that he would co-write the libretto with Ms. Schulman. According to Korie, the subject was rejected because the proposal was viewed as "too cinematic" and not "sufficiently operatic." Consequently, in her non-fiction book, Stage Struck, Schulman stated that the novel later became the basis for the Tony award-winning musical, Rent.<sup>186</sup>

Following this meeting, David Gockley met with German stage director Jon Dew, who would direct the world premiere of Robert Moran's Desert of Roses for HGO. Dew proposed the idea of doing an opera on the subject of Harvey Milk. Gockley was intrigued by the idea. Gockley sent a tape of Where's Dick? to Dew to see if he thought that the style of Wallace and Korie might correspond with his idea of the opera. Dew was impressed by the piece and thought it was the right approach for Harvey Milk. In 1991, Korie and Wallace were in Houston to see the premiere of their opera, Kabbalah, by

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<sup>186</sup>Michael Korie, Interview via e-mail. 12 April 2002.

Diverse Works. Upon this visit, Gockley invited them to a meeting to discuss the Harvey Milk project. During this meeting, Gockley contacted Dew in Germany by phone to discuss his concept of the opera so Korie and Wallace could hear it first hand. In Korie's opinion, Dew's concept was on the "campy side" for Harvey Milk. Korie felt that the subject could definitely work if it were treated with a more serious approach.

### **III. HARVEY MILK - A SYNOPSIS OF THE OPERA<sup>187</sup>**

#### **Act I: The Closet**

At the moment of his assassination, past and present interweave in the office of Harvey Milk, the 48-year-old San Francisco Supervisor. The voice of Dianne Feinstein, president of the Board of Supervisors, announces the murders of Milk and Mayor George Moscone and identifies Dan White, a fellow City Supervisor, as the suspect. Fifteen-year-old Harvey Milk, about to leave for the opera in New York from his Long Island home, is warned by his Mama of big city dangers: "Watch out for men who are different." Young Harvey appears in the standee section of the old Met, puzzled by a line of "men without wives." Wondering where they go when the opera is over, he follows them into Central Park and is entrapped and handcuffed by a plainclothes cop. Grown Harvey Milk takes his place, a 39-year-old Wall Street stockbroker - still handcuffed. Harvey entertains in his "closet." A fight with a German businessman who denies knowledge of the death camps makes Harvey irate. "How can

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<sup>187</sup>Joseph Caldwell, Synopsis of Harvey Milk, San Francisco Opera Magazine 1996-97 Season, Vol 74, No. 7, 24.

a person see and not act?" he demands to know. But when a cop with a nightstick approaches, Harvey himself retreats. As a Jew, he is able to defend himself; as a gay man he is intimidated and silent. Scott, a street activist, ridicules Harvey's fear, daring him to be open. Instead, Harvey returns to the comfort of the opera house, but again seeing the "men without wives," he realizes nothing has changed or will until he risks change. He snaps his handcuffs apart to the sound of shattering glass. A riot is in progress - the 1969 Stonewall Uprising on Christopher Street. Harvey and Scott find each other in the crowd: Harvey's romance with activism has begun.

## Act II: The Castro

Dan White, a fireman, laments the transformation of this old Irish neighborhood into the Castro, San Francisco's openly gay ghetto. Residents and recent arrivals revel in their newfound freedom and identity. Harvey Milk, complete with a hippie ponytail, surveys the teeming street from the roof of his camera store. "Register to vote!" he encourages them. Mobilizing gays and an ever-widening constituency of minorities, women, Teamsters and senior citizens, he runs for City Supervisor - and loses. In a moment of quiet recommitment, Scott encourages Harvey to cut his flowering hair to broaden his electoral appeal. Outside on the street, a gay man is killed by teenagers wielding knives and a baseball bat. Milk counters White's message of hate with one of hope and faith in the power of every individual to effect change. He is elected Supervisor for District

Five. Dan White is elected Supervisor for District Eight. Mayor Moscone thanks San Francisco for the City's first diverse Board of Supervisors. Harvey thanks his supporters as a massive pride parade begins. "Come on out!" calls Harvey.

### Act III: City Hall

As Board of Supervisors President Dianne Feinstein gives Dan White a lesson in pragmatic politics, Harvey moves knowingly and effectively through the corridors of power. White's "not in my backyard" opposition to a neighborhood issue is overruled by one vote - Harvey's. In retribution, White votes against Harvey's gay rights ordinance and resigns in fury. Harvey moves quickly to have White replaced by a liberal, when White, now backed by a phalanx of downtown real estate interests, returns to reclaim his position. The Mayor, at first inclined to reinstate White, is convinced by Milk not to do so. When White realizes he is out, he sits at home watching TV, plotting revenge. Harvey and Scott appear in a box at the opera. Though publicly cheered by his constituents, Harvey has troubling premonitions about his possible assassination. White stuffs a loaded gun into his holster. Mayor Moscone is in his office. When his back is turned, White fires. Harvey is seated at his desk as he was in the beginning of the opera. A tape of Milk's actual voice speaks his prescient, political last will as White fires again and again. The Messenger appears and leads Harvey to a high place to witness his legacy: a candlelight vigil stretching the length of Market Street as San Francisco mourns the slain

with a requiem of remembrance.

In the program for the New York City Opera production, Joseph Caldwell writes:

“In one sense, Harvey Milk follows a venerable and preferred operatic tradition. The hero’s lineage can be traced to Fidelio/Leonora and Florestan, to Don Carlos and his friend Don Rodrigo, all of whom braved the prevailing powers in the name of justice and paid a penalty that was heavy indeed. Like Tosca’s Cavaradossi, like Andrea Chénier, Harvey Milk fought against oppression - and was killed. [. . .] Drawing upon direct histories provided by those who lived and worked with Harvey Milk, Wallace and Korie re-imagined Milk’s history as a mythological journey to martyrdom. Placing the story within the context of the evolving eras of gay and lesbian life in America, they trace Milk’s personal, political, and visionary growth, from a teenager, drawn to opera as a means of understanding himself, to a closeted Wall Street stock broker to Castro Street activist to responsible city servant of the dispossessed-the gays, women, minorities, labor unionist-whose cause he made his own.”<sup>188</sup>

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<sup>188</sup>Joseph Caldwell, New York City Opera Program, April 4, 1995, n. pag. (Selection taken from Historical notes).

#### IV. THE COMMISSIONING PROCESS AND WRITING OF HARVEY MILK

During the early stages of the opera, the commissioning partners changed as well. Originally, the opera was to be the co-production of HGO, San Francisco Opera, and Minnesota Opera with Dortmund Opera of Germany building the sets and costumes. After John Dew's falling out with Gockley and HGO, Dortmund was out of the equation. Minnesota dropped out after perusing one of the early drafts of the libretto. According to Michael Korie, "It (Minnesota Opera) found the work's frankness off-putting."<sup>189</sup> Following the loss of these two companies from the project, another partner and more revenue had to be found. New York City Opera was approached to join the co-production, but they would not do so until hearing the music and reading the libretto. Christopher Keene, New York City Opera's music director, was pleased with what he heard and agreed to sign on.

It took quite a bit of scrutiny of the libretto and the score by other companies to finally get them on board to co-produce the opera. Some of the significant communications with the other co-producers came in a very drawn-out manner. It was during January of 1991 that an article appeared in the Bay Area Reporter (a San Francisco gay newspaper) announcing that Houston Grand Opera was commissioning an opera about Harvey Milk. Later that year in October, Houston Grand Opera asked San Francisco Opera if it had any interest in becoming a co-commissioner on the project. During a trip to San Francisco to get background research for the libretto, Michael Korie met with SFO's Musical Administrator, Kip Cranna, to discuss his plans for the opera.<sup>190</sup>

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<sup>189</sup>Korie, interview via e-mail.

<sup>190</sup>Time line of the opera, Harvey Milk. Prepared by Kip Cranna, San Francisco Opera.

In 1992 and 1993, San Francisco's involvement became more active with Cranna making visits to Houston to meet with Gockley, Korie and Wallace to discuss the project. Wallace also visited SFO's General Director Lotfi Mansouri in San Francisco to play him samples of the score. By December of 1992, a new draft of the libretto was in place that incorporated many of the changes discussed in previous meetings. In April of 1993, Wallace met with Donald Ruckles, SFO's music director, in New York to discuss the music. Wallace followed that meeting up in May by meeting with New York City Opera's music director Christopher Keene. In October, a meeting was held in San Francisco between Mansouri, Gockley and Cranna to discuss the project and SFO's involvement. It was at this meeting that Mansouri committed his company to performing Harvey Milk. This was two years after the first communication of SFO's involvement with the work had taken place. Following SFO agreeing to co-produce the work, a meeting took place in November between Cranna, SFO's artistic administrator, Sarah Billingham, and Ann Owens of HGO to discuss Houston's and San Francisco's role as co-commissioners. In December of 1993, auditions and a play-through of the opera took place for the San Francisco artistic team (Mansouri, Cranna and Billingham) in New York.

Following the agreement to the co-commission, everything moved at a faster pace. In January of 1994 the co-commission was announced in a press release and the final details of the agreement were reached in March. The bulk of the casting decisions were made by June of 1994, and the design presentations for the production were conducted in July in New York. Five months later in January of 1995, Harvey Milk opened in Houston.

As stated earlier, the problems in the commissioning process can be numerous, not only for the opera company, but for the composer and librettist as well. This was the

case for Michael Korie and Stewart Wallace on Harvey Milk. Although they were under the supervision of one of the most respected producers of new operas, the road to the premiere was not always smooth. For example, although the first draft of the libretto took a few months to complete, it took a matter of years to get to the final draft. There was a total of fourteen revisions to the libretto. One reason for this is that Gockley wanted to solicit outside opinions on the libretto. The libretto was critiqued by six dramaturges from the various producing companies. According to Korie: "They had widely divergent viewpoints of what the opera should be, which is not what I thought at all."<sup>191</sup>

Fortunately, Korie's concept of the opera was shared by Gockley and Wallace. Korie was encouraged by Gockley to stay on his path. Korie wrote: "Unlike some of the dramaturges, David (Gockley) was not afraid of the content and issues raised by the opera. His main concern was that whatever I wrote, it had to be dramatically clear and musical. He was a great source of moral support to me, and truly showed what an expert producer of new work he is."

Not only were the dramaturges opposed to some content in the opera, but so were some of the more important administrators among the producing partners. The ending of the opera met with resistance from San Francisco Opera's Artistic Director, Lotfi Mansouri. When SFO produced the opera, The Death of Klinghoffer, a number of complaints were registered as to the way the Jewish characters were portrayed. In Harvey Milk, the final section of the opera is a "Kaddish" candlelight vigil held for Milk and Moscone. This scene contains Hebrew text of the prayer of mourning. Mansouri was hesitant to approve this passage in the opera due to further objections from the

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<sup>191</sup>Korie, interview via e-mail.



company's Jewish supporters. "At one point he threatened to withdraw from producing Milk unless Stewart (Wallace) and I eliminated the whole section. Stewart and I held our ground and refused to cut or change 'The Kaddish,' even though it might have meant the cancellation of the opera." Korie said.<sup>192</sup> Mansouri did not go through with his threat.

Objections to the gay subject matter in the opera were raised by two of the three boards of directors of the co-commissioning companies. Although HGO was under the assumption that its gay subscribers would fully support the work, there was some opposition from a gay contingency. According to Korie, "a large group of gay subscribers including a significant constituency of 'Log Cabin Republicans' withdrew its support of the opera and threatened to boycott it." Korie was asked to meet with the group by HGO. As they put it to Korie, "We don't want to see that kind of thing on the stage of the opera house. It's bad for our image." Most of the protestors who actually attended the production, however, proclaimed it as "wonderful" and "marvelous" according to Korie.<sup>193</sup>

Another obstacle Korie had to face was dealing with the heirs of Harvey Milk, his close friends and supporters, and his lover, Scott Smith. (Scott Smith is also a character in the opera). As one could imagine, these individuals wanted to make sure that Milk's name would not be tarnished and his legacy would be left intact. Many wanted to provide input in the libretto. Korie held off from showing any of them the libretto until the premiere.<sup>194</sup>

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<sup>192</sup>Korie, interview via e-mail.

<sup>193</sup>Korie, interview via e-mail.

<sup>194</sup>Korie, interview via e-mail.

One final incident that Korie shared involved a wealthy benefactor of the New York City Opera, who although he was gay, threatened to withdraw his annual gift of one million dollars from the company unless the gay content was removed. The rationale behind his declaration was that many of his friends were straight and they were “sick and tired of hearing about the problems of gays. Straight people have problems too.” The individual was informed by the librettist that no such changes would be made to the opera. The benefactor did not withhold his donation. Korie went on to add that the San Francisco Opera board members embraced the opera wholeheartedly and offered no interference at all.<sup>195</sup>

After waiting years for the libretto to be completed and approved, Wallace then had to tackle the score. He did not have to endure the struggles of the librettist in regard to the editing done of the text. According to Wallace, though the text was discussed at great length, there were never any conversations regarding the music. “The assumption was that they were interested in my musical voice and I took it from there.”<sup>196</sup> This does not mean that Wallace had free reign over what he wanted to do. He admits to having to play through the score for Gockley and others while it was still in progress. Opinions were offered at these sessions, but Wallace expressed that one has to be careful as to how much advice and from whom you can take. “Everyone always offers input. The trick is in keeping your own counsel through the process.”<sup>197</sup> Through it all, Wallace said that the score took a full two years to complete, working seven days a week, twelve to eighteen hours a day. The process in whole, from the initial writing of the first draft to

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<sup>195</sup>Korie, interview via e-mail.

<sup>196</sup>Stewart Wallace, interview via e-mail, 10 Feb. 2002.

<sup>197</sup>Wallace, interview via e-mail.

the premiere, was four years.

Another hindrance Korie and Wallace faced was in the original contract they signed with HGO. As per the agreement, the opera was to be in two acts. They were also limited to the number of principal singers they could use. As the opera developed, Korie felt limited by the structure and felt that three acts would fit the dramatic outline of the story more effectively. Also, Christopher Keene, New York City Opera's music director, agreed that the score needed more strings. This helped support Wallace's position that the opera needed a larger orchestra. Korie said: "To its great credit, HGO allowed me to change the terms of the contract, and gave us more principals, a larger orchestra and agreed to the three-act structure." With these changes in place and a much larger piece than had originally been planned developing, Harvey Milk's premiere was moved from the smaller Cullen Theatre to the larger Brown Theatre of HGO's Wortham Theatre Center.

## **V. ARTISTIC STAFF**

Stewart Wallace is a composer with diverse tastes and musical influences. Author Carole Maso writes:

Stewart Wallace makes irresistible musical shapes out of his inexhaustible compassion and fury, irreverence and joy. In love with contradictions, he comes up again and again with an alchemical brew of high and low art, ancient and new - incantatory, hallucinatory, with a flurry of show biz thrown in, a riot of quotation, a generosity of options. His conviction is that there may be room for it all: the ecstatic, the hilarious, the pure, the

corrupt, the senseless, the silly, the spiritual."<sup>198</sup>

Besides Where's Dick?, which premiered with Houston Grand Opera in 1989, his opera Kabbalah made its world premiere as part of the Brooklyn Academy's New Wave Festival later that same year. To his credit he has composed two other operas, Hopper's Wife, which is based on the premise of an unlikely marriage of painter Edward Hopper and gossip columnist Hedda Hopper, and Yiddisher Teddy Bears.

Librettist Michael Korie had a very diverse upbringing. Trained in his youth on the Baroque harpsichord and pipe organ, he later spent six years working as a journalist. In addition to his work on Harvey Milk, his collaborations with Wallace include Kabbalah, Where's Dick?, and Hopper's Wife. Korie is also no stranger to the world of music theatre, having his dramatic theatre songs performed at the American Music Theater Festival, Performance Space 122, Goodspeed Opera and Manhattan Punchline.

Since Harvey Milk was not going to be a conventional opera by any stretch of the imagination, the composer, librettist and producers did not want a director who would give the piece a realistic staging and possible caricatures of the characters represented. Since the opera was part biographical and part mythological, the project needed someone who was willing to take risks. After John Dew left the project, Christopher Alden was brought in to stage the opera.

Prior to the world premiere in January 1995, Christopher Alden had already established a reputation as one of the most innovative opera directors in the United States and Europe. Alden had already directed such opera companies as the Welsh National Opera, San Francisco, Sante Fe, Washington, the Opéra Comique in Paris, Dallas,

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<sup>198</sup>Carole Maso, "Biography of Stewart Wallace, Stagebill, HGO Program for Harvey Milk January 1995: 24.

Omaha, St. Louis, Basel Opera, the Netherlands' Opera Zuid, Memphis, Pittsburgh, Detroit, Syracuse, Long Beach and Los Angeles. To his credit, he also had directed three World and American premieres prior to *Harvey Milk*: Tania (World Premiere with the Philadelphia Music Theater Festival), Das verratene Meer and Ghost Sonata (American premieres with the San Francisco Opera).

At the time of the Harvey Milk premiere, conductor Ward Holmquist was regarded by many as one of the most respected young conductors in the United States. By 1995, he was in his eighth season as resident conductor with Houston Grand Opera, where he had assisted other world premieres for the company, including Nixon in China. Holmquist was also the Program Director for HGO's Opera New World. Among his conducting credits outside of Houston were Tulsa, Omaha, Chautauqua, and the Des Moines Metro Opera, as well as the Houston Symphony and Houston Ballet. The other world premieres with Houston Grand Opera include The Dracula Diary and The Passion of Jonathan Wade (revised edition).

Quite often, directors like to keep their design team together to maintain an artistic vision for the pieces they create. Such was the case of Alden and Set Designer Paul Steinberg. Although Harvey Milk was Steinberg's debut with Houston Grand Opera, he had previously designed over thirty of Alden's productions. Steinberg, an instructor of stage design at the New York University Tisch School of the Arts, had also designed productions for San Francisco Opera, Geneva Opera in Switzerland, the New Israeli Opera, the Opéra Comique in Paris, the Chicago Symphony, Sante Fe Opera, New York City Opera, Washington Opera, Seattle Opera, the Welsh National Opera, Opera Zuid in Holland, Opera Pacific, and the Kennedy Center, as well as productions in Antwerp and Ghent.

Noele Stollmack, who at the time of the premiere had worked for HGO as a resident lighting designer for three years and had worked for the company since 1989, was contracted to handle the designing duties for the world premiere in Houston. Before designing Harvey Milk, she was the lighting designer for the world premiere of the Houston Grand Opera productions of Desert of Roses, The Outcast and The Dracula Diary. Besides the over forty productions to her credit as a lighting supervisor with HGO, Stollmack had also designed for New Orleans Opera, Portland Opera, and numerous productions for Houston's Alley Theatre. Unfortunately for Stollmack, she was led to believe that she was to light all three productions, but was informed later that due to the budgetary constraints of NYCO and SFO her services would only be needed in Houston. Also, new lighting designs would be set in those two cities, so she would receive no compensation or credit for re-use of her original design. Such is not the normal practice in the contemporary climate of new productions.

Since a different lighting designer was hired for each of the three productions, the artistic vision for each production changed as well. New York City Opera decided to use one of their in-house lighting designers, Jeff Davis, to design the East Coast premiere. In San Francisco, Lighting Designer Heather Carson, who had collaborated with Christopher Alden on over ten operas prior to Harvey Milk, was brought in to design the revised production for the West Coast premiere. A designer who is recognized both in the U.S. and abroad, Carson has designed opera and theater for such directors as David Alden, Francesca Zambello, Richard Foreman, and Anne Bogart.

Costume Designer Gabriel Berry had a well-deserved reputation as a designer for opera, theater and ballet prior to joining the Harvey Milk project, where she made her HGO debut. She was an Obie and Bessie award winner, and had also received numerous American Theater Wing Design nominations. She was the resident designer for La

MaMa E.T.C. and artistic associate with the New York Theater Workshop. This was another case where Alden was using a designer with whom he had collaborated a great deal in the past with such companies as Opera Zuid in Holland, the American Music Festival, Opéra Française de New York, Opera at the Academy, Washington Opera, and the Chicago Symphony, where she co-designed with Oscar de la Renta. She had also designed costumes for world premieres by playwrights such as Tony Kushner, Maira Irene Fornes, Samuel Beckett, Sam Shephard, Steve Tesich, Charles Ludlum and Eric Bogosian. Her dance credits included Alvin Ailey Dance Co., Donald Byrd Dance Co., Yoshiko Chuma and the School of Hard Knocks, Molissa Fenley, Yves Musard, Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane, and the Urban Bush Women.

## **VI. AUDITIONS AND CASTING**

The casting process took from six months to a year depending on the individual company. According to San Francisco Opera Musical Administrator Kip Cranna, the auditions were first held in New York in December of 1993 and the cast was basically completed by June of 1994. Some of the auditions were held in New York at the 92<sup>nd</sup> Street Y. Representatives were present from all of the three companies. Christopher Alden recalled that each company brought their own people, favorite singers and young artists, to the auditions, jockeying them into place for casting consideration. Although keeping the same principal singers for each production would seem like the logical decision, quite often it is difficult to find an artist who has the flexibility in his or her schedule for a duration of nearly one year, the time from the opening in Houston on January 21, 1995 to the closing in San Francisco on November 30<sup>th</sup> of that same year. As stated in an earlier chapter, many artists are contracted two or three years in advance

when singing standard repertory. Since the casting did not begin until December of 1993, thirteen months before the scheduled premiere of the opera, finding singers who were available for all three productions was a difficult task. In some co-productions, you will see artists capable of clearing their schedule for possibly the first two productions and then having to be replaced for the subsequent mountings of the opera. In the case of Harvey Milk, the principal cast was kept intact for all three cities, but New York and San Francisco insisted on some changes of the singers in secondary roles in order to use their own people.

