

**CHRIS LARGENT:** Hey there, let me take you off this busy main road of Van Ness Avenue, follow me through this parklet. I'm going to bring you into the secret world - not accessible to the general public...The North Stage Door!

Welcome to San Francisco Opera's new podcast! I'm your host, Chris Largent and I'm delighted to sweep you into this massive hive of creativity, stagecraft and performance at one of opera's most exciting companies. Along the way, we'll meet singers, directors, designers -- and some surprise guests; like Pixar's Chief Creative Officer and Academy Award Winning Director Pete Docter, and internationally acclaimed opera star Patricia Racette.

In normal times, walking around backstage, there would be a flurry of activity. But, it's not really happening like that this year...our stage has been dark. Our season? Canceled. This moment of social distancing has given us time to reflect -- how can this venerable artform that is entirely dependent on precision planning, hundreds and hundreds of people from different disciplines collaborating behind the scenes, and thousands in the audience --- how might this artform of opera adapt to a different reality, yet still adhere to restrictions necessary to keep everyone safe? How can we satisfy the craving we're all feeling... to experience opera live and come together as a community again?

Luckily, San Francisco Opera is in the process of answering this question with a production of *Barber of Seville* that is unlike any other --and is taking shape as I speak. Literally! We're having to think hard about some key questions: What are the essential elements of Rossini's opera? What cultural references will you, our audience, bring to it? ... For starters, I think of Bugs Bunny and the *Rabbit of Seville*. And what will our new production reveal about the spirit of our company in difficult times?

So amazingly, our journey to live performance is taking us back to the good ole days of drive-ins. Our new production of *Barber* opens at the Marin Civic Center on April 23. I'm the Associate Technical Director and it has been a colossal effort to build this production from the ground up! But more on that later. Now to get our bearings on

the Barber I'm going to turn the reins over to segment producer, Jeff McMillan and the world-renowned baritone, Lucas Meachem.

*MUSIC INSERT: SFO's 2016 Aida, Triumphal March*

**JEFFERY MCMILLAN:** Looking back at the last century, the most performed opera was Verdi's *Aida* -- followed closely by—and indeed surpassed by—Puccini's romantic tear-jerker, *La Boheme*. *Carmen*'s up there, and probably *Tosca*, too. Yet there is one opera that has every bit as much passion and energy in it as any of these ... and nobody even dies onstage. It's also a much older work and a comedy, which, as genres go, is notoriously difficult. What makes one generation laugh, centuries later can be trite, kitsch, or even worse. Yet Rossini's *Barber of Seville* is still funny and smart and, after more than two hundred years on the boards, it shows no signs of slowing down.

*MUSIC: SFO's 2015 Il Barbiere di Siviglia, Overture*

But with popularity comes the risk that operagoers will get comfortable—maybe too comfortable—with *Barber*. How many of you have looked at a new season brochure only to think “They’re doing *Barber*? Again?” Insert sigh and eye-roll. But if you don’t go, you’re missing out. And even if you do go, the fun factor is so high you still might overlook the fact: *The Barber of Seville* is a masterpiece -- hiding in plain sight.

*MUSIC INSERT: SFO's 2015 Il Barbiere di Siviglia, “Largo al factotum”*

That's American baritone Lucas Meachem. After starring as Figaro on the world's stages -- including multiple productions with San Francisco Opera -- Lucas returns for the Company's live drive-in performances in April. Meachem knows a thing or two about what makes this opera tick, so I asked him why an opera, which just turned 225 years old, is still making us laugh today

**LUCAS MEACHEM:** I've always called *The Barber of Seville* the greatest hits of opera wrapped into one opera. You know, it's really amazing. You have the *Largo al Factotum*. You have the, the overture, which everyone knows from *Bugs Bunny*. You have to have the tenor arias, they're, they're fantastic. You've got duets that are well

known. You've got Dunque Io Son, which every mezzo starts singing. There are so many wonderful pieces in this that it's just, it's fireworks all night long and it ends with the grand finale. It's like a firework show for the voice.