Harvey Milk was played by baritone Robert Orth. Orth, noted for his flexibility as a singer and actor with a repertoire including opera, operetta and musical theatre, had sung with all three companies prior to this engagement. He also has extensive credits in American operas including The Aspern Papers, Six Characters in Search of an Author, Summer and Smoke, and A Waterbird Talk. Raymond Very, tenor, who played former police commissioner and assassin of Harvey Milk, Dan White, was a singer who came out of the Houston Studio program. Milk's lover, Scott Smith, was portrayed by tenor Bradley Williams. The former Texas resident, with numerous international credits to his resumé, had only performed with New York City Opera in three productions prior to this engagement. Male soprano Randall Wong, who played Henry Wong, and baritone James Maddalena, who performed the roles of Mintz, Empress, Messenger and Reverend Barcus, were both very well known to Houston, but had not appeared previously with either New York City Opera or San Francisco. Wong, an early music specialist, had been involved with other world premieres of HGO, as well as Wallace and Korie. Roles were written for him in the HGO productions of Meredith Monk's ATLAS: an opera in three acts and Wallace and Korie's Where's Dick?. Maddalena was also no stranger to new works or world premieres. Besides his internationally acclaimed portrayal of the title



character in the HGO production of John Adams' Nixon in China, he also appeared in the world premiere of The Death of Klinghoffer at Brussel's Théâtre de la Monnai and Michael Tibbet's New Year with HGO. Born in Israel and receiving his musical training in Manchester, England, bass Gidon Saks had performed almost exclusively throughout Europe and Canada in numerous roles and concert appearances. The only non-American among the group, he made his debuts with all three companies, HGO, NYCO and SFO, in the roles of Horst Brauer and George Moscone.

Rounding out the principal cast were mezzo-soprano Jill Grove and soprano Juliana Gondek. Harvey Milk is a huge opera with respect to the number of named characters listed for the piece. With the exception of Robert Orth, all of the principal actors had to take on two or three characters. Jill Grove, a three-year member of the HGO Studio program who created the roles of Anne Kronenberg and The Beard in the world premiere of Harvey Milk in Houston, was not contracted for the New York City production and was replaced by Robynne Redmon. Grove was contracted to play Kronenberg in San Francisco, but then switched to portraying The Dyke, instead of The Beard, in this final production. Even at this early stage in her career, Grove had been involved in a few world premieres, including The Dracula Diary in Houston and The Vanishing Bridegroom for the Opera Theater of St. Louis. Finally, the singer with the most extensive resume among the members of the principal cast was Juliana Gondek. Gondek originated the roles of Diane Feinstein and Mama in the world premiere, but for the New York City production the role of The Hooker was added to her assignment. In the San Francisco production she played Feinstein, The Beard, and The Hooker. An extensive recital and concert artist as well, her credits are international and numerous in scope. With regard to American opera, Gondek appeared in the world premiere of the Dreamkeepers with Utah Opera and sang the world premieres of Stephen Albert's Distant

Hills and Bright Sheng's Songs from the Sung Dynasty. Although Christopher Alden was present and had a great deal of input in the casting of the piece, Gockley made the ultimate decision for the casting of the Houston Grand Opera production, as he does with all new works.

## **VII. PRODUCTION PROCESS**

The overall budget for the co-production was approximately \$500,000. This amount covered the rights for the designs and stagings, building of the production (sets, costumes and props), programming of the synthesizer, and other incidentals. Houston Grand Opera, New York City Opera, and San Francisco Opera shared this cost equally.

The production budget for the Houston Grand Opera world premiere was approximately \$685,000. This amount does not include HGO's portion of the overall co-production fees shared by the three companies or overhead costs incurred by HGO. The budgetary breakdown below includes most of the expenses incurred by HGO to mount the world premiere and five subsequent performances in the Brown Theater. Some of the categories are crossover expenses, which are included in the co-production budget charged to all three companies.

“Harvey Milk: HGO Production Budget for Jan.21-Feb. 5, 1995 performances”<sup>199</sup>

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|---------------------------------|-----------|--------------------|
| Technical/Running Crew:         | \$235,000 | (HGO expense)      |
| Wardrobe/Wig/Make Up Crew:      | \$ 19,200 | (HGO expense)      |
| Singers/Chorus/Supernumeraries: | \$187,045 | (HGO expense)      |
| Conductor/Orchestra:            | \$153,744 | (HGO expense)      |
| Hall Rental (Brown Theater):    | \$ 33,000 | (HGO expense)      |
| Lighting and Sound Equipment:   | \$ 20,400 | (HGO expense)      |
| Blue Print and Drafting:        | \$ 2,420  | (Co-Prod. expense) |
| Advancing:                      | \$ 5,200  | (Co-Prod. expense) |
| Shipping:                       | \$ 15,900 | (Co-Prod. expense) |
| Warehouse Crew:                 | \$ 6,500  | (Co-Prod. expense) |

Stage Director Christopher Alden had been brought on board more than a year prior to the production for planning sessions and design conferences. At this time in the process, he also received the libretto from Korie to which many alterations were subsequently made. In fact, according to Alden, it bore very little resemblance to the one finally used in production.<sup>200</sup> As for the design team, he had very little say in the choice of lighting designer, since all three co-producers had decided to use someone from their own companies. Steinberg and Berry had a worked with Alden extensively prior to this

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<sup>199</sup>Greg Weber, Production Budget for HGO world premiere of Harvey Milk, e-mail correspondence to the author, 29 Jan. 2004.

<sup>200</sup>Christopher Alden, phone interview, Dec. 2003.

production. Ross Perry, Director of Dramatic and Movement Studies for the HGO Studio, was brought in as assistant director and choreographer for the opera. Although he was not a resident assistant director with HGO, Perry had extensive experience with the company as a director and choreographer on such productions as Aida, Love & Science and the world premiere of The Dracula Diary.

In his initial meetings with Wallace and Korie, the creators of the work discussed their ideas about the piece with the director, but according to Alden, they were careful not to drive him in any particular way. They wanted a director who would not take a realistic approach to the opera. They wanted someone who was not afraid to make bold choices.

Alden said that the opera went through many changes, primarily in Houston. According to Alden, Wallace and Korie were very active in the rehearsal process and welcomed comments. By his recollection, one of the major alterations to the opera was the ending of Act III, which was reworked quite a bit. Originally the section was a 30-minute choral/concert scene, but it was trimmed significantly. At this point, the opera was basically rehearsed for three and a half weeks, and then a mock workshop production was performed for members of the company and other invited guests. Following this preview, suggestions were taken. A two-week hiatus took place following the workshop to implement changes in the production and score. At the end of the hiatus, the full company, singers and technical staff, rehearsed for two weeks to iron out the changes and add all of the production elements to the opera to prepare for opening. Alden did not do any special preparation for the project. He read whatever books he could get on the subject, but he chose not to speak with any of the people who knew Harvey Milk.

With regard to the lighting in Houston, Stollmack said that the production team communicated fairly well, especially since she had not worked with Alden or Steinberg

prior to this production. She did admit, though, that since she did not have the history of working together that the director and set designer did, she did become less of a “player” or active participant in production meetings. While in the theatre for technical rehearsals, there were many active participants all giving their opinions on the look of the piece. Besides the director and designers, Korie, Wallace, and Gockley all took an active interest in rehearsals. As for the lighting design itself, Stollmack felt that there were limited options as to how the piece could actually be lit considering the options afforded her by the box set. Even taking this into consideration, the show went through at least three significant lighting changes during technical rehearsals. Every one of the approaches was significantly different. According to Stollmack, Gockley was the one who actually called for the relights. One of the problems that the designer said she faced was that the production team was trying to figure out exactly what the appropriate esthetic for the opera should be during the technical rehearsals in the space.<sup>201</sup> Whether this statement is truly reflective of the situation, much of the overall look of the production is made during design meetings months prior to any production. Once in the space, adjustments are always made, but the redesigning of a show is not a usual occurrence.

Since the set was to be used for all three cities in which the opera would be performed, Paul Steinberg was hired for all three productions. He received a design fee for the first city (Houston) and an additional fee from each of the subsequent producing companies. In doing the design, Steinberg had to keep the parameters of all three venues in mind. The set design for the production was done in complete collaboration with Alden, and Wallace and Korie approved the set design prior to its final presentation to the

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<sup>201</sup>Noele Stollmack, phone interview.

producers. Steinberg said that his aim in collaboration with Alden was “to facilitate and illuminate both the music and the text.”<sup>202</sup> Steinberg, who had also designed sets for the premieres of Anthony Davis’s Tania and Carly Simon’s Romulus Hunt, said that a production on the scale of Harvey Milk takes anywhere from nine months to a year to design with twelve weeks of presentation work in his studio. In regard to the completion of the set, Steinberg felt that Adirondack Scenery, who built and painted the set and was chosen by the producing companies, did a great job.<sup>203</sup>

Following the Houston production, alterations and revisions were made to many facets of the opera prior to each of the productions in New York and San Francisco. These alterations were based on suggestions from all involved: the director, designers, producers, and the composer and librettist themselves. Musically, Wallace said that the score he handed in for the premiere basically stayed intact, with the exception of some minor editing during the Houston rehearsal process, which is normal.

The revisions that did take place were after the Houston and New York performances and took six months. There were a few additions, but most of the changes were in editing and the orchestrations. [. . .] The best advice I got during the revisions was from a fellow composer, John Corigliano. He suggested the new shape for the Kaddish at the end of the opera. I largely followed his advice.[. . .] San Francisco Opera wanted a new aria for Harvey in the third act. The result was “Goodbye, Judy Garland” a short, but revealing moment as Harvey embraces the historic change he’s

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<sup>202</sup>Paul Steinberg, interview via e-mail, 18 Jan. 2004.

<sup>203</sup>Steinberg, interview via e-mail.

set into motion.<sup>204</sup>

In regard to the libretto, Korie said that it took three years to get the libretto of Harvey Milk right, and even after its premiere he made changes for the San Francisco production, also citing the addition of the Act Three aria.<sup>205</sup> The final version of the score, which was used in San Francisco, is the edition used for the cast recording and rental to other opera companies.

The only changes that Steinberg faced involved the choice of lighting designer, which directly influences the look of his set, as well as the overall look of the production.

The biggest hurdle in this regard was that each company insisted on the show being lit by their resident (lighting) designer. We had a particularly difficult time in Houston because the designer wasn't experienced enough to do a large show and the administration refused to acknowledge the problem until it was too late. Only in San Francisco did circumstances allow us to have our lighting designer of choice.<sup>206</sup>

Overall, members of the artistic staff and the producing companies view the production as a success in many ways. One point, which Alden discussed, that made the production process problematic was that three major companies were producing the work together. Each company, all ranked in the top ten based on annual operating budgets by OPERA America, is used to being the leader in its own productions, or in the case of Houston Grand Opera and its history of co-producing, being the leading company on a

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<sup>204</sup>Stewart Wallace, interview via e-mail.

<sup>205</sup>Korie, interview via e-mail.

<sup>206</sup>Steinberg, interview via e-mail.

project. With three huge institutional egos, so to speak, all pulling to assert their own opinion and leave their mark on their own individual productions, things were a little difficult for the artistic team who took the production from city to city. Alden felt that the demands from the different entities were hardest on Wallace and Korie.<sup>207</sup>

Besides the lighting issue, Steinberg felt that the producing companies were not willing to invest enough money and stage time that the piece deserved. In his words, “there was a lot of squabbling between the companies and much general distrust about money.”<sup>208</sup> He also cited the reluctance of San Francisco Opera to fully commit to the project until the opera was to be presented by their company. The lack of proper plans for San Francisco’s Orpheum Theatre led to inaccuracies in the set for that production. NYCO General Director and conductor Christopher Keene’s health issues during the New York production of Harvey Milk created its own set of tensions and difficulties.<sup>209</sup> Keene passed away following the production in December 1995. Wallace came away with both positive and negative sentiments toward the project:

The experience with HGO was terrific. [. . .] David (Gockley) had a personal commitment to making the piece happen, and he and his company were rewarded with tremendous publicity and acclaim worldwide. [. . .]. The compensation. It is always more work than you expect, and the pay is always far too little. In addition, I would have chosen not to have the production at the New York City Opera, as they

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<sup>207</sup>Alden, phone interview.

<sup>208</sup>Steinberg, interview via e-mail.

<sup>209</sup>Steinberg, interview via e-mail.



butchered my work and Michael's.<sup>210</sup>

## VIII. MARKETING

Since every city in which the opera was produced had a different relationship with its gay community, each company had to take a different tack with that area of the population in its advertising and outreach. A great deal of the HGO marketing campaign specifically targeted gay organizations and publications, specifically Houston's primary gay publication Out Smart Magazine. The Houston Grand Opera had been the darling of the publication prior to Harvey Milk, but following the production a sentiment had been sent back to the company that the marketing of the opera had been misleading. Franco recalled that the marketing seemed to send the message that the gay community should only attend "that" opera. Harvey Milk was marketed as a "gay opera," not an opera about a man who happens to be gay. The gay community of Houston, to whom the opera was so heavily promoted, felt the opera was not a gay opera, but more about the gay community.<sup>211</sup>

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<sup>210</sup>Wallace, interview via e-mail.

<sup>211</sup>Franco, personal interview.

## **IX. PUBLIC AND CRITICAL REACTION AND THE FUTURE OF HARVEY MILK**

When asked about the reaction to Harvey Milk in the various cities in which it played, Alden said that the reception in each location was different.

In Houston, the reception was very warm and enthusiastic. In New York, it was a bit colder. The gay opera-going populace wasn't quite as enthusiastic and acted a little aloof and colder to the piece. Perhaps they didn't like the realistic circumstances or situations staring them in the face while attending the opera. The opera received the warmest reception in San Francisco. It was where the majority of the story occurred and the piece also had the opportunity to tighten up over the past two productions.<sup>212</sup>

Steinberg, a New Yorker in his own right, said:

In general the public was very enthusiastic about the opera although, surprisingly, it was rejected by the conservative gay opera community. Some influential NY critics campaigned violently against the opera. The NY Times published three highly viable, negative pieces about the opera. In San Francisco there was a gratifying enormous outpouring of enthusiasm. I saw the production in Dortmund, Germany, which was a travesty. Unfortunately, it had had much publicity and was seen by many influential opera producers who dismissed the piece.<sup>213</sup>

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<sup>212</sup>Alden, phone interview.

<sup>213</sup>Steinberg, interview via e-mail.

Michael Redmond summed up the audience reaction of the opening night of the New York production in his review.

There was total silence in the New York State Theatre, a silence as clamorous in its way as any number of theatrical ovations. It was the kind of silence that one can only call profound. It went on for what seemed to be a very long time. Then the storm broke. The silence was not that of a puzzled audience, uncertain how to respond. No, this was the silence, encountered all too rarely, of an audience coming to grips with a depth and intensity of experience that only opera, 'the great art,' can provide.<sup>214</sup>

As for the critical reaction to the opera, opinions were definitely mixed. Most of the critical disagreement regarding the opera was aimed at the music and libretto. Nathan Caldwell wrote:

Harvey Milk is far from a traditional opera for the same reason that Stewart Wallace is hardly a traditional composer and Michael Korie is far from a traditional librettist. Wallace, in his music, frequently uses sustained propulsive rhythms, yet he is fearlessly drawn to lyricism and melody. Jazz and American roots music, medieval polyphony, minimalist ostinato, Middle Eastern liturgical influences - all have been called into service when the artistic and emotional needs of a particular work required their inclusion. Korie's discontent with norms and forms, his native impudence and independence, have conspired to cast him in the role of an

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<sup>214</sup>"Harvey Milk Leaves Partisan Audience Speechless" by Michael Redmond, The Star-Ledger, April 6, 1995: Pg. 74.

American scourge, one he takes up with undisguised glee.<sup>215</sup>

With this description in mind, it is not difficult to see how some may have viewed and heard the opera in a very different way from others. This, compounded with the work of a stage director who is known for taking artistic risks leads to a fairly controversial and debated work. Some of the reviews were pointed and cynical.

Michael Korie, the librettist, stoops to the crudest possible symbolism...But Korie's stagecraft is for the most part smooth and secure...It is not enough merely to believe that Milk is a man without a flaw in order to buy the last two acts of Harvey Milk: one must also be pro-union, pro-affirmative action, anti-cop, a registered Democrat, and willing to listen with a straight face to some of the most leaden lines I've ever heard in an English-language opera. (The booby prize goes to 'And yet you have a strongly engrained ethnic identity'). [. . .]. The worst libretto can be redeemed by good music. Unfortunately, Stewart Wallace's score is little more than a fluent, faceless pastiche of Stravinsky, movie music and disco...As recent American operas go, Harvey Milk was far from awful. It moved along briskly and was never boring.<sup>216</sup>

Not all critics were negative or mixed on the opera. In fact, from the premiere production in Houston, a lot of feedback in the press was positive and enthusiastic.

"But as a theatrical treatment of an extraordinary tale - one that includes

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<sup>215</sup>Nathan Caldwell, New York City Opera's program for Harvey Milk, April 4, 1995.

<sup>216</sup>Terry Teachout, "Harvey Milk Pours It On," New York Daily News, April 6, 1995: n. pag.

both political and personal struggles of a far-reaching nature, and a tragic inevitability worthy of an Italian opera - this is a potent creation...it's dimensions are made broader and deeper by Korie's stunning libretto, and to a lesser degree by Wallace's stylistically eclectic score."<sup>217</sup>

New York Magazine's Peter G. Davis viewed the opera with a different eye.

One thing about Harvey Milk is certain: Nothing quite like it has ever been done before. Gay characters turn up in opera as peripheral figures...but until now, to my knowledge at least, composers have avoided homosexuality as a central theme...Korie's libretto never stands still for long, swiftly capturing the spirit of a turbulent decade without preaching, posturing, or forgetting the part music must play in bringing the story to life. In the end, the text may present character and conflict too symbolically for the dramatic health of the piece, but the action is expertly imagined...Wallace is probably weary by now of hearing how his colleague dominates the opera and how the music never quite raises the heat high enough, even when the text invites it to do so. That, I fear, doesn't make the fact any less true, although there are many good things in the score, especially when it relaxes into a lyrical mode. Unlike many other American composers producing operas nowadays, Wallace understands what the voice can do and how to write effectively for it.<sup>218</sup>

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<sup>217</sup>Johua Kosman, "Potent Paean to Harvey Milk," San Francisco Chronicle, 23 Jan. 1995: E1-2.

<sup>218</sup>Peter G. Davis, "Opera Comes Out," New York magazine, 24 April 1995: 70.

Mary Campbell, writing for the Associated Press, described Wallace's music as "accessible and easy to listen to. Much of it is minimalist, lushly orchestrated."<sup>219</sup> Some reviews were simply vicious in their intent: "Good subject. Bad Opera. [. . .] The dramatic problems could have been mitigated, even obliterated, by a probing, character-defining, psychologically sensitive score. [. . .] The orchestrations are dense. That may explain the singers' appalling reliance on body microphones [. . .] The purposes may be practical, but the recourse to electronic boosting remains a declaration of operatic ineptitude, if not dishonesty."<sup>220</sup>

Other reviewers chose to focus on homosexual aspects and images of the piece. Bernard Holland described the "docu-opera" as a "grand coming-out party. An emerging culture not only insinuates its connection to opera but occupies its stage outright...an opera diva (Maria Callas) as graven image, enlarged and suitable for worship."<sup>221</sup> Byron Bell of the Newhouse News Service: "The text and Alden's direction are not subtle, and a few critics and members of the audience found some of the cliché gay sex and "carrying on" a bit offensive, just as some gays clearly found them lacking in positive qualities."<sup>222</sup>

Once the opera had opened and made its way to the different theatres, Wallace and Korie had time to reflect on some of the reactions to the opera. "What we've done has not been done," Wallace concedes. "But in some ways Harvey Milk is the most

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<sup>219</sup> Mary Campbell, "Harvey Milk," Associated Press Review, 5 April 1995: n. pag.

<sup>220</sup> Martin Bernheimer, "Harvey Milk: Gay Liberation at the Opera." Los Angeles Times. 6 April 1995: F1, F6.

<sup>221</sup> Bernard Holland, "Havey Milk, a Gay Opera As a Grand Coming Out Party," New York Times, April 6, 1995: C17, C24.

<sup>222</sup> Byron Bell, "Bold Harvey Milk and Beautiful Merry Widow conclude City Opera Season with Contrasting, Compelling Triumphs," Newhouse News Service, April 1995.

traditional opera we've ever done."<sup>223</sup> "When it opened in Houston, Korie says, 'a lot of closeted gay men who love opera were furious, 'Why do you have to drag all that into the opera?'" Wallace went on to add, "They treat opera the way the Met does, as a museum/mausoleum, a place to preserve dead art."<sup>224</sup> What most of the reviewers seemed to miss was that the opera was never intended to be a "docu-opera," because the opera is "based on fact and fiction. It's a 'mythological' treatment of Milk's life."<sup>225</sup> Since the closing night in San Francisco on November 30, 1995, Harvey Milk has only been performed by Dortmund Opera in Germany.

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<sup>223</sup>Jonathan Mandell, "Love! Valour! Arias!" Fan Fare, April 2, 1995: n. pag.

<sup>224</sup>Mandell, "Love! Valour! Arias!" Fan Fare, 2 April 1995: n. pag.

<sup>225</sup>Leighton Kerner, "A Martyr's Opera," Voice 4 April 1995: 33-34.

## Chapter 6: Case Study of Cold Sassy Tree

Carlisle Floyd is one of the most prolific American composers of opera. His output is comparable to that of Gian Carlo Menotti, probably the most famous American opera composer for the time spanning the 1950's through the 70's. Floyd made his name with the production of his first full-length opera, Susannah, which premiered in 1955 at Florida State University in Tallahassee, where he was a faculty member. Like Menotti, Floyd not only composed the music for his operas, but wrote the librettos as well. This would be one of his trademarks on his operas in the future. Floyd said that he has always written his own libretti since composing his first opera (a one-act opera called Slow Dusk) in 1949 as a graduate student at the University of Syracuse. Slow Dusk was taken from a short story that Floyd had written himself at a writing seminar. Besides his accessible musical style and cleverness in setting his own text, the attribute that Floyd possesses that draws comparison to Menotti is the theatricality of his operas. Floyd has said: "I've reached the conclusion that the theatrical instinct, the instinct for writing music for the stage, cannot be taught. If it's there, you can sharpen it, hone it and do all kinds of things to it. But either you have theater blood in you or you don't."<sup>226</sup>

Susannah remains his best known and most widely performed opera. Two years after its Tallahassee premiere, it appeared on the stage of the New York City Opera. Since that time he has gone on to pen numerous other works, four others of which received their premieres at the Houston Grand Opera. Bilby's Doll (1976) was Floyd's first commission and premiere with HGO. In 1981, his opera Willie Stark was a co-

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<sup>226</sup> Alan Rich, "Carlisle Floyd: Opening Doors in American Opera," Opera Cues. Houston Grand Opera, Spring 2000: 11.



commission between HGO and the Kennedy Center. His other world premiere with that company occurred in 1991, when HGO and the Greater Miami Opera co-commissioned a revision of Floyd's 1962 opera The Passion of Jonathan Wade. Among Floyd's other notable works is his setting of John Steinbeck's Of Mice and Men (1969). To this day, Susannah and Of Mice and Men are his most noteworthy pieces and have shown signs of entering the standard repertoire.<sup>227</sup> Although his career can be said to have started in Florida, where he still resides, Houston Grand Opera is considered by many Floyd's home company.

Cold Sassy Tree made its world premiere at Houston Grand Opera's Brown Theater in the Wortham Theater Center on April 14, 2000. The opera was a five-company co-commission and co-production. The other companies involved were Austin Lyric Opera, Baltimore Opera, Opera Carolina and San Diego Opera. The premiere also marked a milestone for its host company. Cold Sassy Tree was Houston Grand Opera's twenty-fifth world premiere over a span of twenty-five years.

## **I. BACKGROUND BEHIND COLD SASSY TREE, THE OPERA**

The inspiration for using Olive Ann Burns's novel Cold Sassy Tree as an opera came from Floyd. He read the Southeastern-based novel two times and began to strategize how to overcome some of the problems of converting the book into a libretto. He gave the novel to HGO general director David Gockley so that he could get the perspective of a non-Southeasterner. Gockley admits that while reading the novel, he had his own questions. "I chuckled through the book, while wondering how this basically non-dramatic study in character, culture and language could ever be turned into a

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<sup>227</sup>Stagebill, Spring 2000, Houston Grand Opera: 22.

libretto.”<sup>228</sup> Floyd described Gockley’s reaction after reading the novel as “hugely enthusiastic.”<sup>229</sup> Gockley then discussed commissioning Cold Sassy Tree with Floyd, but the composer was hesitant. There were still a number of problems to be worked out in regard to the libretto.

Finally, in the spring of 1997, a contract was signed for the commissioning of what was said to be Floyd’s final opera, Cold Sassy Tree. According to Floyd, at the time of the signing two or three companies had already been brought on board to become partners on the project.

Cold Sassy Tree took Floyd about three years to compose. According to the composer, this is the average time that it takes him to write an opera. It took him over three years to compose Of Mice and Men and less time for Wuthering Heights. Three years is the minimum time to which he is willing to commit. He feels that the composer must insist upon an adequate amount of writing time during the deliberations over the commission. According to Floyd: “Young composers often agree on a timetable that is too short.”<sup>230</sup>

As mentioned earlier, Floyd is a composer who prefers to write his own libretto. It is important to Floyd that the creative vision for a piece comes from one imagination. Floyd said that he never begins to write any of the music until “the libretto is in its final form as a libretto.” He realizes, however, that the libretto will change once he has to begin to set it to music. “While writing the libretto, I am certainly aware of what I have

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<sup>228</sup>Stagebill, HGO, Spring 2000

<sup>229</sup>Floyd, interview via fax.

<sup>230</sup>Floyd, interview via fax.

to provide myself as a composer.”<sup>231</sup> Another aspect of Cold Sassy Tree that would create difficulty for any librettist is the source that it is derived from. Burns’ novel is not a story that moves seamlessly through dramatic events, leading the reader from one incident into the next, but rather a series of comedic vignettes strung together through the characters. Although it is a wonderful novel with colorful characters, the format of the work is not conducive to an opera libretto. Such an observation was made by Austin Lyric Opera’s Artistic Director Joe McClain, who read the novel once his company was invited to join the co-commission. McClain was skeptical because there is not a lot of dramatic action in the book, which does not move the story along expeditiously, as most stories must do on stage. He felt it would be difficult to turn such a book into a dramatic genre. After witnessing its transformation from a large cinematic novel to a very concentrated story, he said it was one of the most excellent examples of fashioning a libretto in the whole literature of opera and could be compared with the librettos that Verdi and Strauss set.<sup>232</sup>

In constructing the libretto from the novel, some adjustments had to be made to streamline the dramatic action and interplay between characters. In its operatic form, Cold Sassy Tree contains eighteen named roles. From the novel, Floyd eliminated some characters that were not as essential to the story, such as Will Tweedy’s father. Floyd also made some minor adjustments to characters to aid him in the retelling of the story. Instead of portraying Will Tweedy as a young teenager by casting a female singer in the “pants role,” Floyd added a year to the character’s age, making him 16, and then casting the youthful looking John McVeigh to sing the role and act as the opera’s narrator. Floyd

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<sup>231</sup>Floyd, interview via fax.

<sup>232</sup>Joe McClain, personal interview, 14 May 2000.

made some minor adjustments to the central character of Rucker Lattimore. In the novel, the character's last name is actually Blakeslee and has only one arm. Besides eliminating the distraction of the physical limitation, Floyd changes the name "Lattimore" to "Blakeslee" for musical reasons.<sup>233</sup>

## **II. COLD SASSY TREE - A SYNOPSIS OF THE OPERA<sup>234</sup>**

### Act I: Spring 1900

The citizens of Cold Sassy Tree, Georgia, are outraged when Rucker Lattimore, proprietor of the General Store, announces his intention to marry Love Simpson, a "Yankee" milliner half his age. At the same time, Rucker's grandson, Will Tweedy, befriends a classmate, Lightfoot McClendon, who lives on the wrong side of the tracks.

Rucker's grown daughters, Mary Willis and Loma Williams, coldly receive Miss Love, who explains the "marriage arrangement" between herself and Rucker. She will cook and clean in return for the deed to the house and its furnishings. She explains that as an orphan, she grew up in rented rooms and boarding houses.

The citizens of Cold Sassy Tree shun the new Mrs. Lattimore at church on Sunday following their marriage, prompting Will and Love to leave the service defiantly. Rucker responds by setting up a makeshift church in his parlor and preaching his own sermon, creating further public

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<sup>233</sup>The Valkyrie View, "Houston Grand Opera - Cold Sassy Tree," n.d.: 6 Feb. 2003 <[http://valkyrierview.org/ColdSassyTree\(2\).htm](http://valkyrierview.org/ColdSassyTree(2).htm)>.

<sup>234</sup>"Synopsis of Cold Sassy Tree," OperaCues, Houston Grand Opera, 12.

outrage.

## Act II: Summer 1900

Love has redecorated Rucker's house, much to his daughters' dismay. When Rucker begins to make some changes of his own, including shaving off his beard, Mary Willis and Loma are inconsolable. Loma's husband, Camp, announces the arrival of a Texas rancher, Clayton McAllister, who is Love's former fiancé. Clayton disconsolately returns to Texas.

Lightfoot is distressed about having to quit school to support her family. She confides in Will her love for learning. Will offers to help her get an after-school job at his grandfather's store. They embrace and are discovered by Loma, who strongly disapproves. Will responds by spreading humorous but embarrassing rumors about Loma.

While Love is away in Atlanta, Rucker equips their house with modern conveniences: electricity and plumbing. He asks Will to apologize to his aunt for the rumors he started and shows him the improvements to the house. Love's surprise is tempered by her growing attraction to Rucker, and his to her. Overwhelmed by her feelings, she reveals that she was violated as a young girl and considers herself "damaged goods." Rather than rejecting her, Rucker tenderly proposes that she become his wife in every sense of the word.

## Act III: Fall 1900

At the store, Love quiets the gossiping ladies by appealing to their

vanity. Rucker reproves Will for wanting to become a writer instead of taking over the family business. As Rucker closes the store for the day, he is robbed at gunpoint and critically wounded.

The family maintains a vigil for Rucker. He apologizes for his earlier criticism of Will and encourages the boy to follow his heart. He tells Love that “she was the vision he had always searched for.” Love tries to interrupt the dying Rucker to tell him she is expecting his child.

Will pours out his grief to Lightfoot and announces Rucker’s funeral party plans. At Will’s urging, Love discloses to the townspeople that Rucker is to be a father again. Her announcement is greeted with shocked silence. A few townspeople take their leave, but most are won over at last. Love and the other members of Rucker’s family, finally united, receive the joyous congratulations of the crowd and celebrate the legacy of Rucker Lattimore.

### **III. CARLISLE FLOYD - THE COMMISSION AND COMPOSITION OF COLD SASSY TREE**

An interesting fact about Cold Sassy Tree is that it is Floyd’s first comic opera. Parallels have been drawn with Giuseppe Verdi’s Falstaff in this fact. According to the composer, Cold Sassy Tree will be his last opera. Falstaff, a masterpiece of comic opera, was Verdi’s final piece as well.

Once the writing of the opera had begun and the legal matters were settled between the composer, publisher and the producing companies, an artistic team had to be put in place. Being a composer of stature in the opera world also gave Floyd power and privilege that is not generally available to less experienced composers. For example, as

specified in his commissioning agreement, Floyd had approval over the casting of the singers, conductor and stage director for the world premiere. “That guarantees that the initial production of the work is as close as possible to my conception of the work.”<sup>235</sup> Following the premiere in the subsequent productions by the co-commissioning companies, Floyd had no prerogatives in the casting, but was consulted by the other general directors on singers and conductors. The original production team consisted of stage director Bruce Beresford, set and costume designer Michael Yeargan, lighting designer Duane Schuler, and conductor Patrick Summers, HGO’s musical director.<sup>236</sup>

#### IV. ARTISTIC STAFF

Houston Grand Opera did not act alone when selecting the artistic team for the opera. That decision lay with the consortium as a whole. The leading members of the production team (director, set designer, costume designer and lighting designer) had to be mutually agreed upon by members of the consortium. Likewise, it was also agreed that all members of the consortium would use all of the original design elements of the production (staging, set, costumes and lighting) when mounting their individual production. All members of the production team would be given first-refusal rights for working on the subsequent productions. If Beresford, Yeargan and Schuler were not available, the companies would then recreate the original design elements with either assistants from the premiere production or members of their own staff.

Bruce Beresford, although primarily known as an Academy Award nominated film director with such notable works as Driving Miss Daisy, Breaker Morant, Tender

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<sup>235</sup>Floyd, interview via fax.

<sup>236</sup>Summers only conducted the Houston premiere.

Mercies and Crimes of the Heart, was no stranger to the operatic stage. He had directed previously with the Spoleto Festival in the U.S. and Italy, State Opera Company of South Australia, Portland Opera, Washington Opera and Los Angeles Opera. With his busy film and stage directing schedule, Mr. Beresford was unable to stage any of the subsequent productions, so that duty went to his assistant director from HGO, Garnett Bruce, who was part of the assistant directing staff at the time. According to HGO producing director, Ann Owens, Bruce was chosen with the remounts in mind. Also, HGO typically uses one of their “A.D.’s”, instead of contracting that position from the outside, so that the company will always have a contact person with the production to keep the company informed of any notable changes or problems that may occur as the production moves from city to city.

Michael Yeargan was no stranger to world premieres of operas. Before his design of Cold Sassy Tree graced the stage of the Brown Theater, Mr. Yeargan had designed The Great Gatsby (John Harbison) for the Metropolitan Opera, as well as Central Park for Glimmerglass and New York City Opera Companies. Following the premiere of Cold Sassy, he would go on and design for the world premiere of Dead Man Walking for the San Francisco Opera. As well as working with other opera companies such as the Lyric Opera of Chicago, Washington Opera, the Royal Opera and Dallas Opera, Mr. Yeargan is on the faculty at the Yale School of Drama and the principal designer for the Yale Repertory Theatre, and has numerous credits on Broadway and with regional theatres across the United States.

Considered by some as “one of the most successful lighting designers of his generation,” Duane Schuler is also very familiar with working on operatic world premieres.<sup>237</sup> In 2000, he also designed the premiere of A View from the Bridge for the

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<sup>237</sup>Stagebill, Spring 2000, Houston Grand Opera: 22



Lyric Opera of Chicago, where he is the resident lighting designer. He also designed the world premieres of the Metropolitan Opera's The Great Gatsby, Bilby's Doll (Houston Grand Opera), McTeague (Lyric Opera of Chicago), The Voyage of Edgar Allan Poe, Frankenstein, and Casanova's Homecoming (Minnesota Opera). Besides his numerous credits with Houston Grand Opera and the aforementioned companies, Mr. Schuler has also designed for other companies, such as the Los Angeles Opera, Deutsche Oper Berlin, American Ballet Theatre, Goodman Theatre, and was previously the resident designer for the Guthrie Theater.

Patrick Summers became the Music Director of Houston Grand Opera in 1998. He, like his counterparts on Cold Sassy Tree, was no stranger to premiering new works. He conducted HGO's world premiere of Resurrection (Tod Machover) in 1999 and the world premiere A Streetcar Named Desire (Andre Previn) with San Francisco Opera, of which he also conducted the European premiere. In October 2000, Summers conducted the world premiere of San Francisco Opera's Dead Man Walking (Jake Heggie and Terrence McNally). His work with new operas has also branched out into the recordings of Mark Adamo's Little Women and Daniel Catan's Florencias en el Amazonas. Mr. Summers has conducted for companies such as the Metropolitan Opera and Opera Australia in Sydney. Patrick Summers did not conduct the subsequent productions of Cold Sassy Tree due to time constraints in his existing schedule.<sup>238</sup>

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<sup>238</sup>Patrick Summers, interview via e-mail, 12 Dec. 2003.

## V. THE SCORE AND LIBRETTO

Although the composer feels that it is vitally important that the “creative vision” for the libretto must come from one imagination, Floyd does take some input from his colleagues on the production. Although it had not been a common experience for Floyd, periodic music demonstrations were held and recordings of the opera’s progress were offered along the way for the co-commissioners. These presentations would range between a compact disc recording of just the piano accompaniment with a synthesizer used to articulate the vocal line (since the libretto had not been fully set) to invited gatherings of the general directors of the company where members of the Houston Opera Studio would be used to demonstrate scenes and arias. Gockley said that although the companies were welcome to offer comments and ideas very few comments were received and only minimal revisions had to be made to the opera at all, which is not the norm.

Since he was the music director for the world premiere, Patrick Summers was on board throughout the entire process of Cold SassyTree, even before the writing of the libretto. “All composers work differently: with some composers I hear bits of the score as its being written. With Carlisle, he presented us with a completed work which was subsequently cut considerably. But that is his unique process. Carlisle tends to provide a plethora of ideas and proceeds to cut it down. Half of the score of his opera Susannah was eventually cut into the piece we know.”<sup>239</sup> Summers went on to explain how he was unaware of any alterations done to the score following the Houston premiere. He went on to add that his general practice with world premieres is to “lavish attention on them while we’re preparing them”, and then leave them for others to perform and interpret.

There was some addition of music between the Austin and San Diego productions

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<sup>239</sup>Summers, interview via e-mail.

to aid scene changes, as well as some trimming of the music to cut the time of the opera a bit prior to the Opera Carolina performances. Chad Calvert, Artistic Administrator of Opera Carolina, recalls that some editing occurred in Lightfoot's aria and an Act II scene between Rucker and Love, but no more than ten minutes were eliminated from the opera from its premiere in Houston almost three years prior to the performances in Charlotte. On top of the duties of composing the music and the libretto, Floyd also orchestrated the opera, which is the common practice for opera composers but not necessarily for composers of musical theatre.

Something that helped familiarize the production team with the piece was the opportunity to hear and see portions of the work while it was in development. According to Garnett Bruce, some of the music preparation for the opera occurred at the Aspen Summer Music Festival in August of 1999. It was during his months in Aspen that Floyd had the opportunity to work out various segments of the opera, record portions of the piece, and get familiar with inputting and formatting the piano-vocal score on to the computer, which he had never done before. Portions that Floyd wanted to work on were the sprechstimme sections of Will Tweedy and the robbery episode in Act III, Scene 1. Some of the work could not be done due to the lack of a bass-baritone who could learn and perform the Rucker segments in such a short amount of time. The scenes that were prepared were presented on one of the weekly opera scenes master classes, which act as training for the singers in the Aspen Opera Center program.<sup>240</sup> Floyd functioned as narrator for the scenes. One of the beneficial aspects of the experience was not only seeing if the piece worked on stage, but also observing the immediate audience response that the workshop attendees provided. In regard to the development of the characters and the treatment of the story, Bruce wrote:

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<sup>240</sup>Garnett Bruce, e-mail correspondence to the author, 21 Sept. 2003.

When approaching the piece in Aspen, both Ed Berkeley (Aspen Opera Center Director) and I had the impression from Carlisle in 1998 that the key character in the opera would be Will Tweedy, as in the novel....We expected the key relationship would be between Will and Rucker - based on the pathos in Will's final aria. By the finish of the (1999) workshop, the love story was paramount - even with very few of Rucker's scenes worked on. Will and Lightfoot would now become the preamble to the relationship of Rucker and Love Simpson. The music at the end of Act II left little question of that. Carlisle must have discovered this vein during the year when he was composing, but it was the first time I was aware of the shift of focus of the opera.<sup>241</sup>

When asked about the process of working with Houston Grand Opera, Floyd felt that it went very smoothly. This was his fourth opera commission with the company, and the relationships that had been previously established helped the working relationship immensely.

It was an ideal launching of a new opera, certainly in terms of the singers engaged, the stage director, the designer and set design, as well as the conductor and the company's involvement and marketing...I was impressed with the care David (Gockley) took to be sure his co-producers were always 'up to speed' with the progress of the opera, and I recall he arranged conferences with two of the co-producers and me in Houston while the opera was still being written. Ian Campbell, General Director of San Diego Opera, came to Houston very early on to discuss joint

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<sup>241</sup>Bruce, e-mail correspondence.

casting.<sup>242</sup>

The only negative thing that Floyd expressed about the experience was that he wished that the contractual work on the commission between the producer and representative publisher had been completed prior to the actual writing of the opera so as to not interfere with the creative process.

## **VI. THE CO-COMMISSION AND CO-PRODUCTION OF COLD SASSY TREE**

As for the co-commissioners, all seemed happy with the end result of both the work itself and the production experience, although there were snags along the way. The gathering of commissioners began in 1997, when Gockley approached Ian Campbell of San Diego Opera, James Wright of Opera Carolina, and Michael Harrison of Baltimore Opera. Austin Lyric Opera was added in 1998. The agreement between the companies was that they would all be equal financial partners in the production. The fees which they paid on a schedule over three years or so covered the following: commissioning fee, copyist fee, lighting design creation, set design creation, costume design creation, construction and painting of the set, the materials and building of the costumes, the programming of the synthesizer, and other miscellaneous fees involving travel and other minor items. The production cost approximately \$725,000.<sup>243</sup>, which would be split equally among the five co-producers.

In the case of co-commissions such as Cold Sassy Tree, where the production itself will most likely have an extended life through rentals, a “remount fee” will take

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<sup>242</sup>Floyd, interview via fax.

<sup>243</sup>Owens, personal interview.

affect. Although the companies all share equally in the overall expense, the lead commissioner takes on the burden of some additional costs up front, beyond the shared fee. Since this is the first time the work will ever be performed, extra time must be allotted so the production team can actually figure out exactly how the production is to be set up and run efficiently. For example, if it usually takes twenty hours to hang and focus all of the lighting instruments for a standard show, it may take four additional hours the first time the new work is presented. Since the lighting design was planned in the mind of the designer and plotted out on paper, some of the instruments may have to be rehung once the designer has seen the lights in the theatre. Additional costs may also include stage crew labor, scenery construction, and other miscellaneous fees, such as “Advancing.” Advancing is the cost incurred to bring in the members of the artistic team for production meetings during the planning stages of the production. These additional costs (i.e. remount fees), paid up front by the lead commissioner, will be taken out of any future fees generated through the rental of the production. Once the remount fee has been paid to the lead commissioner, all other rental fees will be split evenly between the co-producers.<sup>244</sup>

The following is the co-production budget for Cold Sassy Tree. Any areas which are subject to “remounting fees” are designated by (r). The total expense from these categories will exceed the \$725,000 production budget due to the addition of remount fees. Please remember that all fees regarding the writing of the opera itself are covered in the co-commissioning budget.

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<sup>244</sup>Greg Weber, phone conversation, 11 March 2004.

Co-Production Budget for Cold Sassy Tree:

|                               |                              |
|-------------------------------|------------------------------|
| Stage Crew Labor:             | \$ 372,017(r)                |
| Scenery Construction:         | \$ 293,555(r)                |
| Property Construction:        | \$ 24,885(r)                 |
| Lighting Construction/Rental: | \$ 12,686(r)                 |
| Cartage:                      | \$ 41,261                    |
| Blueprint and Drafting:       | \$ 5,992                     |
| Warehouse Fees/Labor:         | \$ 8,869                     |
| Misc. Fees/Construction:      | \$ 3,611(r)                  |
| Advancing:                    | \$ 15,741(r)                 |
| Wardrobe Construction:        | \$ 178,000(r) <sup>245</sup> |

Since Houston Grand Opera was the lead company and took on the responsibilities of coordinating all communication between the parties in regard to the commission and all production details, it would give the world premiere of the piece. According to Gockley, the rule for production order usually states that the companies get to choose their production dates based on when they signed on for the commission, the first to sign on gets their choice of dates. The order of the subsequent Cold Sassy Tree productions would be decided more based on their season schedules. No pecking order would be in place since no company had any more of a financial interest than any other

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<sup>245</sup>Greg Weber, e-mail correspondence with the author, 17 Feb. 2004.

company. Austin Lyric Opera, San Diego Opera, Opera Carolina, and then Baltimore Opera was the production order that fell in line with the various schedules for the companies. Another part of the agreement was that since the companies were all owners of the production, no co-producers would pay rental if they wanted to produce the opera in future seasons. (It should be noted that Baltimore Opera, which originally wanted to perform the opera as part of a Summer American Opera season had to decline performing the opera due to financial constraints. Since that time, the company has had difficulty fitting the opera into one of its seasons.)<sup>246</sup>

Within the commission agreement between the five companies and Carlisle Floyd, it states: “Composer agrees that he will encourage licensors of the Opera to utilize the physical production which was premiered in Houston. [ . . . ] Other than those presented by the Co-commissioners, no fully staged presentation of the ‘Opera’ shall occur until the final Co-commissioner’s presentation without the prior written approval of the Administering Co-commissioner.”<sup>247</sup>

In most cases, such clauses would not be necessary. If a new opera is going to find a life after its showings by the producer or co-producer, it usually will take at least a year or two in order to schedule the work into the season of an interested company from outside the framework of the original production. Cold Sassy Tree was premiered in Houston on April 14, 2000 and Austin Lyric Opera followed that production in January of 2001. The Austin production was conducted by Ward Holmquist, Artistic Director of Lyric Opera of Kansas City, who had gained a great deal of his early experience with Houston Grand Opera and Carlisle Floyd. Wanting to perform the work with his own

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<sup>246</sup>Jim Harp, Artistic Administrator, Baltimore Opera, phone interview, 17 Feb. 2004.

<sup>247</sup>Ann Owens, e-mail correspondence to the author, 20 Jan. 2004.



company, LOKC, Holmquist could not schedule any production until the final co-producer, Baltimore Opera, had presented the opera. With the San Diego production scheduled for March 2001 and Opera Carolina slated for February of 2002, LOKC could not schedule a production of Cold Sassy Tree, since Baltimore Opera was having trouble scheduling a date for their production. Lyric Opera of Kansas City approached Houston Grand Opera and requested permission to perform the work despite the co-production agreement having yet to be fulfilled. The consortium of co-producers was poled and LOKC was granted permission to proceed with a production.

According to Greg Weber, HGO attempted to woo LOKC into using the original production. He prepared sample drawings to display how the opera could fit into their space, and offered ideas of how to cut the show scenically to have it work for their house. The only saving grace was that Kansas City was not near any of the other cities (in the consortium), therefore not a threat to audience or donor base.<sup>248</sup> Instead of using the original production, Kansas City teamed with Opera Omaha and Utah Symphony and Opera in a new co-production of the opera designed for their smaller theatres and budgets.

## **VII. MARKETING**

Since Cold Sassy Tree was not attached to a historical event or any particular special interest group, as was the case with Harvey Milk, marketing the opera had to take a different approach. Since the novel was a national best seller, any special promotional campaigns outside of the company's usual routine centered around book stores. The most important aspect of the advertising of the opera was Carlisle Floyd. Houston Grand

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<sup>248</sup>Greg Weber, e-mail correspondence to the author, 20 Jan. 2004.

Opera and Floyd are synonymous with one another. With the exception of his collegiate works, the company has produced all of his operas, and given world premieres to one revised opera (The Passion of Jonathan Wade) and three original pieces (Bilby's Doll, Willie Stark and Cold Sassy Tree). Floyd's name was also attached to the company through its internationally recognized Studio program, which he co-founded in 1977 and for which he acted as artistic advisor.

### **VIII. CASTING**

Although he did have a say in the casting process, Floyd said that he never composes roles with specific singers in mind. Floyd said: "I am completely concerned with writing music that identifies and projects the characters in the libretto."<sup>249</sup> At one point in the process, Ian Campbell of San Diego discussed joint casting with Gockley, but according to Gockley each company cast the opera independently. Besides input from Floyd, the casting for the HGO production was done by Gockley and Summers. Campbell said that the heads of the various companies did confer via telephone as to their casting plans, but no joint casting ventures were ever undertaken. Ann Owens and other members of the HGO production team discussed casting with Bruce Beresford via e-mail. Beresford and Patrick Summers had worked together prior to this project and had already established a rapport.

As stated earlier, the casting for new works also happens a bit later than with traditional works because the music and the characters are still being developed when the casting process for the premiere has to take place. Since every singer has a different performance schedule that is sometimes determined years in advance, casting the new

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<sup>249</sup>Floyd, interview via fax.

piece can at times be difficult. Another aspect of the casting for an original piece according to Gockley is that “a new work usually involves casting more specifically to character type.”<sup>250</sup> One other dilemma in regard to casting, though it did not happen in this case, is the chance that the role could change significantly after the premiere if something did not go quite right during the initial performances.

The Houston Grand Opera cast included some of the opera world’s finest actor-singers: Bass-baritone Dean Peterson, whose credits include many international companies as well as the Met and La Scala, was cast as Rucker Lattimore; soprano Patricia Racett, who was winner of the prestigious Richard Tucker Award, as Love Simpson; soprano Margaret Lloyd, who appeared in such new works as Little Women, Central Park, and Richard Wargo’s Sive, portrayed the role of Lightfoot McClendon; tenor Joseph Evans, who was a regular leading singer for New York City Opera and Houston Grand Opera, as well as companies around the world, was cast as Camp Williams; and mezzo-soprano Judith Christin, who had sung over one hundred roles with leading opera companies throughout the United States, was brought in to play Effie Belle Tate.

For other significant roles, Houston also used two former studio members who since leaving the studio have begun very promising careers: tenor John McVeigh, who at the time of this production had already debuted with The Met, New York City Opera, Los Angeles Opera and Sante Fe Opera, as Will Tweedy, and Beth Clayton, who had sung with the Israel and New York Philharmonics, as well as the Dallas and Sante Fe Opera companies, played Loma Williams. Two other young principal singers, whose careers were very much on the rise at the time of the premiere, were brought into make their

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<sup>250</sup>Gockley, interview via e-mail, 10 Jan. 2003.

HGO debuts and complete the cast: Diane Alexander, who had sung extensively with numerous regional opera companies, as Mary Willis Tweedy, and baritone Christopher Schaldenbrand, who was part of the Metropolitan Opera's Young Artist Program and had performed in more than 150 performances with the company, as Clayton McCallister. Although Houston used studio members to try out parts of the opera, only one was used to play any named role: Scott Scully as Luther.

For the second production in Austin, which opened January 12, 2001, only Dean Peterson, John McVeigh, and Margaret Lloyd were contracted for the revival. For the San Diego production, which took place on March 24 of the same year, Dean Peterson, John McVeigh, Patricia Racette, Beth Clayton, and Judith Christin were brought in from the original cast.

For the second new production of Cold Sassy Tree, a three-company co-production including Lyric Opera of Kansas City, Opera Omaha and Utah Opera that premiered on May 4, 2002 in Kansas City, only John McVeigh was retained from the Houston cast. Marie Plette and Mark Thompson, who appeared in the Austin Lyric Opera production, recreated the roles of Love Simpson and Camp Williams, respectively, for this production.

Conductor Ward Holmquist, who received a great deal of training and early professional experience with Houston Grand Opera, conducted the Austin Lyric production. Over a year later, he would conduct the opera again for the Lyric Opera of Kansas City, where he is the artistic director.

## **IX. THE PRODUCTION PROCESS**

Michael Yeargan's set seemed to steal a great deal of attention away from the overall production. This was not due to its sophistication or size, although it was very grand and beautiful, but rather from the problems it created on and off the stage.

Yeargan's design, though large in stature, captured the elegance and simplicity of the southern setting. The design of the production was made with four of the companies and the schematics of their theatres in mind. Beresford wanted a more realistic look for the production. This is easy to accomplish in film, Beresford's primary medium, but difficult to accomplish on stage with so many different settings to design. Nonetheless, the "realistic" approach to the design is the course that was taken. Michael Yeargan said: "In retrospect, I think the show would be better served with a much simpler, more 'Our Town' sort of approach."<sup>251</sup>

In preparation to design the project, Yeargan had to do a great deal of research on the period and the town, which is an actual place, as well as a careful reading of the novel for specific aspects of setting and period. Most of the research that assisted Yeargan's design rested in photographs and color postcards of the period. Yeargan shared that Floyd, a southerner like himself, was very involved from the beginning and very helpful, especially in the area of costuming the opera. The entire process was an extremely collaborative experience. As Yeargan had to design both the set and costumes, it was very fortunate for him that the set was designed and built far ahead of the time of the premiere production. The set construction took place in two locations: The San Diego Opera Shop and R.L. Reed in Portland, Oregon. Many of the drops were painted by an independent artist, Stephan Passernig, at the Austin Lyric Opera Scene Shop. The

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<sup>251</sup>Michael Yeargan, interview via e-mail, 24 Nov. 2003.

costumes were made closer to the production date, mainly because they had to be fitted to the performers during the rehearsal period. The costumes were constructed in the San Diego Opera Shop and the Houston Grand Opera Shop. All of the build-work, sets and costumes, was selected on the basis of the lowest bid. The supervision for both projects was handled by the Houston Grand Opera Technical Department.<sup>252</sup>

Since Austin Lyric Opera joined the consortium later than the rest, the design of the piece was well underway and the dimensions of its theatre or its production budget could not be taken into consideration. Because of this, problems arose once the opera was mounted in Austin at the Bass Concert Hall on the campus of the University of Texas.

Once rehearsals began in Austin, Garnett Bruce, the assistant stage director for the premiere production, who was restaging the work for ALO, learned that the company had no plans to use the turntable that was originally designed for the show to help with the massive set and the scene changes. The decision to omit the unit came out of budgetary restraints in regard to the expense of building the deck around the large turntable.

With no turntable the flow of the show changed significantly. Yeargan said that they attempted to simplify some of the set changes. The ones that worked remained in the running scheme of the show. Scene changes took much longer to execute, and without the aid of the machinery, the large pieces moved in an awkward and noisy manner. Since this change could not be foreseen, there was not ample time to compose more music to cover up the clumsy transitions. There was music that preceded each of the three acts, but the intent of that music was to set the mood for the coming scene and not to cover up the noise of the set change. This factor stood out as one of the few

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<sup>252</sup>Yeargan, interview via e-mail.

negative moments pointed out by the Austin critics.

The Cold Sassy Tree set encountered even more difficulties when it made its way to Charlotte, North Carolina from San Diego. One of Charlotte's larger local corporations, Duke Energy, donated a warehouse to store the set and props until it would be needed for the Opera Carolina production. Unfortunately, the building in which the set and props were stored was demolished. Apparently, the city had requested that due to health reasons and other developmental needs for the area the warehouse and others in the near vicinity needed to be torn down. Since the storing of the set, there was quite a bit of turnover in the personnel of the corporation, and the proper people had been left out of the loop when communicating about the oncoming demolition. The demolition company was under the impression that the warehouse belonged to another group, and when contacting that group was informed that the contents was not theirs so they should go through with the demolition of the building and all of its contents. The problem was exacerbated not only because the Opera Carolina production of Cold Sassy Tree was months away, but also because Baltimore was still slotted to perform the piece and Houston Grand Opera had announced that they were going to remount the opera in 2005 or 2006.

After consulting with all of the co-producers, it was agreed that the set had to be rebuilt and in the most expedient manner possible. Yeargan, who was unavailable due to previously scheduled commitments, hired Luke Cantarella to supervise the reconstruction and technical rehearsals for the Opera Carolina production. Cantarella kept Yeargan informed of the progress during the rebuilding process. Yeargan, though not available first-hand, made sure that he was available to answer any questions that came up and also offer approval on specific aspects of the set, such as the painting.

San Diego Opera's scene shop took the lead in the reconstruction, having built a

large portion of the original set. Portland's R.L. Reed was also contracted to build the mechanical aspects of the set. Stephan Passernig was retained to recreate his scenic art. Since the construction team was going to have to start from scratch, it was able to look at some of the problems that the previous companies had encountered with the set and try to improve upon them. Excess pieces that were cut from the original design and had not been used were utilized, while other pieces were omitted to streamline the functioning of the set. The set was streamlined to some extent to make it more functional. The undertaking, which was begun in October of 2002, was completed and delivered to Opera Carolina in the January of 2003. Opera Carolina's insurance and that of Duke Energy settled and covered the complete cost of the reconstruction.

As for the lighting, Duane Schuler lit the Houston and San Diego productions. David Nancarrow was brought in for the Austin Lyric Opera production. Schuler's main research for the piece consisted in reading the novel. His goal, as was Yeargan's, was to capture the essence of the life described by Olive Ann Burns. Prior to the production in Houston, Schuler met with HGO's Technical Director Greg Weber while working in Houston on another project. At this meeting, Schuler was able to view the preliminary set design drawings and discuss space and transition issues. Schuler was also able to meet with Yeargan and Beresford in Los Angeles. Most of their meeting centered around the set and the number of set changes. According to Schuler, the major problem was simply the logistics of scene changes and allowing space for lights as well as scenery.<sup>253</sup>

Once in production, the communication and rapport developed between the members of the production/artistic team become even more important. "I believe a lighting designer is a collaborative artist and I like to have input from both (director and

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<sup>253</sup>Schuler, interview via e-mail.



set designer). Bruce (Beresford) was not terribly involved in the cueing process. He would rather edit a final product, a style I actually like. Michael (Yeargan) and I have worked together often and have a good common vision so we pretty much agreed on the look from the beginning.”<sup>254</sup> Schuler only received minor suggestions from the composer and the producer. “Houston Opera has a very good lighting department and crew who were willing to go through the process of making many changes as the opera evolved...This is crucial to make a new opera come to life.”<sup>255</sup>

Schuler and others have commented that one of the major drawbacks of the production was its size. “My biggest regret is the score did not allow room for scene changes, so the opera never flowed as well as I thought it should. Carlisle did not seem to hear or see the need for some transition music at points where we really needed it.”<sup>256</sup> Yeargan added: “At one point, we really did feel like we were making a movie as opposed to a piece for the stage (due to the sheer size of the piece). There are no ‘previews’ in the opera world. The first time a new piece is before the audience is usually the final dress rehearsal with no time to change anything before the actual opening. At least with the co-production process, it gave Carlisle several looks at the piece.”<sup>257</sup>

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<sup>254</sup>Schuler, interview via e-mail.

<sup>255</sup>Schuler, interview via e-mail.

<sup>256</sup>Schuler, interview via e-mail.

<sup>257</sup>Yeargan, interview via e-mail.

## **X. DEVELOPMENT OF THE MUSIC IN REHEARSAL**

Floyd gave a great deal of input into the musical performance of the piece. This was as it should have been according to Maestro Summers. “Conductors are merely stand ins for composers. When I conduct Beethoven, Rossini, or Mozart, my primary task is to be true to those composers - my secondary task is to think about my own performance. When a composer is present that process is much easier.”<sup>258</sup> In this case, Summers chose not only to take on the role as collaborator with the director, as well as the composer, but also acted as impartial observer when it came to the viewing and hearing of the opera. Summers chose not to read the novel before the piece was performed. This allowed him to look at the opera with “fresh eyes,” and to respond only to what the composer wrote. Just as many audience members who would come to see the opera would be fans of the novel, the non-readers of Burns’ novel would not have any preconceived idea about the storyline and the characters if they had not read the work. “Everything you need to know about character and the dramatic situation must be in the music first, the words secondarily.”<sup>259</sup>

## **XI. PUBLIC AND CRITICAL REACTION, AND THE FUTURE OF COLD SASSY TREE**

According to Patrick Summers: “The opera had a wonderful reception from the public (in Houston).”<sup>260</sup> Several members of the Austin Lyric audience traveled to Houston to see the premiere of the work prior to its presentation in Austin. The reaction

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<sup>258</sup>Summers, interview via e-mail.

<sup>259</sup>Summers, interview via e-mail.

<sup>260</sup>Summers, interview via e-mail.

from these individuals and members of the company was very enthusiastic. There was great pride surrounding the work, as it was the company's first commission. Chad Calvert of Opera Carolina commented that the reaction in Charlotte was "overwhelmingly positive."

General Director Ian Campbell, Cold Sassy received a mixed reaction from the San Diego audience. "Most new operas have this reception. The response in the house was enthusiastic. They enjoyed the story and the characters. If we mounted again, most of them would not come a second time."<sup>261</sup> By saying this, Campbell is not being a cynic, but rather a realist. With over twenty years experience as a general director and numerous productions and commissions to his credit, his comments come from personal experience with new works.

As for the future of Cold Sassy Tree, Set and Costume Designer Michael Yeargan wrote: "The public seemed to really enjoy the opera. The critics were mixed, but not too bad. I think it will eventually have a great future. It is truly a charming and strong work and the music really grows on you. If there were a commercial recording, it would really help popularize it."<sup>262</sup>

Duane Schuler shared that "the opera seemed well received, but it is very difficult to build enough interest in a new piece to give it the exposure it needs to become part of the standard repertory. I think HGO was very smart in sharing this production with a number of companies, which guarantee it some exposure. Who know where it will go from here?"<sup>263</sup>

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<sup>261</sup>Campbell, phone interview.

<sup>262</sup>Yeargan, interview via e-mail.

<sup>263</sup>Schuler, interview via e-mail.

Resident Stage Director of Opera Carolina, Chad Calvert said: “The life span of Cold Sassy Tree will be decided on the design of a new production that can move into different spaces. The first production only has a life in larger houses or the largest regional houses. Many regional companies can’t afford to contain this current production.”<sup>264</sup>

Maestro Summers went on to add when posed with the question of the opera’s future: “As for the life of the opera, that is probably not something we will know about very soon. Many operas Madame Butterfly and The Barber of Seville were disasters with the public when they were written (Butterfly particularly), but went on to find a place in the repertory. Historically, we are very unreliable at pronouncing what will last and what won’t.”<sup>265</sup>

Aside from the opinions of the production staff, the critical attention given by the print media was on the whole favorable. Though without memorable “tunes,” the music pleased, was appropriate for the opera’s 1950’s Southern setting, and reminiscent of Floyd’s Susannah. “Floyd sets the texts to an often fascinating idiom: strong, straightforward tonality contrasted by melodies that circled around their central notes with exceptional complexity. His orchestral accompaniment became another character because of the deft leadership of HGO music director Patrick Summers.”<sup>266</sup> David Gregson’s review of the San Diego production echoed the sentiments of other critics: “It’s no wonder audiences love Carlisle Floyd’s Cold Sassy Tree. The composer’s musical rhetoric is solidly chiseled from the early twentieth-century American grain,

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<sup>264</sup>Calvert, phone interview.

<sup>265</sup>Summers, interview via e-mail.

<sup>266</sup>Charles Ward, Houston Chronicle, 17 April 2000:9 Feb. 2004  
<[http://web.lexis.com/universe/document?\\_m=33c9e5d87c549...](http://web.lexis.com/universe/document?_m=33c9e5d87c549...)>.

easily accessible and unthreatening. [. . .] The story [. . .] blends gentle rural humor with elements of romance. The ending is upbeat, and the composer has given everybody in the cast something that resembles a traditional aria to sing.”<sup>267</sup> Scott Cantrell wrote in his Opera News review: “Cold Sassy Tree [. . .] contains no music that would have sounded ‘modern’ in 1950, nothing that would sound out of place next to, say, Vanessa or The Crucible. The best feature is the orchestral writing - lush, colorful and deftly mood-specific, veering between Copland and Bernstein. The vocal lines, based on natural speech inflections, are easy on the voice and ear.”<sup>268</sup>

Though critics from the larger opera centers of the country, such as Houston, or from reputable operatic sources, like Opera News, may flatter the music, but still find it safer than the more avant garde work of Glass or Tippett, critics from smaller market cities, such as Austin or Charlotte, may hear the opera from a different perspective. In his review in the Austin Chronicle, Robi Polgar described Floyd’s music as running “the emotional gamut from playful to melodramatic, joyous to tragic, the score is a challenging one for opera-goers whose diets consist of the classics, one that eschews recognizable melodies.”<sup>269</sup>

Besides the overall approval for all of the singers, both principal and secondary, Bruce Beresford received accolades for his staging. “The work was so effortless that his (Beresford’s) work was seemingly unnoticeable. Yet without such finely tuned handling,

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<sup>267</sup>David Gregson, “In Review: San Diego,” Opera News, July 2001: 9 Feb. 2004  
<<http://web.epnet.com/citation.asp?tb=1&ug=dbs+aph+sid+1D4B...>>.

<sup>268</sup>Scott Cantrell, “In Review: Houston,” Opera News, n.d.: 7 Aug. 2001  
<<http://www.operanews.com/archives/800/inreviews.800.html>>.

<sup>269</sup>Robi Polgar, “Exhibitionism,” Austin Chronicle, 19 Jan. 2001: 6 Feb. 2003  
<[http://www.auschron.com/iss...\[atcj/2001-01-19/arts\\_exhibitionism.html](http://www.auschron.com/iss...[atcj/2001-01-19/arts_exhibitionism.html)>.

the performance would have lost much emotional wallop.”<sup>270</sup>

Michael Yeargan also received critical praise for his designs. “In their tired scenic literalism, the Michael Yeargan sets - Norman Rockwell magazine covers come to life would very likely be laughed at in more sophisticated corners of the operatic planet. Still, they seem quaintly appropriate for an aesthetic sensibility so firmly rooted at the beginning of the last century.”<sup>271</sup>

As for the future of the opera, most of the critics were optimistic, but some still questioned the work’s place in the American operatic firmament. “As Floyd took his bow Friday, it was clear he had composed so fine a comic opera that Cold Sassy Tree should become the companion to his great tragic opera Susannah.”<sup>272</sup> “It’s worth asking whether, at this late date, the world really needs another conservative 1950’s American opera. At least Cold Sassy Tree is a well-crafted, entertaining one.”<sup>273</sup> James Paulk concluded his review of the opera by stating: “No opera composer has ever had a better sense of the South and its cadences than Floyd, as this is that rare comedy that is funny and charming without going overboard. At 73, Floyd has given us his comic masterpiece, like Verdi with Falstaff.”<sup>274</sup>

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<sup>270</sup>Ward, Houston Chronicle review.

<sup>271</sup>David Gregson, “In Review: San Diego,” Opera News July 2001: 62.

<sup>272</sup>Charles Ward, Houston Chronicle review.

<sup>273</sup>Scott Cantrell, Cold Sassy Tree review.

<sup>274</sup>James Paulk, “Cold Sassy Tree review of 6 May 2000 performance in Houston”: 6 Feb. 2003 <<http://www.musicon.org/v8n4/coldsassy.htm>>.

## Conclusion

It seems as if every time an opera company premieres an American work, a critic is in the wings writing about the “failure of American opera.” Before the composer’s last note is written on the page, the questions are already being asked: “Will this be the next Tosca?” Do composers and librettists sacrifice years of their lives to create the next “whatever”? To the contrary, the composer is out to create a new work that may find resonance with a sector of the opera audience. For the producing opera company, as well as the creators of the work, the larger that sector, all the better. Some critics want composers to write pieces that will enjoy massive appeal, while not going down the same musical road as those that preceded them. In other words, write the new Le nozze di Figaro, but don’t let it sound anything like Mozart!

One of the greatest critical and popular successes in American opera over the past twenty years has been John Corigliano’s The Ghost of Versailles (1991). If you read an article on American opera written during this period, most likely this opera will be named as one of the few successful ventures in the over two hundred and fifty year life of opera in America (or one hundred and fifty years).<sup>275</sup> Just as you hear all of the accolades heaped upon this work, you will also find just as many negative positions about the opera, sometimes from the same voices that praise it. For all of the positive attention the opera has drawn, it is said to be too long, slow and too “old fashioned” in its musical language. Length and pacing aside, the musical language for the work is influenced by

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<sup>275</sup>Depending on what we designate as the first American opera, the ballad and heroic operas from 1730, such as the James Ralph’s The Fashionable Lady (1730), or William Henry Fry’s grand opera Leonora (1845), either period can be argued as the beginning of American opera.

the subject matter and period from which it was derived, Beaumarchais' La mère coupable (1792). Should Corigliano have scattered twelve-tone rows throughout to pay homage to Schoenberg or opted for sprechstimme over melodic vocal lines? The quotations he uses from Mozart and Rossini go along with the composer's concept of how the story should be presented with its reminiscences of past generations.

All this being said, there may be no pleasing those critics who feel a duty job to the opera purists in their readership by regurgitating the past at the price of creating the future. What is important to remember is that there is a body of work that is "American" opera. According to composer Robert Ward, this catalogue of works could well exceed two thousand in number.<sup>276</sup> Joan Peyser would lead one to believe that the number may far exceed Ward's estimate. "Throughout the twentieth century, literally thousands of American composers were drawn to the creation of opera."<sup>277</sup> Italy, France and Germany may each be able to boast a national catalogue ten times that amount. Since the beginnings of opera in Florence, Italy with Jacopo Peri's Dafne in 1597,<sup>278</sup> one can only imagine the numbers of European works composed over those four centuries. This being said, what percentage of these works remains in the standard repertory?

Our question should not be "why has American opera failed?" Rather, we should ask how will we keep American opera alive. One obstacle is the education of the American opera audience. Most professional opera companies have some sort of educational outreach program into the schools, whether they be touring troupes such as Houston's Texas Opera Theatre or opportunities for students to attend performances of

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<sup>276</sup>Robert Ward, "American Opera Today, A Second Chance," Opera News, Sept. 1996, 74.

<sup>277</sup>Joan Peyser, "Future Indefinite," (n. pag., online source)

<sup>278</sup>Elise Kirk, American Opera, 1.



main stage works. In many cases, though, all we are doing is exposing them to the standard European repertory, whether it be in English or the vernacular of the work. This does not educate students about the existence of American opera, but rather reinforces the path we are currently on where the average person on the street can only tell you the names of one or two operas, neither of which are American. As Opera News' Matthew Gurewitsch put it: "Are future generations condemned to a standard repertoire shrunk to the top ten titles?"<sup>279</sup>

So how do we take our audience on a new path? One way is to expose them to opera sung in English composed by American composers, possibly on topics that pertain to their daily lives, such as the operas commissioned for elementary school-aged students for apprentice touring troupes or organizations like Opera to Go!. Operas that carry messages about the dangers of drug abuse or possibly the history of the state or country not only open one's eyes as to the versatility of the art form, but serve as an important educational tool to reinforce the work done by the classroom teacher. In the words of Pamela Rosenberg, general director of San Francisco Opera, "unless we wade in with massively more education, the audience will grow older and older, and not just in the U.S. Demographically, one fears that the next generation of people for who it's normal to listen to classical music or attend symphonies or operas just isn't coming along."<sup>280</sup> One way of reaching out and educating not only the youth, but the older generations as well, is to break down the stereotype that opera is an elitist art form, created just for the affluent. Presentations of American titles to the public free of charge or at affordable ticket prices, such as HGO's Miller Park opera series, can only help in broadening the

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<sup>279</sup>Matthew Gurewitsch, "Are Unschooled Audiences Changing the Face of Opera?," Opera News, Dec. 2002, 40.

<sup>280</sup>Gurewitsch, "Unschooled Audiences," 42.

scope of the average citizen's knowledge and experience with the genre, thus building the potential for a new audience base.

These are tried and proven ideas that have worked for companies such as Houston Grand Opera and Minnesota Opera, as well as numerous others. The key to programs such as these, as well as keeping American opera as a viable art form, is and will always be money. Some argue that the government, through programs such as the National Endowment for the Arts, already funds opera to far too great an extent. But the budgetary breakdowns of companies such as Houston Grand Opera, Minnesota Opera, San Francisco Opera and the Lyric Opera of Chicago, show that only 2 to 4 percent of their annual budget comes from public or governmental support.<sup>281</sup> Opera is rooted in European tradition, and European countries have supported opera composers and companies since opera began as an art form. One cannot compare European and American opera companies because they function in societies run by different socio-economic structures. American opera has always survived mainly on ticket revenue and private donations with minimal, yet important, support from public and government subsidies.

From the 1960's to the present, with increasing production costs and decreasing governmental support, American opera companies had to look to other sources for support if they were going to keep American opera alive. Corporate funding became an important source of support for American opera, as exhibited by the New York City Opera/Ford Foundation seasons of American opera. To help find corporate support for the genre, the OPERA America programs Opera for the Eighties and Beyond and the Lila-Wallace-Reader's Digest Opera for a New America project benefited all stages of

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<sup>281</sup>These figures come from the company questionnaires completed by Houston, Minnesota, San Francisco and Chicago.

creation of opera, from commission to production. Such programs have aided companies by not only providing them financial support, but by furnishing organizational support and information and to help companies through co-commissions and co-productions.

With the increased interest in American opera that comes with scheduling of American works by major companies, attention has to be paid to where the next wave of opera composers would receive their training. Opera composition is a difficult craft and with the expense of mounting operas, the pressure on first-time composers to find immediate success is very high. As Opera News editor Patrick Smith put it: “[. . .] a failed opera carries with it a more paralyzing after-effect [. . .]. If at first you don’t succeed at opera, don’t try again: the world will not permit itself to be burned twice.”<sup>282</sup> To aid in the training of America’s young opera composers, the National Endowment for the Arts made its first workshop grants in the 1970’s to the National Opera Institute and the O’Neill Theater Center for this purpose.<sup>283</sup> To carry on this tradition, companies, such as the Lyric Opera of Chicago, have implemented programs to encourage young composers through composer-in-residence projects.

What many critics have pointed to as the major flaw of the commissioning of American opera is that following the premiere and any subsequent productions by co-producers, very few of these operas have an extended shelf life. Jamie James painted such a bleak scenario in 1996:

Nowadays, when the house lights go down for a new opera, the audience is in all likelihood unacquainted with the composer, and tonight’s piece may well be his first work in the medium. The opera will have been

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<sup>282</sup>Patrick Smith, “Does American opera have an identity as such?,” Opera News, July 1991, 17.

<sup>283</sup>Ward, “American Opera Today, A Second Chance,” 71.

commissioned (or co-commissioned) by the house; it wouldn't have been composed otherwise. The librettist is more likely to be a music critic than a dramatist. Finally, the audience knows, even before the curtain rises, that the production they are about to see is probably the only one the work will receive.<sup>284</sup>

Despite what Mr. James says, the fate of the work does not or should not have to be that way. If the work has a solid foundation but is in need of alterations, it may find a life for itself after some alteration. Even James himself reminds his readers that Carmen and Madame Butterfly were both opening night flops.<sup>285</sup> He also goes on to discuss other operas of the repertory that may have been lost to today's audiences.

The core repertory of opera classics is far from being a fixed thing. Very few people had even heard of Lully or Marc-Antoine Charpentier before William Christie staged his brilliant revivals of their operas. Many of the Mozart operas that are now standards had become completely neglected by 1934, when Glyndebourne was established [. . .] and started digging them up. Conversely, it would have been inconceivable to our operagoing grandparents that Thaïs, Louise and La Juive would ever be consigned to the Ultima Thule of the repertory.<sup>286</sup>

In concurrence with these same sentiments, the late Christopher Keene said: “ [. . .] without a system of state subsidy, we can never do what is our absolute obligation, which is to present many, many new works. You have to remember how many bad

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<sup>284</sup>Jamie James, “American Opera Today, A Gloomy Scenario,” Opera News, Sept. 1996, 18.

<sup>285</sup>James, “American Opera Today, A Gloomy Scenario,” 18.

<sup>286</sup>James, “American Opera Today, A Gloomy Scenario,” 71.

operas were composed for every Carmen, Aida or Fidelio.”<sup>287</sup>

Since it is very likely that many of the operas composed today could go unperformed following their initial runs and be lost to us, OPERA America started their third major initiative, The Next Stage, to increase the number of North American works in the standard repertory by providing support to professional company members’ productions of existing, underperformed works by North American creative artists.<sup>288</sup> With opportunities for further productions of an opera, the audience of a particular company may find success with a piece that did not strike a positive chord with a previous crowd. Seattle Opera’s general director Speight Jenkins said: “We’ve got about sixty to eighty standard pieces to choose from. That’s a lot. But then, we’ll do something like Catán’s Florencia en el Amazonas (which made its world premiere with Houston Grand Opera). Elsewhere, the critics sneered at it, but my audience adored it. I’ve never had an opera that more people wanted to see again, and I’m going to bring it back.”<sup>289</sup>

Even with all of these programs in place from OPERA America, the National Endowment for the Arts, and support from corporate America, commissioning works is still a risky endeavor for all companies. But, based upon the example set by Houston Grand Opera, it’s Opera New World program, and its production practices, the financial losses may be minimal in comparison to the work that will be created.

Specific financial assistance for premieres of American works from the National Endowment for the Arts, OPERA America and corporations such

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<sup>287</sup>Joseph Horowitz, “The Failure of American Opera?,” Opera News, Nov. 1993: 57.

<sup>288</sup>Ward, “American Opera Today, A Second Chance,” 71.

<sup>289</sup>Gurewitsch, “Unschooling Audiences,” 41.

as Philip Morris and AT&T have resulted in no more, and sometimes less, of a loss than that incurred for a standard-repertory piece such as Faust or The Magic Flute. Moreover, good marketing and communication methods can deliver an audience for the new pieces, which makes up for the non-attendance of more traditional opera-goers. We have also significantly reduced the costs of commissioning and producing new operas through co-production with other companies.<sup>290</sup>

So why would a company put itself on the line and dare to commission a work? Most of the opera professionals polled agreed that one of the primary reasons is to build an American repertory. When asked why his company finds it important to commission and premiere new works, David Gockley said it is “to create an American repertory of operas that Americans can relate to.”<sup>291</sup> When asked about the financial bottom line and the motivation for commissioning, Kip Cranna of San Francisco Opera, stated his response more directly: “‘Break even’ is not a term we deal with. Opera always loses money, and new opera especially so. The challenge is to lose as little as possible. [. . .] . In short, you commission for glory, not the money.”<sup>292</sup>

Many critics of Houston Grand Opera have argued that Gockley’s motivation for commissioning new works has more to do with the “glory” that Cranna described and less about the perpetuation of the genre. This is probably true to some extent. Opera is a field much like any other in the entertainment industry; notoriety draws attention, which in turn sells tickets. Gockley admits time and time again that commissioning and

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<sup>290</sup>Ward, “American Opera Today, A Second Chance,” 71.

<sup>291</sup>Gockley, interview via e-mail, 10 Jan. 2003.

<sup>292</sup>Kip Cranna, e-mail correspondence to the author, 21 Jan. 2004.

premiering new works has been Houston's niche in the opera world since his arrival over thirty years ago. Other companies, such as Minnesota, New York City and St. Louis, have also made the premiering and producing American opera a vital part of their existence as well.

The thing that separates Houston from the pack is that no matter the economic climate, the company has stayed committed to this practice year-in and year-out for three decades. The organization, attention to detail and commitment that goes into each one of their co-commissioned projects is what has made Houston Grand Opera one of the ten largest companies in the country. Although some of their operas, such as Harvey Milk, may not be viewed as successful by outside sources due to a lack of subsequent productions, the mere fact that an opera about one of the first openly gay elected officials in United States history made it to the stages of three of the nation's most prominent opera companies is significant and an encouraging sign. Now, approaching its thirtieth world premiere in as many years, Houston Grand Opera has set the standard for how operas are to be commissioned and has established practices which their commissioning partners over the years have benefited from and carried into their own commissioning projects.

## **Appendix A:**

### **Houston Grand Opera World Premieres: 1974 to 2005**

#### The Seagull

Music by Thomas Pasatieri

Libretto by Kenward Elmsie

Premiere Date and Location: March 5, 1974. Jones Hall.

#### Bilby's Doll

Music and Libretto by Carlisle Floyd

Premiere Date and Location: February 27, 1976. Jones Hall.

#### Willie Stark

Music and Libretto by Carlisle Floyd

Premiere Date and Location: April 24, 1981. Jones Hall.

(Co-commissioned by Houston Grand Opera and the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts).

#### Starbird

Music by Henry Mollicone

Libretto by Kate Pogue

Premiere Date and Location: April 27, 1981. St. John the Divine School.

#### A Quiet Place

Music by Leonard Bernstein

Libretto by Stephen Wadsworth

Premiere Date and Location: June 18, 1983. Jones Hall.

(Co-commissioned and co-produced by Houston Grand Opera, the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, and La Scala, Milan).

#### Nixon in China

Music by John Adams

Libretto by Alice Goodman

Premiere Date and Location: October 22, 1987. Brown Theater, Wortham Theater Center

(Co-commissioned by Houston Grand Opera, the Brooklyn Academy of Music and the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts. Co-produced by the commissioners as well as The Netherlands Opera and Los Angeles Music Center Opera).



The Making of the Representative for Planet 8

Music by Philip Glass

Libretto by Doris Lessing

Premiere Date and Location: July 8, 1988. Cullen Theater, Wortham Theater Center (Co-commissioned and co-produced by Houston Grand Opera; English National Opera; Her Muziektheater, Amsterdam; and Buehnen der Landeshauptstadt Kiel).

Where's Dick?

Music by Stewart Wallace

Libretto by Michael Korie

Premiere Date and Location: May 24, 1989. Miller Park Outdoor Theatre.

New Year

Music and Librettist by Sir Michael Tippett

Premiere Date and Location: October 27, 1989. Cullen Theater, Wortham Theater Center (Co-commissioned by Houston Grand Opera, Glyndebourne Festival Opera and the British Broadcasting Corporation. Co-produced by Houston Grand Opera and Glyndebourne Festival Opera.

ATLAS: an opera in three parts

Music by Meredith Monk

Premiere Date and Location: February 22, 1991. Cullen Theater, Wortham Theater Center

(Co-commissioned by Houston Grand Opera, American Music Theater Festival and Walker Art Center).

The Passion of Jonathan Wade (new version)

Music and Libretto by Carlisle Floyd

Premiere Date and Location: January 18, 1991. Brown Theater, Wortham Theater Center.

("New Version" Co-commissioned by Houston Grand Opera and Greater Miami Opera. Co-produced by Houston Grand Opera, Greater Miami Opera and San Diego Opera).

Desert of Roses

Music by Robert L. Moran

Libretto by Michael John La Chiusa

Premiere Date and Location: February 14, 1992. Cullen Theater, Wortham Theater Center.

(Co-produced by Houston Grand Opera and the Bielefeld City Opera, Germany).

The Achilles Heel

Music by Craig Bohmler

Libretto by May Carol Warwick

Premiere Date and Location: February 22, 1993. Heinen Theater, Houston Community College Campus

TEXAS!

Music by Mary Carol Warwick

Libretto by Kate Pogue

Premiere Date and Location: September 28, 1993. Saint Peter the Apostle

Note: Production premiered under the title In Their Own Voice

The Dracula Diary

Music by Robert L. Moran

Libretto by James Skofield

Premiere Date and Location: March 18, 1994. Cullen Theater, Wortham Theater Center (Co-commissioned by Houston Grand Opera and RCA (BMG))

The Outcast

Music and Libretto by Noa Ain

Premiere Date and Location: June 3, 1994. Cullen Theater, Wortham Theater Center

Harvey Milk

Music by Stewart Wallace

Libretto by Michael Korie

Premiere Date and Location: January 21, 1995. Brown Theater, Wortham Theater Center (Co-commissioned and co-produced by Houston Grand Opera, New York City Opera and San Francisco Opera).

Puppy and the Big Guy

Music by Sterling Tinsley

Libretto by Kate Pogue

Premiere Date and Location: December 18, 1995. Houston City Hall

The Tibetan Book of the Dead, a liberation through hearing

Music by Ricky Ian Gordon

Libretto by Jean-Claude van Itallie

Premiere Date and Location: May 31, 1996. Wortham Theatre, Rice University.

(Co-commissioned and co-produced by Houston Grand Opera and the American Music Theater Festival).

Florencia en el Amazonas

Music by Daniel Catán

Libretto by Marcela Fuentes-Berain

Premiere Date and Location: October 25, 1996. Brown Theater, Wortham Theater Center.

(Co-commissioned by Houston Grand Opera, Seattle Opera and Los Angeles Music Center Opera. Co-produced by the commissioners as well as Opera de Colombia, Ópera de Bellas Artes, and Festival Internacional Cervantino).

Jackie O

Music by Michael Daugherty

Libretto by Wayne Koestenbaum

Premiere Date and Location: March 4, 1997. Cullen Theater, Wortham Theater Center.

(Co-commissioned and co-produced by Houston Grand Opera and the Banff Centre for the Arts.

Cinderella in Spain/Cinderella en Espana

Music by Mary Carol Warwick

Libretto by Kate Pogue

Premiere Date and Location: February 24, 1998. Heinen Theater, Houston Community College.

Little Women

Music and Libretto by Mark Adamo

Premiere Date and Location: March 13, 1998. Cullen Theater, Wortham Theater Center.

Resurrection

Music by Tod Machover

Libretto by Laura Harrington with additional material by Braham Murray

Premiere Date and Location: April 23, 1999. Brown Theater, Wortham Theater Center.

Cold Sassy Tree

Music and Libretto by Carlisle Floyd

Premiere Date and Location: April 14, 2000. Brown Theater, Wortham Theater Center.

(Co-commissioned and co-produced by Houston Grand Opera, Austin Lyric Opera, Baltimore Opera, Opera Carolina and San Diego Opera).

The Emperor's New Clothes

Music by Mary Carol Warwick

Libretto by Kate Pogue

Premiere Date and Location: 2001 (Location not available)

The Little Prince

Music by Rachel Portman

Libretto by Nicholas Wright

Premiere Date and Location: May 31, 2003. Cullen Theater, Wortham Theater Center

Sibanda!

Music and Libretto by Michael Remson

Premiere Date and Location: 2003 (Location not available).

The Velveteen Rabbit

Music by Mary Carol Warwick

Libretto by Kate Pogue

Premiere Date and Location: January 20, 2004. Heinen Theater, Houston Community College.

The End of the Affair

Music and Libretto by Jake Heggie

Premiere Date and Location: March 4, 2004. Cullen Theater, Wortham Theater Center

Salsipuedes, a tale of Love, War and Anchovies

Music by Daniel Catán

Libretto by Eliseo Alberto and Francisco Hinojosa

Proposed Premiere Date and Location: November 6, 2004. Brown Theater, Wortham Theater Center.

Lysistrata, or The Nude Goddess

Music and Libretto by Mark Adamo

Proposed Premiere Date and Location: March 4, 2005. Cullen Theater, Wortham Theater Center.

**Appendix B:**  
**World Premieres by Selected Opera Companies**  
**from 1990-1991 through 2000-2001**

**I. WORLD PREMIERES OF LYRIC OPERA OF CHICAGO**

McTeague (1992)

Music by William Bolcom                      Libretto by Arnold Weinstein and Robert Altman

The Song of Majnun (1992)

Music Bright Sheng                      Libretto by Andrew Porter

Orpheus Descending (1994)

Music by Bruce Saylor                      Libretto by J.D. McClatchy

Amistad (1997)

Music by Anthony Davis                      Libretto by Thulani Davis

Between Two Worlds (The Dybuk) (1997)

Music by Shulamit Ran                      Libretto by Charles Kondek

A View From The Bridge (1999)

Music by William Bolcom                      Libretto by Arnold Weinstein and Arthur Miller

Lovers and Friends (Chataqua Variations) (2001)

Music and Libretto by Michael John LaChiusa

**II. WORLD PREMIERES OF THE METROPOLITAN OPERA**

The Ghosts of Versailles (1991)

Music by John Corigliano                      Libretto by William M. Hoffman

The Voyage (1992)

Music by Philip Glass                      Libretto by David Henry Hwang

The Great Gatsby (1999)

Music and Libretto by John Harbison

### **III. WORLD PREMIERES OF MINNESOTA OPERA**

#### From the Towers of the Moon (1991-92)

Music by Robert Moran

Libretto by Michael John LaChiusa

#### The Bok Choy Variations (1995)

Music by Evan Chen

Libretto by Fifi Servoss

#### How the Camel Got His Hump (1999)

Music and Libretto by Carla Alcorn

#### The Cat That Walked by Himself (2000)

Music and Libretto by Carla Alcorn

#### The Birds, the Beast and the Ball Game (2000-2001)

Music and Libretto by Carla Alcorn

#### Frankenstein, The Modern Prometheus (1990)

Music and Libretto by Libby Larson

#### Snow Leopard (1990)

Music by William Harper

Libretto by Roger Nieboer and William Harper

### **IV. WORLD PREMIERES OF NEW YORK CITY OPERA**

#### Marilyn (1993)

Music by Ezra Laderman

Libretto by Norman Rosten

#### Griffelkin (1993)

Music by Lucas Foss

Libretto by Alastair Reed

#### Esther (1993)

Music by Hugo Weisgall

Libretto by Charles Kondek

#### Lilith (2001)

Music by Deborah Drattell

Libretto by David Steven Cohen

## **V. WORLD PREMIERES OF OPERA THEATRE OF SAINT LOUIS**

### The Very Last Green Thing (1992)

Music by Cary John Franklin      Libretto by Michael Patrick Albano

### The Midnight Angel (1993)

Music by David Carlson      Libretto by Peter S. Beagle

### The Woman of Otowi Crossing (1995)

Music by Stephen Paulus      Libretto by Joan Vail Thorne

### The Thunder of Horses (1995)

Music by Cary John Franklin      Libretto by Michael Patrick Albano

### The Merchant and the Pauper (1999)

Music by Paul Schoenfield      Libretto by Margaret B. Stearns

### Joshua's Boots (1999)

Music by Adolphus Hailstork      Libretto by Susan Kander

### The Tale of Genji (2000)

Music by Minoru Miki      Libretto by Colin Graham

## **VI. WORLD PREMIERES OF SAN DIEGO OPERA**

### The Conquistador (1996-97)

Music by Myron Fink      Libretto by Donald Moreland

## **VII. WORLD PREMIERES OF SAN FRANCISCO OPERA**

### The Dangerous Liaisons (1994)

Music by Conrad Susa      Libretto by Philip Littell

### A Streetcar Named Desire (1998)

Music by André Previn      Libretto by Philip Littell

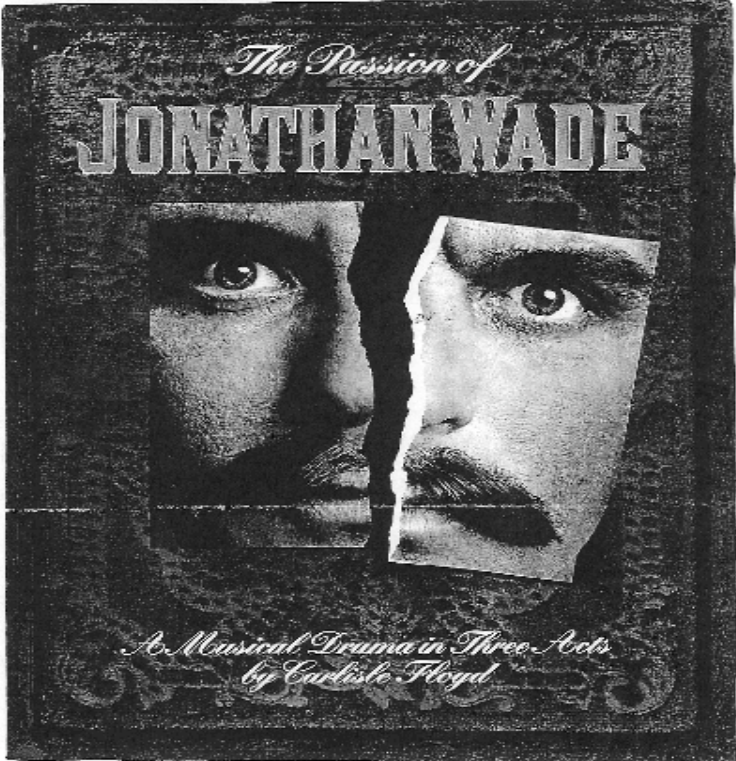
### Dead Man Walking (October 7, 2000)

Music by Jake Heggie      Libretto by Terrence McNally

**Appendix C:**  
**Houston Grand Opera Publicity Photos and Advertisements**

Print ad for the Houston Grand Opera world premiere of the revised version of The Passion of Jonathan Wade by Carlisle Floyd.


**WORLD PREMIERE**



*A Musical Drama in Three Acts  
by Carlisle Floyd*

A gripping, impassioned love story set in South Carolina during the turbulent years following the Civil War. HGO's spectacular production, based on historical facts, is the epic tale of a military officer torn between humanity and duty. You'll be moved by the soaring, lyrical music that has made Carlisle Floyd the most performed native born American opera composer of the past 30 years. Sung in English with lyrics projected above the stage so you won't miss a word. If you love the North, if you love the South, you will love this magnificent new musical drama.

**BROWN THEATER  
WORTHAM CENTER**  
January 18, 20m, 23, 26, 29 and February 2  
Curtain times: 7:30 p.m. evenings, 2:00 p.m. matinee  
**CALL 227-ARTS**



David Guckley  
General Director



Invitation for special preview discussion for the public about Harvey Milk hosted by Houston Grand Opera and a local civic group, Christ Church Cathedral.

# HARVEY MILK

## SNEAK PREVIEW

Christ Church Cathedral and Houston Grand Opera present a preview of *Harvey Milk* at 7:30 p.m. on January 9, 1995 in Christ Church Cathedral's Great Hall, 1117 Texas.

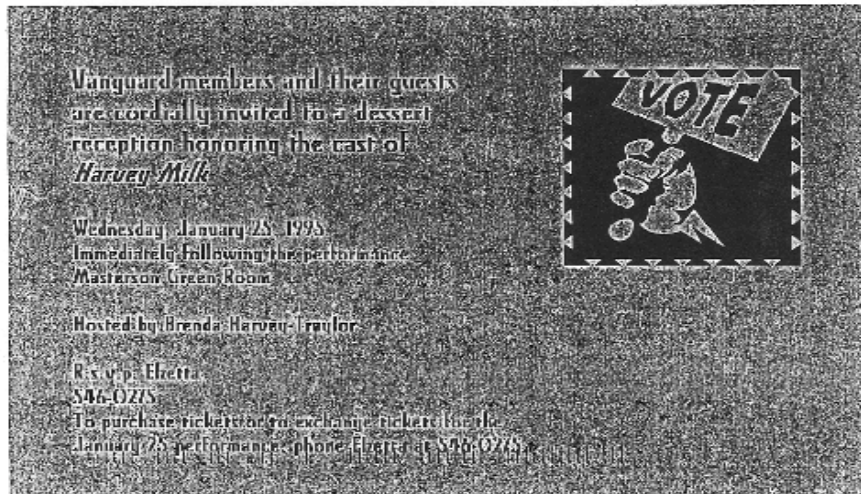
Wine and cheese reception begins at 7:00 p.m.  
Call 546-0240 or 222-2593 for more information.

David Gockley, general director of Houston Grand Opera, and composer Stewart Wallace will present a preview of Wallace and librettist Michael Korie's new opera *Harvey Milk*. The opera was inspired by the life and assassination of San Francisco's first openly gay elected public official, City Supervisor Harvey Milk.

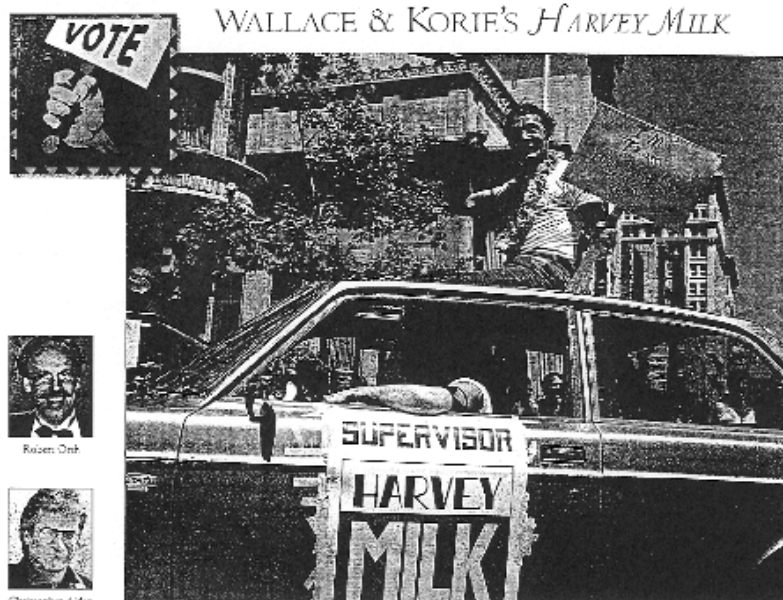
Joining HGO as co-producers are New York City Opera and San Francisco Opera, where the production will be staged later this year and the next. Production of *Harvey Milk* is underwritten in part by the Caddell and Conwell Foundation for the Arts and Philip Morris Companies Inc. The commissioning of the opera was made possible by Drs. Dennis and Susan Outlye. Additional support comes from the National Endowment for the Arts, the Houston Grand Opera has also received support for its 1994-95 season from the Texas commission on the Arts and the City of Houston through the Cultural Arts Council of Houston/Harris County.



Invitation for members of Vanguard to attend a reception following a performance of Harvey Milk.



Print ad for the Houston Grand Opera world premiere of Harvey Milk.



Robert Orth



Christopher Aden

*The life and tragic death of a modern-day American hero is retold in an extraordinary new opera.*

In the tradition of *Nixon in China* and *Wilbur Schlegel*, HGO proudly presents the world premiere of *Harvey Milk*, the portrayal of San Francisco's first openly gay elected official. Singer/actor Robert Orth creates the title role in this ground-breaking premiere which is sure to attract international attention for its unprecedented scope and power.

Follow the life of a man who finds his destiny in political activism. A man who struggles, then succeeds, in establishing a "rainbow coalition" of the disenfranchised.

*Harvey Milk* is a journey marked by self-discovery and transformation, encompassing courage, compassion, outrage and finally, assassination. It is a tragedy...and a triumph.

#### CAST

Robert Orth—Harvey Milk

#### PRODUCTION

Ward Wilson—General  
Christopher Aden—Deputy  
Paul Scoville—In Charge  
Gabriel Berry—Cassidy  
Nick Sullivan—Lenny  
The Houston Symphony

Brown Theater

Sung in English with  
Surtitles

A co-production with  
New York City Opera  
and San Francisco Opera

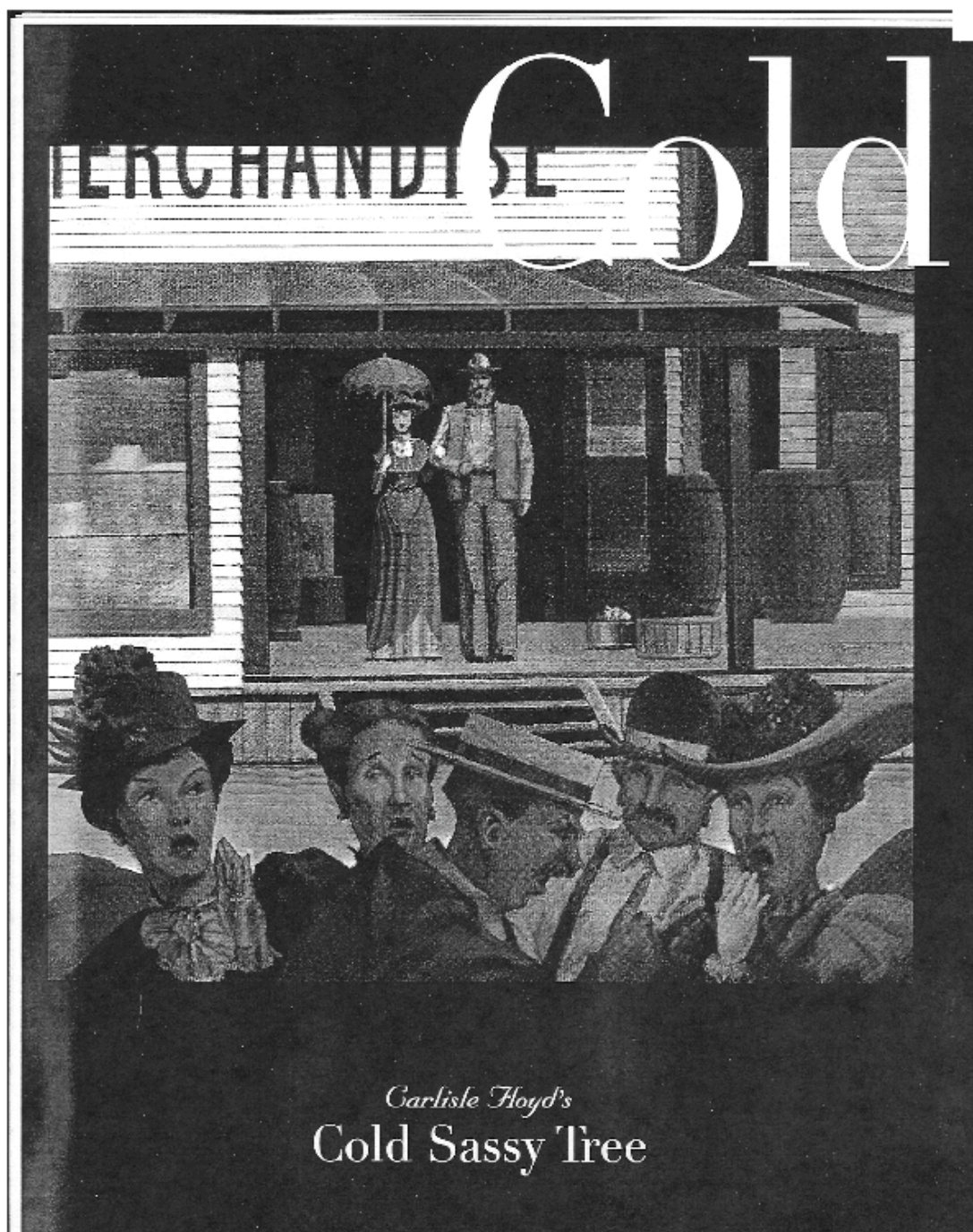
AN OPERA NEW WORLD  
PRODUCTION  
SPONSORED IN PART BY  
PHILIP MORRIS  
COMPANIES INC.

UNDERWRITTEN BY  
THE CADDILLAC &  
CONVALL FOUNDATION

| JANUARY |    |    |    |    |    |    | FEBRUARY |    |    |    |    |    |    |
|---------|----|----|----|----|----|----|----------|----|----|----|----|----|----|
| S       | A  | T  | W  | T  | F  | S  | S        | M  | T  | W  | T  | F  | S  |
| 1       | 2  | 3  | 4  | 5  | 6  | 7  | 1        | 2  | 3  | 4  | 5  | 6  | 7  |
| 8       | 9  | 10 | 11 | 12 | 13 | 14 | 8        | 9  | 10 | 11 | 12 | 13 | 14 |
| 15      | 16 | 17 | 18 | 19 | 20 | 21 | 15       | 16 | 17 | 18 | 19 | 20 | 21 |
| 22      | 23 | 24 | 25 | 26 | 27 | 28 | 22       | 23 | 24 | 25 | 26 | 27 | 28 |
| 29      | 30 | 31 |    |    |    |    | 29       | 30 | 31 |    |    |    |    |



Two-page print ad for Houston Grand Opera world premiere of Cold Sassy Tree.



# Sassy Tree

*A world premiere! Be among the first  
to delight in the newest work by  
America's best-known opera composer.*

**H**ouston Grand Opera is proud to unveil Carlisle Floyd's long-awaited gift to opera lovers across the country: *Cold Sassy Tree*.

Based on Olive Ann Burns' hilarious novel of the same name, *Cold Sassy Tree* is a step back in time to turn-of-the-century rural Georgia. When his wife dies, Rucker Lattimore, the town's leading—and most outspoken—citizen, needs someone to manage his household. Just days later, he marries a beautiful young woman, and a firestorm of controversy ensues. The results are both uproarious and heartwarming.

The cast of *Cold Sassy Tree* is one befitting a world premiere. Dean Peterson performs the part of the colorful Rucker Lattimore, and Patricia Racette has been cast as his spirited young wife. Patrick Summers leads the Houston Grand Opera Orchestra. Stage direction is provided by the distinguished Australian film director and Oscar nominee Bruce Beresford (*Driving Miss Daisy*, *Tender Mercies*).

Come let us introduce you to the unforgettable characters of *Cold Sassy Tree*.

April 14, 16m, 19, 22, 25, 28, 30m, 2000

Sung in English with Surtitles

Evenings 7:30 Matinees 2:00

Rucker Lattimore, Dean Peterson  
Love Simpson, Patricia Racette  
Will Tweedy, John McVeigh  
Effie Belle Tate, Judith Christin  
Clayton McAllister, Christopher  
Schaldenbrand  
Loma Williams, Beth Clayton  
Lightfoot McClendon, Margaret Lloyd



Dean Peterson



Patricia Racette



Carlisle Floyd

Conductor, Patrick Summers  
Stage Director, Bruce Beresford  
Designer, Michael Yeargan

Houston Grand Opera Orchestra

Co-commissioned and co-produced with San Diego Opera, Austin Lyric Opera, Opera Carolina and Baltimore Opera

World premiere made possible by the generosity of AT&T Foundation

Major funding support provided by Lyondell Chemical Company

Commissioned through a generous gift from Drs. Dennis and Susan Carlyle

**Appendix D:**  
**Co-Commission and Co-Production Agreement for Harvey Milk**  
**Provided by Kip Cranna, San Francisco Opera**

Harvey Milk Co-Prod  
3/16/94

AGREEMENT

AGREEMENT made this 16th day of March, 1994, by and between the Houston Grand Opera Association, Inc., the New York City Opera, and the San Francisco Opera Association.

It is hereby agreed as follows:

I. The Houston Grand Opera Association, Inc. (HGO), the New York City Opera (NYCO), and the San Francisco Opera Association (SFOA) are herein referred to as collectively as the "Co-producers".

II. The Co-producers shall produce and fund the design, manufacture, shipping, and assembly of theatrical scenery, projections, non-stock properties, and costumes (herein referred to as "Production") of Stewart Wallace and Michael Korie's "Harvey Milk" (the "Opera"). Specifically excluded from "Production" are wigs, footwear, armory, firearms, and stock properties and stock scenic elements including but not limited to escapes, raker system platforms, house masking, unpainted scrims, and the like.

Production is currently scheduled to premiere in Houston, Texas, in January, 1995. Production is currently scheduled for presentation by NYCO in April, 1995; by SFOA in November/December, 1996.

III. The stage director shall be Christopher Alden (herein referred to as "Director"); the scenery and properties shall be designed by Paul Steinberg (herein referred to as "Set Designer"); the costumes shall be designed by Gabriel Berry (herein referred to as "Costume Designer"). The Conductor, Assistant Director, the Lighting Designer, and the Sound Designer shall each be contracted separately by each Co-producer and, therefore, are not included in this Agreement.

IV. The Co-producers agree that HGO shall be the "Administering Co-producer" of the project. As such, HGO shall:

A. administer the Co-production Agreement and the Co-production Budget, collecting and dispersing funds as required according to the terms of this Agreement and the Budget (Attachment A).

B. contract the Director, the Set Designer, and the Costume Designer to conceive/create the Production and to be present as necessary during initial rehearsals and the

first "put-in" of the Production. Payments to Director and Designer(s) from Co-production funds shall also cover:

1. for the Director, working fees and royalties for all venues as well as initial creation expenses;
2. for the Set and Costume Designers, working fees and royalties for all venues, as well as initial creation expenses including design assistants.

HGO will establish local expense rates (hotel, per diem) and air fare restrictions: (1) for NYCO in the Director's and the Designers' contracts; and (2) for SFOA in the Designers' contracts. Further, HGO will contract the artist to be present at each Co-producer's presentation based upon dates furnished to HGO by each Co-producer. However, each Co-producer must communicate directly with the Director and each Designer to arrange each artist's transportation local expenses; Co-producers are urged to do so in a timely fashion, so that the terms and conditions negotiated on their behalf by HGO may still apply. Local expenses and air fares are not applicable when the Director or a Designer is in his or her home city.

Although contracts are not yet finalized, it is anticipated that each Designer will be required to be in attendance at each-Co-producer's venue beginning with load-in.

C. supervise the logistics of Co-production meetings, making sure all Co-producers are informed of important Co-production activity in a timely fashion.

D. oversee the creation and manufacture of Production, including facilitating the communication among the Co-producers, the Director, and the Designers, the scheduling of design presentations, and the awarding and monitoring of construction contracts.

E. be sure that Production will "work" within the technical physical limitations each of NYCO and SFOA's theaters provided that HGO has been sent technical drawings as required in this Agreement.

F. supervise the rehearsal and technical periods in Houston, to include the rehearsal and "first-time" technical expenses which are incurred on behalf of the Co-production.



G. provide to NYCO and SFOA a copy of the initial presentation's hanging plot, floor plans, and stage manager's book.

H. supervise future rentals of the Production.

I. pay for and supervise the programming of the synthesizer equipment as required by the composer. Synthesizer equipment, as specified by the Composer, will be rented or purchased on behalf of all Co-Producers by the Administering Co-Producer. The programming and the equipment shall be made available without fee to each Co-Producer. However, each Co-Producer is responsible for applicable cartage of synthesizer equipment.

V. NYCO and SFOA each separately agrees that it shall:

A. on or before April 1, 1994, inform HGO of its Load-in and rehearsal and performance dates. NYCO and SFOA each separately bears the responsibility to employ the Director and Designers in accordance with this Agreement and the terms HGO has negotiated.

B. pay all rehearsal and performance costs normally paid by and associated with a producing entity's presentation in its city, including Director's or Designers' air fares and local expenses, in accordance with terms negotiated by HGO.

C. on or before April 15, 1994, to each provide technical drawings of NYCO or SFOA's performance theater to HGO, and designate a person in authority through whom all design approvals and other communication shall occur.

D. accept and arrange for shipping the Production following the previous Co-producer's packing and load-out, and to store, if necessary, until presenting co-producer's presentation.

E. clean and completely dry costumes prior to packing for shipment to next Co-producer's city.

F. insure the Production in the amount of \$250,000 US while Production is in the care of NYCO or SFOA (e.g., upon acceptance from the preceding Co-producer's theater the current Co-producer's storage, rehearsal, and performance, through load-out from its theater).

G. to insure the synthesizer equipment while under its control and to pay for applicable cartage of said equipment.



vi. The Co-commission.

HGO has entered into a Co-commission Agreement with Steward Wallace (Composer) and Michael Korie (Librettist). Upon signing this Agreement, NYCO and SFOA each separately accepts the terms and conditions governing their use of "Harvey Milk" and in so doing, become Co-commissioners, along with HGO. Specifically, NYCO and SFOA each separately agrees:

A. that the Composer and Librettist shall have right of approval of the Director and the Conductor, such approvals not to be unreasonably withheld. Scenic, sound, lighting, and costume designers and cast shall be selected by the Co-commissioners, in consultation with the Composer, Librettist, and Director.

B. that no changes in the Opera shall be made at any time without the prior consent of the Composer and the Librettist in consultation with the Director.

C. to deal with the Composer to represent the Librettist as regards rights, payments, royalties and other aspects of this commission.

D. that it shall be granted up to eight royalty-free performances, to be presented over the course of a single performance season. No performances in excess of eight shall be presented without the prior written approval of the Librettist and the Composer.

E. that except as otherwise provided for in this Agreement, the Composer or the Composer and the Librettist shall be the sole owner of all rights of every kind and character in and to the Opera, the music, the orchestrations, and the libretto, and any and all translations, arrangements, and/or musical materials, whether or not such rights are now not known or ascertained or shall hereafter come into existence. No rights in or to the Opera, the music, or the libretto are granted to the Co-commissioners except for those rights which are specifically granted in this Agreement.

F. the musical materials (partitura, piano/vocal scores, orchestra parts, and the like) are available to each Co-commissioner free of charge; following such use in the initial run, the materials shall be returned to Composer, Librettist, or their designee, who shall thenceforth take responsibility for maintaining the renting them out at a fee of not less than \$500 per performance, half of which shall, upon receipt, be payable to HGO acting on behalf of all co-commissioners until such time as the cost of preparing and producing the original materials has been recouped.

Note: The musical materials will be sent by HGO to NYCO or SFOA upon request and submission of rehearsal dates. All

musical materials must be returned to HGO by NYCO or by SFOA after its use, in a condition similar to that in which it was received.

C. that the Composer and the Librettist shall each be entitled to receive three pairs of complimentary tickets and to purchase five pairs of house seats, all between the first and tenth rows of the orchestra section, for each performance of the Opera during each Co-commissioner's initial performance run. Such tickets shall be set aside by each company and made available for purchase by the individual until 6:00 P.M. on the second day prior to the scheduled performance. In addition, the Composer and the Librettist shall each be entitled to purchase a minimum of ten additional pairs of tickets for the official opening night in each of the Co-commissioners' cities; such additional tickets must be purchased at least one week prior to opening night.

H. that the Composer and Librettist shall be notified of all rehearsals for the Opera by the Co-commissioner holding the rehearsal. The Composer and the Librettist shall be entitled to attend rehearsals; however, the Composer's or the Librettist's expenses relating to the rehearsal shall be paid only for those rehearsals at which his presence is necessary, as determined by the Co-commissioner holding the rehearsal. It is understood that each of the Composer and the Librettist shall be entitled to be present for the casting process. Further, the Composer and the Librettist shall be entitled to be present for at least the one week period prior to and including any opening performance of the initial performance run in each such venue.

I. that when, as required in a contract negotiated by HGO or in the opinion of the Co-commissioner paying such expenses, the presence of the Composer or the Librettist is required at meetings, rehearsals, or performances held beyond a fifty mile radius of the individual's home city, the Composer or the Librettist each shall receive (following written approval of the Co-commissioner involved and as applicable; provided that the Composer and Librettist shall each be entitled at the expense of the applicable Co-commissioner to be present to the periods set forth in the preceding paragraph):

- (1) a round-trip, coach, economy air fare ticket, the reservation for which is to be arranged by the Co-commissioner.
- (2) a \$100 US per day meal allowance.
- (3) a first class apartment or first class hotel.
- (4) reimbursement for other directly related, pre-approved local transportation expenses in the USA,

Harvey Milk Co-Prod  
3/16/94

outside of New York City, (i.e., car rental) and other "out-of-pocket" expenses upon presentation or appropriate receipts.

VII. Each Co-producer's financial obligation is one-third of the total Co-production Budget (see Attachment A). NYCO and SFOA each agrees separately to pay its obligation to HGO without deduction of any sort whatsoever according to the following schedule:

33% on the signing of this Agreement, but in no event later than May 1, 1994;

33% on or before August 1, 1994;

33% before load-in to its theater, but in no event later than;

April 1, 1995 for NYCO; and  
November 1, 1996 for SFOA.

VIII. Each Co-producer agrees:

A. to responsibly maintain Production in good condition while such materials are in its care. Major alteration of Production may not be done without the prior written permission of HGO. Costumes may be altered within reason to fit another individual, but fabric is not to be cut, painted or otherwise permanently altered. Replacement costumes to fit NYCO or SFOA's cast are the sole financial responsibility of NYCO and SFOA, respectively.

B. to accept responsibility for all physical loss or damage to Production beyond normal wear and tear while the Production is under its care. HGO makes no representation as to the safety of the Production as designed or as installed, handled, or used by NYCO or SFOA. NYCO and SFOA each separately expressly waives, to the extent allowed by law, any claims under federal, state, or other law that either Co-producer might otherwise have against HGO relating to the condition of the Production.

C. prior to shipping, to properly pack and wrap the Production to prevent unnecessary and other than normal damage due to shipping. It is suggested that technical personnel of following Co-producer be present for the final performance and load-out at the previous Co-producer's theater. All shipping is to be by overland truck and is to be arranged for by NYCO or SFOA when it accepts the Production following load-out of the previous Co-producer.

D. provide prominent credit in a manner similar to that which appears in Attachment B on the title page of NYCO and SFOA's house program, flyer, poster, and in all promotional or press materials controlled by a Co-commissioner. Further both the Composer's name and the Librettist's name shall appear wherever and whenever one of the names appears in all billing and promotion by the Co-commissioner(s). All programs shall contain biographies of the Composer and the Librettist, provided they are provided by the Composer and the Librettist. the surtitle author shall receive title page credit.

E. that it will not visually duplicate the Production by film, tape, or other similar process except for minimal publicity and except for in-house archival purposes.

F. that it will not tour or present Production in more than one theater without the prior written permission of HGO.

IX. For as long as Production is kept intact (see below), each Co-producer shall be a co-owner of Production, and will participate in revenue (net of deductions of applicable direct costs) resulting from any exploitation of Production. NYCO or SFOA's portion of such net revenue will be the percentage its total contribution is of the total Production Budget (Attachment A), and is due upon full payment by Co-producer of its financial obligations as required by this Agreement. However, should Co-production costs exceed the budgeted amount, and should HGO solely have to pay for such overage, then HGO shall be able to first recoup its additional expenses (over and above HGO's original assigned percentage) before the distribution of any future revenue.

Production shall be kept intact through the final Co-producer's presentation, now scheduled to be on or about November 1996. Upon the load-in to its theater, said final Co-producer shall notify all Co-producers that the final presentation (as originally planned) is about to occur. HGO will then initiate communication regarding the future of Production and pay for its return shipping to Houston. Those Co-producers agreeing to keep Production intact will be the new co-owners of Production, sharing the costs of subsequent storage and insurance, as well as the revenue (net of direct expenses) from future rentals or other exploitation. Each new co-owner's portion of such cost or net revenue will be the percentage its total contribution is of the sum of all remaining Co-producers' (the new co-owners') contributions.

X. Each party is unencumbered by this Agreement to raise contributions or to solicit grants to finance its portion of the Co-production Budget. The parties agree, however, that a single



donation of \$50,000 or more will be credited on the title page of each Co-producer's house program and, where appropriate, in all other media. The name and proper crediting must be received by the crediting Co-producer at least 30 days prior to its first public performance.

XI. Contractual Obligations

A. This Agreement constitutes the entire agreement between the parties hereto and supersedes all prior understandings between the parties on the subject matter hereof, whether written or oral, expressed or implied.

B. This Agreement is for the use of Production; it in no way creates a joint venture or partnership. The Agreement does not grant any rights other than those stated. Neither signatory has the authority or power to bind the other to third parties without the written consent of the party to be bound, except as may be provided herein.

C. This Agreement may not be changed, modified, renewed, extended, or discharged, except as may be provided herein or except by mutual agreement, in writing, signed by the parties to the Agreement. The waiver of a breach of, or a default under, any of the terms of this Agreement shall not be construed as a waiver of any subsequent breach or default.

D. No party to this Agreement may assign this Agreement or any right hereunder without the written consent of the other party.

E. If any provision of this Agreement shall, for any reason, be held violative of any applicable law, and so much of said Agreement is held to be unenforceable, then the invalidity of such specific provision herein shall not be held to invalidate any other provision herein which shall remain in full force and effect.

F. Each party to this Agreement hereby indemnifies and holds the other harmless from and against any and all penalties, claims, proceedings, fines, taxes, losses, damages, injuries, or liabilities sustained by the other (including reasonable attorneys' fees) as well as from and against any and all third party claims brought by any person (including an employee of either party) for damage, loss, personal injury or death, arising out of this Agreement or by reason of a breach of warranty or representation by the indemnifying party or by reason of use of the Production materials, whether or not such penalty, claim, proceeding, fine, tax, loss, damage,

injury, or liability is based in whole or in part upon a defect in the Production materials or the negligence or other fault of the other party.

G. All questions with respect to this Agreement will be resolved in accordance with the laws of the State of Texas.

H. It is agreed that if any of the Co-producers cannot perform or rehearse or operate or fulfill its obligations under this Agreement because of fire, accident, riots, acts of God, war, civil strife, acts of terrorism, the public enemy, or any other cause of the same general class which could not be reasonably anticipated or prevented (other than lack of money), that party shall not be held liable or responsible for carrying out the terms, conditions, or financial requirements of this Agreement, provided that the defaulting party shall be liable to the others for its pro-rata share of the expenses already incurred (or contracted for and which must be paid) for those items contained in this Agreement.

IN WITNESS WHEREOF, the parties have executed this Agreement, effective the date first written above. HGO shall be bound by the financial terms and conditions contained herein only if this Agreement is signed on or before May 1, 1994.

AGREED: For the Houston Grand Opera Association, Inc.

BY: \_\_\_\_\_

DATE: \_\_\_\_\_

AGREED: For New York City Opera

BY: Clark J. Wenzel

DATE: 4/7/94

AGREED: For San Francisco Opera Association

BY: Frank Billehant

DATE: 7/15/94

ATTACHMENT A  
CO-PRODUCTION BUDGET

|   |                                  |
|---|----------------------------------|
| 1. Commission/Performance rights<br>(up to 8 free performances each)  | [REDACTED]                       |
| 2. Composer/Librettist rehearsal expenses *                           | [REDACTED]                       |
| 3. Director<br>Fees, Rights, "creation" expenses *                    | [REDACTED]                       |
| 4. Set Designer<br>Fees, Rights, "creation" expenses, assistant *     | [REDACTED]                       |
| 5. Costume designer<br>Fees, Rights, "creation" expenses, assistant * | [REDACTED]                       |
| 6. Sets/Props/Costumes  | [REDACTED]                       |
| 7. Synthesizer programming costs                                      | [REDACTED]                       |
| 8. Creative/Technical/Production meetings                             | [REDACTED]                       |
| 9. Musical materials preparation                                      | [REDACTED]                       |
| 10. Plans/Drafting/Photos   | [REDACTED]                       |
| TOTAL, all companies  | approx \$500,00<br>\$ [REDACTED] |
| Each (of three) Co-producer's contribution                            | approx \$166,<br>\$ [REDACTED]   |

\* Figures do not include local expenses or travel.

Harvey Milk Co-Prod  
3/16/94

ATTACHMENT B  
BILLING/CREDITS

Houston Grand Opera Assn., Inc., \*  
New York City Opera,  
and  
San Francisco Opera Association

present

(100%) Harvey Milk  
An opera in two acts  
(75%) Music by Stewart Wallace  
(75%) Libretto by Michael Korie

Christopher Alden, Stage Director  
Paul Steinberg, Set Designer  
Gabriel Berry, Costumer Designer

(25%) Co-commissioned by Houston Grand Opera,  
the New York City Opera, and  
the San Francisco Opera Association.

\* Each Co-producer may list itself first in its own city.



**Appendix E:**  
**Co-Commission Agreement for Cold Sassy Tree**  
**Provided by Ann Owens, Houston Grand Opera**

Cold Sassy Tree Co-commission  
4/30/99

COMMISSION AGREEMENT

AGREEMENT made this 30<sup>th</sup> day of April 1999, for the commissioning of the Opera, "Cold Sassy Tree" (hereinafter "Opera"), with music and libretto by Carlisle Floyd, based upon the novel by Olive Ann Burns.

All parties to this Commission Agreement mutually agree as follows:

**I. Definitions**

- A. Carlisle Floyd shall be herein referred to as "Composer".
- B. "Co-commissioners" shall refer collectively to the Houston Grand Opera Association, Inc., and up to four additional Co-commissioners as may be added according to the terms and conditions provided herein. As of this writing, the four additional Co-commissioners are Baltimore Opera, Austin Lyric Opera, Opera Carolina, and San Diego Opera.
- C. Houston Grand Opera Association, Inc., herein referred to variously as "HGO" or the "Administering Co-Commissioner," as follows:
  - 1. "HGO" when used herein refers to the Houston Grand Opera Association, Inc., acting on its own behalf, referring to and binding no other entity.
  - 2. "Administering Co-commissioner" when used herein refers to the Houston Grand Opera Association, Inc. acting on behalf of itself as a Co-commissioner and on behalf of all other Co-commissioners as well.
- D. Boosey & Hawkes, shall be herein referred to as "Publisher".

**II. The Parties**

- A. HGO enters into this Agreement on behalf of itself.
- B. Administering Co-Commissioner enters into this Agreement on behalf of itself and on behalf of the additional Co-Commissioners. Upon adhering to the terms and conditions contained herein, such additional Co-Commissioners shall be entitled to all rights afforded all Co-Commissioners to the extent provided herein. However, unless specifically stated to the contrary, HGO, in acting as Administering Co-

Commissioner, in no way obligates itself for payments to be made or activities to be carried out by the additional Co-Commissioners.

- C. Composer with respect to the music and libretto warrants and represents that he has obtained full authority to enter into this Agreement on his behalf in all matters, terms, and conditions pertaining to and/or contained in this Agreement, whether stated or implied, including, but not limited to, payments, rights to the work being commissioned (including the music and the libretto), ownership, performing and other published materials, and public and other uses.

### III. The Commission

- A. The Administering Co-commissioner hereby commissions Composer to compose the music ("music") and to write the libretto ("libretto") for an original full-length opera entitled "Cold Sassy Tree". Composer accepts this commission in accordance with the terms of this Agreement.
- B. Composer agrees to enter into such agreements with other individuals as they deem necessary, to obtain all necessary rights and to pay all legal and other costs of preparing and entering into such agreements as are necessary to fulfill their obligations under this commission.
- C. Composer shall consult with the Administering Co-Commissioner and the Director from time to time during the course of creating the Opera, with a view toward assuring that the Opera shall in all respects be suitable for performance in each of the Co-commissioners' theaters. This includes limiting the Opera to a principal cast of no more than nine, a chorus of no more than 40, and an orchestra of no more than 56. The Opera shall be composed so as to contain no more than 140 minutes of music and/or dialogue, structured into no more than three acts.
- D. The Director and the cast shall be mutually decided upon by the Administering Co-commissioner and Composer; in the case of disagreement, the Administering Co-commissioner's decision shall prevail. Composer and Administering Co-commissioner agree that the Director shall be Bruce Beresford, and the Conductor in Houston shall be Patrick Summers. Administering Co-commissioner has no control over conductors in other co-commissioners' venues; however, Administering Co-commissioner will require that each other Co-commissioner consult with the Composer prior to hiring a Conductor.
- E. During the composition, initial rehearsals and first performances of the Opera, Composer, the Conductor, the Director and the Administering Co-commissioner shall consult about desired changes in the Opera. No such changes shall be made to the Opera at any time without the prior consent of Composer, such consent not to be

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unreasonably withheld.

#### IV. Payment

In consideration of the agreements hereunder, the Administering Co-commissioner shall pay a [REDACTED] commission fee to Composer. This fee shall be payable by HGO on behalf of all other Co-commissioners, and shall be guaranteed by HGO, subject to the delivery and acceptance provisions below. Composer hereby warrants and represents that payment of the commission fee fulfills all financial obligations of the commission fee for the Co-commissioners, HGO currently being the first Co-commissioner. All commission fee and copying payments under this agreement shall be made by Administering Co-commissioner. The commission fee shall be paid according to the following schedule:

1. [REDACTED] upon the signing and returning of this Commission Agreement.
  2. [REDACTED] upon delivery of the piano vocal score, but in no event later than July 1, 1999, and acceptance thereof.
  3. [REDACTED] upon delivery of the full score and complete orchestral performance materials, but in no event later than January 1, 2000, and acceptance thereof.
  4. [REDACTED] on opening night in Houston, but in no event later than November 1, 2000.
- B. HGO does not guarantee the presentations of the Opera by the other Co-commissioners.
- C. Composer agrees to be reasonably available to consult with respect to the Opera as necessary until the final premiere at the final Co-commissioner's venue, subject to prior commitments and schedules and payment to Composer of expenses as set forth herein.
- D. All sums of money payable under this Agreement shall be paid to the order of Composer and sent to: [REDACTED]. No fees to any agent representing or acting on behalf of Composer are payable by the Co-commissioners under this agreement.
- E. After each submission of materials as provided in this section IV, the Administering Co-commissioner shall have fifteen days from receipt to accept or reject the submission. Acceptance shall not be unreasonably withheld. Composer shall receive notice of any rejection of the music or libretto, and the precise reasons therefore. In the event the administering Co-commissioner has not so notified Composer of such rejection within said fifteen-day period, said submission shall be deemed accepted.

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- F. In the event any portion of the music or libretto is not deemed acceptable by the Administering Co-commissioner, Composer shall have up to thirty (30) days to make alterations. If such alterations do not render the music and/or libretto acceptable to the Administering Co-commissioner, the Administering Co-commissioner shall so advise Composer in writing within thirty days of receipt of such alterations, and this commission shall be deemed canceled and no further payments shall be due. In the event of cancellation, all rights shall immediately revert to Composer. Composer shall retain all prior payments, unless such cancellation is a result of a material breach of this Agreement by Composer in which case the Composer shall return to the Administering Co-commissioner all prior payments received by him.

V. The Production

The Administering Co-commissioner asserts that it intends to enter into a co-production agreement with other Co-producers, some of whom may also be Co-commissioners as previously referred to in this Agreement to produce a first-class operatic production (the "Houston Production") of the Opera. The Production, to include directorial concept, musical direction, original performers as available and physical production, is licensable by the Administering Co-commissioner. Composer agrees that he will encourage licensors of the Opera to utilize the physical production which was premiered in Houston.

VI. Rights Granted to Co-commissioners

- A. In consideration for the commission fee defined above, Composer hereby grants to the Co-commissioners exclusive world rights as follows:
1. Other than those presented by the Co-commissioners no fully staged presentation of the "Opera" shall occur until the final Co-commissioner's presentation without the prior written approval of the Administering Co-commissioner, such approval not to be unreasonably withheld, provided, however, that said final Co-commissioner's presentation occur on or before June 1, 2003. Administering Co-commissioner will request and use best efforts to get the performance dates of all Co-commissioners on or before the world premiere in Houston.
  2. Royalty payments to the Co-commissioners, to be negotiated in good faith by the Administering Co-commissioner, shall be required for any first class Broadway release or presentation of the Opera for a five-year period, beginning at the time of the world premiere.
  3. Any visual electronic duplication for sale or public release occurring prior to July 1, 2005, shall require the use of the Houston Production or shall require the

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payment of a royalty to the Co-commissioners by the producer of said duplication, such royalty to be negotiated in good faith between the producer and the Administering Co-commissioner, provided that there is no conflict with the already scheduled use of the Production.

- B. Royalties for the initial performance run by each Co-commissioner shall be as follows:
1. Royalties shall be calculated at ~~10~~ percent (10%) of the gross box office receipts, less the normal deductions.
  2. Royalties up to \$~~5000~~ shall be waived for each Co-commissioner.
  3. For San Diego, Baltimore, Opera Carolina, and Austin, royalties which exceed \$~~5000~~, shall be paid by each Co-commissioner to Publisher within sixty (60) days following each Co-commissioner's final performance.
  4. HGO initially shall pay no royalties, but shall notify Publisher of its gross box office receipts, less the normal deductions. Royalty amounts which are less than \$~~5000~~ for each of the other Co-commissioners shall be totaled, and credited against any sums owed by HGO in addition to its \$~~5000~~ waiver up to a maximum of \$~~5000~~ total waiver. HGO shall pay any balance due and owing Publisher within sixty (60) days following the final Co-commissioner's final performance.
- C. A royalty of 10% for the second presentation (or second performance run) by each Co-commissioner shall be paid. No music rental fee shall be charged for such second presentation by each Co-commissioner. However, beginning with the third presentation (third run of performances) by a given Co-commissioner, royalties and music rental shall be paid by said Co-commissioner at rates customary for similar works at similar venues in effect at the time of production.
- D. The "world premiere" shall be presented by HGO unless otherwise agreed in writing by HGO and Composer.
- E. Co-commissioners shall have the right, without payment of any royalty, to present one live or tape delayed radio broadcast of the Opera during the initial run of performances in Co-commissioner's city. Additionally, HGO shall have the rights for one live "plazacast" and for release of the Opera over the NPR World of Opera series without payment of any rental or royalties. HGO shall notify Publisher of such release.
- F. Co-commissioners shall have the right to print full copies of the libretto and make such copies available to their audiences. Publisher shall receive prominent billing in

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such libretti. Should the libretti be sold, Publisher will receive \$10 for each sold libretto.

#### VII. Ownership

Except as otherwise provided for in this Agreement, Composer shall be the sole owner of all rights of every kind and character in and to the Opera, the music, the orchestrations, and the libretto, whether or not such rights are now not known or ascertained or shall hereafter come into existence, including but not limited to copyright in the United States and throughout the world, and Composer shall have the right to exercise such rights without the approval of the Co-commissioners, except as provided for in this Agreement, and subject to the exclusive and non-exclusive rights granted to the Co-commissioners herein. Composer agrees to copyright the music and the libretto. No rights in or to the Opera, the music or the libretto are granted to the Co-commissioners except for those rights which are specifically granted in this Agreement.

#### VIII. Performance Materials

- A. Administering Co-commissioner shall pay Publisher the sum of \$1000 toward the creation and copying of performance materials upon receipt of a facsimile of Composer's Copyist's first invoice.
- B. Publisher will bear the costs of preparing the piano/vocal score, 25 of which shall be provided rent free by Composer's Publisher to the Administering Co-commissioner. Administering Co-commissioner may make copies for distribution to other Co-commissioners, which they may use without payment of royalty or rental fee. Co-commissioners are not permitted to make copies for distribution to entities other than Co-commissioners.
- C. Publisher will bear the cost of preparing the full orchestral score and the orchestra parts, all of which shall be provided rent free by the Publisher to each Co-commissioner.
- D. Co-commissioners will have no obligation to pay rental fees to any individual, agent, or organization for use of such performance materials in their presentations of the Opera for their initial presentation and one subsequent presentation.

#### IX. Non-performance by Composer

- A. Prior to the delivery of the full orchestral score as required herein, if by reason of "incapacity", Composer is unable to fulfill the terms of this Agreement, he or his estate shall retain all payments for those portions of the music or libretto previously

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delivered and accepted by the Co-commissioners. If Composer is unable to fulfill the terms of the Agreement, the Co-commissioners shall have the right to commission completion of the Opera by either another composer, or librettist, or composer/librettist provided that the replacement composer shall be subject to the approval of the administrator or executor of Composer's estate. Co-commissioners shall exercise such right by written notice to Composer (or a duly authorized representative, administrator, successor, or assign), within 90 days after receiving notice of "incapacity" and the inability to complete the Opera.

- B. If for any reasons other than "incapacity", the acts or omissions of HGO or another Co-commissioner, or other factors beyond Composer's control, Composer fails to make deliveries required herein, the Composer shall be liable to the Co-commissioners for the full refund, upon demand, of that portion of the full commission theretofore paid to the individuals as liquidated damages.

X. Billing

- A. Whenever the Opera is presented or rights are licensed, the Co-commissioners and the Publisher shall use best efforts to require the following credits in perpetuity. Such credits are required in each program, flyer, poster, cd or video disc cover, disc, tape, radio broadcast, television production, motion picture production, press release or advertising related to the aforementioned:

Cold Sassy Tree

A Musical Drama in Three Acts

Music and Libretto by Carlisle Floyd

Based upon the novel "Cold Sassy Tree" by  
Olive Ann Burns

Co-commissioned by Houston Grand Opera,  
(and the remaining Co-commissioners)

Premiered by the Houston Grand Opera in April 2000.

- B. Composer's name shall appear in all billing and promotion by the Co-commissioners. All programs shall contain biographies of Composer, provided it is provided in a timely fashion by Composer.
- C. The Publisher shall receive the following credit in the house program of each

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Co-commissioner: By arrangement with Boosey & Hawkes, Inc., publisher.

XI. Undertaking of the Co-commissioners

Nothing herein contained shall be construed to obligate the Co-commissioners to produce, license or present the Opera or to otherwise exercise, exploit or make any use of any of the rights, license, privileges or property herein granted to the Co-commissioners; provided that if, acceptance by the Administering Co-commissioner, at least one of the Co-commissioners does not present the "world premiere" by November 1, 2001, all rights of the Co-commissioners under this Agreement terminate as provided herein.

XII. Tickets

Composer shall be entitled to receive three pairs of complimentary tickets and to purchase five pairs of house seats, all between the first and tenth rows of the orchestra section, for each performance of the Opera during each Co-commissioner's initial performance run. Tickets for purchase shall be set aside by each company and made available for purchase by the individual until 6:00 PM on the day one-week prior to the scheduled performance. In addition, Composer shall be entitled to purchase a minimum of ten additional pairs of tickets for the official opening night in each of the Co-commissioners' cities; such additional tickets must be purchased at least two weeks prior to opening night. Upon timely notification, Publisher shall be entitled to receive one pair of complimentary tickets during each Co-commissioner's initial performance run.

XIII. Rehearsals

Composer shall be notified of all rehearsals for the Opera by the Co-commissioner holding the rehearsal. Composer shall be entitled to attend rehearsals; however, Composer's expenses relating to the rehearsal shall be paid only for those rehearsals at which his presence is necessary, as reasonably determined by the Co-commissioner holding the rehearsal in consultation with Composer. It is understood that Composer's presence will be "required" for a two-week period prior to and including the official opening performance of the world premiere.

XIV. Expenses

When, in the opinion of the Co-commissioner paying such expenses, the presence of Composer is required at meetings, rehearsals, or performances held beyond a fifty mile radius of the individual's home city, Composer shall receive (following written approval of the Co-commissioner involved and as applicable):



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- A. a round-trip, coach, least expensive airfare ticket, the reservation for which is to be arranged by the Co-commissioner.
- B. a ~~per~~ per day meal allowance.
- C. if required, a room in an apartment or first class hotel, should Composer no longer maintain in Houston a second residence.
- D. reimbursement for other directly related "out-of-pocket" expenses upon presentation and approval of required receipts.

To the extent a synthesizer is involved in the orchestra, Composer shall pay for all expenses associated with programming and sampling. HGO shall have the right to approve the synthesizer and related equipment suggested by the Composer, such approval not to be unreasonably withheld.

XV. No Employment

Composer in performing his obligations under this Agreement, is acting as independent contractor and not as an employee or agent of the Co-commissioner and shall at no time represent or hold himself out to be an agent, employee, or representative of the Co-commissioners. Nothing herein shall create, expressly or impliedly, a partnership, joint venture, or other association among the parties.

XVI. Warranties and Representatives

- A. Composer warrants, represents and agrees that:
  - 1. No other contract, agreement, or obligation exists with another entity which precludes, prohibits, or otherwise makes unlawful his ability to fully execute and abide by this Agreement.
  - 2. He will not hereafter enter into any agreements or grant any rights to any other party which would or could diminish, impair or be adverse to the rights in the Opera herein granted to the Co-commissioners.
- B. Composer warrants and represents that he has the absolute right to any of his materials which are incorporated into the Opera, including, but not limited to, music, quotes of individuals, poetry, text, speeches, transcripts, periodicals, newscasts, or other written or recorded material not in the public domain.

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- C. All parties to this Agreement warrant and represent to the others that no broker or finder was responsible for bringing the parties together. Each party shall be solely responsible for any payments due their respective agents.
- D. Each party to this Agreement hereby indemnifies and holds the others harmless from and against any and all costs, awards, damages, judgments, and expenses (including reasonable attorneys' fees) arising out of any claim, demand, or proceeding which may be made or instituted against such other party by reason of a breach of any warranty or representation or agreement made by the indemnifying party. Indemnified party shall give the indemnifying party immediate notice of any such claim, demand, action, or proceeding, and the indemnifying party shall have the right to defend such claim, demand, action or proceeding should it so desire. The indemnified party shall not settle any such claim, demand, action or proceeding for which it seeks indemnification without the indemnifying party's prior written consent (not to be unreasonably withheld).

XVII. Contractual Obligations

- A. This Agreement constitutes the entire agreement between the parties hereto and supersedes all prior understandings between the parties on the subject matter hereof, whether written or oral, expressed or implied.
- B. This Agreement may not be changed, modified, renewed, extended or discharged, except by an agreement in writing signed by the parties.
- C. Any dispute arising under, out of, or in relation to this Agreement or any breach or asserted breach thereof, shall be determined and settled by arbitration in Houston pursuant to the rules then obtaining of the American Arbitration Association unless mutually agreed otherwise by the Publisher and the Administering Co-commissioner, there shall be three arbitrators. Any award rendered shall be final and conclusive upon the parties, and judgment thereon may be entered in the appropriate court or forum having jurisdiction. Such award shall include reasonable attorney fees and documented expenses to the prevailing party.
- D. All questions with respect to this Agreement will be resolved in accordance with the laws of the State of Texas.
- E. Composer may assign his rights to license fees and royalties, but such assignment shall not relieve him of his obligations under this Agreement. Except as provided for in this Agreement, Composer may not assign this Agreement or any other rights hereunder without the written consent of the Commissioner, which consent will not be unreasonably withheld. HGO may not assign its rights or obligations under this Agreement with Composer's prior written consent.

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- F. This Agreement shall be binding upon and inure to the benefit of the respective parties hereto and their successors in interest.
- G. If any provision of this Agreement shall, for any reason, be held violative of any applicable law, and said Agreement is held to be unenforceable, then the invalidity of such specific provision herein shall not be held to invalidate any other provision herein which shall remain in full force and effect.
- H. This Agreement may be signed in counterparts and when taken as a whole shall be a binding agreement between the parties.

IN WITNESS WHEREOF, the parties hereto have executed this Agreement, effective the date first written above:

For the Houston Grand Opera Association:

BY:  DATE: 5/1/99

For Composer, Carlisle Floyd

BY:  DATE: 5/1/99

For Publisher, Boosey & Hawkes:

BY:  DATE: 5/4/99

## Interviews, Correspondence and Communications

Alden, Christopher. (Stage director of Harvey Milk, Houston Grand Opera). Phone interview. 22 November 2003.

Bell, Susan. (Director of Individual Giving, Houston Grand Opera). Personal interview. 12 March 2003.

- - -. Phone conversation with the author. 4 Feb 2004.

Beresford, Bruce. (Stage Director, Cold Sassy Tree, Houston Grand Opera). Interview via e-mail. 5 Oct. 2003.

Bodenheimer, Laura. (Director of Development, Houston Grand Opera). Personal interview. 12 March 2003.

Bruce, Garnett. (Assistant Stage Director, Cold Sassy Tree, Houston Grand Opera). Interview via e-mail. 10 Oct. 2003.

- - -. E-mail correspondence to the author. 21 Sept. 2003.

Calvert, Chad. (Stage Director, Opera Carolina). Phone interview. 21 March 2003.

Campbell, Ian. (Artistic Director, San Diego Opera). Phone interview. 26 Sept. 2003.

- - -. Response to e-mail company questionnaire of the author. 30 Sept. 2003.

Ching, Michael. (General/Artistic, Opera Memphis). Response to e-mail company questionnaire of the author. 9 March 1999.

Clark, Peter. (General Press Representative, The Metropolitan Opera). Response to e-mail company questionnaire of the author. 7 Feb. 2003.

Cranna, Dr. Clifford "Kip." (Music Administrator, San Francisco Opera). Personal interview. 23 Nov. 1998.

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- - -. E-mail correspondence to the author. 21 Jan. 2004.

- - -. Phone conversation, 4 March 2004.

Ellison, Cori. (Dramaturg, New York City Opera). Response to e-mail company questionnaire of the author. 1 July 2003.

Floyd, Carlisle. (Composer of Cold Sassy Tree). Response to interview questionnaire of the author via fax. 11 May 2002.

Franklin, Mary. (Press Relations Coordinator, Lyric Opera of Chicago). E-mail correspondence to the author. 12 June 2003.

Franco, Rodi. (Marketing Director, Houston Grand Opera). Personal interview. 12 March 2003.

- - -. Phone interview. 17 February 2004.

Gockley, David. (Managing Artistic Director, Houston Grand Opera). Response to e-mail company questionnaire of the author. 6 April 1999.

- - -. Interview via e-mail. 10 Jan. 2003.

- - -. Phone interview. 21 March 2003.

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Grindle, David. (Production Stage Manager, The Atlanta Opera). Response to e-mail company questionnaire of the author. 8 Feb. 1999.

Guthrie, Melinda. (Coordinator of Vanguard, Houston Grand Opera). E-mail correspondence to the author. 22 March 1999.

Hancock, Curt. (Artistic Administrator, Central City Opera). Response to e-mail company questionnaire of the author. 8 February 1999.

Harp, James. (Artistic Administrator, Baltimore Opera). Response to e-mail company questionnaire of the author. 14 Feb. 2003.

- - -. Phone interview. 17 Feb. 2004.

Herod, Vince (Production Manager, Austin Lyric Opera). Interview via e-mail. 28 Jan. 2004.

Johnson, Dale. (Artistic Director, Minnesota Opera). Phone interview. 26 Sept. 2003.

- - -. Response to e-mail company questionnaire of the author. 24 Nov. 2003.

- - - . Phone conversation. 4 Feb. 2004.

Kittredge, Katherine. (Administrative Assistant to General and Artistic Director, New York City Opera). E-mail correspondence to the author. 3 Sept. 2002.

Korie, Michael. (Librettist of Harvey Milk). Interview via e-mail. 12 April 2002.

Lusking, Evan. (General Director, Lyric Opera of Kansas City). Phone conversation. 21 Jan. 2004.

- - - . Phone conversation. 9 March 2004.

Robert Lyall. (Artistic Director, New Orleans Opera Association). Personal interview, 13 March 2002.

McClain, Joseph. (Artistic Director, Austin Lyric Opera). Personal interview. 14 May 2000.

McKay, Charles. (General Director, Opera Theatre of St. Louis). Response to e-mail company questionnaire of the author. 10 April 2003.

Mears, Ava Jean. (Resource Center Director, Houston Grand Opera). E-mail correspondence to the author. 25 July 2001.

- - - . E-mail correspondence to the author. 31 July 2001.

Mitchell, Brian. (Director of Resource Center, Houston Grand Opera). E-mail correspondence to the author. 17 Nov. 2003.

Morehead, Philip. (Head of Music Staff, Lyric Opera of Chicago). Response to e-mail company questionnaire of the author. 8 Feb. 1999.

Osborne, George. (General Director, Connecticut Opera). Response to e-mail company questionnaire of the author. 8 Feb. 1999.

Owens, Ann. (Producing Director, Houston Grand Opera). Personal interview. 12 March 2003.

- - - . E-mail correspondence to the author. 20 Jan. 2004.

- - - . Phone conversation. 28 Jan. 2004.

- - -. Phone conversation. 6 Feb. 2004.

Schuler, Duane. (Lighting Designer, Cold Sassy Tree). Interview via e-mail.  
22 Nov. 2003.

Steinberg, Paul. (Set Designer, Harvey Milk). Interview via e-mail. 18 Jan. 2004.

Stollmack, Noele. (Lighting Designer, Harvey Milk, Houston Grand Opera). Phone  
interview. 18 Nov. 2003.

Strongman, Wayne. (Artistic Director, Tapestry New Opera Works).  
E-mail correspondence to the author. 30 Sept. 2003.

Summers, Patrick . (Musical Director, Houston Grand Opera). Interview via e-mail.  
12 Dec. 2003.

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Wallace, Stewart. (Composer of Harvey Milk) Interview via e-mail. 10 Feb. 2002.

Weber, Greg. (Technical Director of Stage Operations, Houston Grand Opera). Personal  
interview. 12 March 2003.

- - -. E-mail correspondence to the author. 20 Jan. 2004.

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- - -. E-mail correspondence to the author. 17 Feb. 2004.

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Woelzl, Susan. (Director of Publicity, New York City Opera.) Correspondence to the  
author. 12 June 2003.

Yeargan, Michael. (Set and Costume Designer for Cold Sassy Tree). Interview  
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