*MUSIC INSERT: SFO's 2015 Il Barbiere di Siviglia, Act I Finale*

**JEFFERY MCMILLAN:** In Barber there are six characters: we have Figaro; we have the love-sick Count Almaviva, the heroine Rosina, her guardian and suitor Bartolo, the old music master Basilio, and the worldly, I've-seen-it-all housekeeper Berta. But what is this opera about?

**LUCAS MEACHEM:** Boy meets girl, boy falls in love with girl, girl falls in love with boy. However, there's an obstacle and that obstacle is some old timey thinking and boy needs some help to be able to get this beautiful girl that he's falling in love with and he ends up hiring a guy that knows how to get the job done. And there are a lot of obstacles, but in the end they end up doing okay and figuring stuff out and through wit, cunning and a little bit of luck.

**JEFFERY MCMILLAN:** Boy meets girl, how does Figaro figure into this?

**LUCAS MEACHEM:** Well, Figaro happens to be the best matchmaker in town, but on top of that, he has many other skills. He's a barber, he's a doctor. He even talks about performing colonoscopies. And so, he's the guy that you'd go to, if you need anything done.

**JEFFERY MCMILLAN:** So, Figaro is handy and, kind of like Macgyver, can figure his way out of sticky situations. From the first moment we meet him in the opera, it's clear to us he can do it all through his spectacular virtuosity.

**LUCAS MEACHEM:** So, the role of Figaro is, it's different than a lot of roles because you start with the most difficult opera aria in the baritone repertoire.

*MUSIC: SFO's 2015 Il Barbiere di Siviglia, "Largo al factotum"*

LUCAS MEACHEM: Yeah. It's a difficult ask, you know. How do I carry out the fast coloratura in the aria and get through all of it, but still be heard. You have to be a master of your breath support to be able to perform Rossini.

JEFFERY MCMILLAN: Rossini illustrates through action and music how outwardly, the clever barber performs according to his station, but in reality is always a step ahead.

*MUSIC INSERT: SFO's 2015 Il Barbiere di Siviglia, "All'idea di quel metallo"*

LUCAS MEACHEM: There's a different way to write for royalty and there's a different way to write for the everyman.

*MUSIC INSERT: SFO's 2015 Il Barbiere di Siviglia, "All'idea di quel metallo"*

JEFFERY MCMILLAN: We love Figaro. He is the everyman who outsmarts the upper class. And how about the first-act duet between Figaro and Rosina? Maybe she is even a step ahead of the barber in this scheme to meet her beloved.

LUCAS MEACHEM: Rosina is probably the only one in the show that's actually smarter than Figaro. And I'll give her that. She's a smart cookie; she just happens to be born into a society that doesn't appreciate smart women. And it really tells because she's put down constantly by the old vanguard. And if you think about *The Barber of Seville*, she really is the center point around which everything spins.

JEFFERY MCMILLAN: Is this a key to the opera's appeal? These clever characters getting what they want, in spite of social inequities? And Rosina? She's not waiting around for any of the men to save her; she is a heroine we can root for.

*MUSIC INSERT: SFO's 2015 Il Barbiere di Siviglia, "Dunque io son"*

JEFFERY MCMILLAN: Whether it is your first or 20th time hearing *The Barber of Seville*, one thing is abundantly clear; Rossini's music requires extraordinary virtuosity from everyone, whether you are on stage or in the pit. The singers,

especially, have to be impeccable multi-taskers. They're going for laughs and playing up the comedy while also spinning out these long coloratura lines, often at a rapid clip. The famous "Zitti zitti piano piano" near the end of the opera is a perfect example. Passions are running a bit hot between the Count and Rosina, while Figaro is trying to keep their voices down so they can all slip out of Bartolo's house undetected.

*MUSIC INSERT: SFO's 2015 Il Barbiere di Siviglia, "Zitti zitti piano piano"*

**LUCAS MEACHEM:** Well, this is the most difficult scene to sing if it's not the perfect tempo. So, with the conductor, we always worked so hard to make sure that tempo's right, because normally we're running around stage. And if it's not perfect, there's nowhere to breathe in this trio. And if it's not a perfect tempo, it's just impossible to do. I'm just taking breaths everywhere and I've just been dying by the end of it.

*MUSIC INSERT: SFO's 2015 Il Barbiere di Siviglia, "Zitti zitti piano piano"*

**JEFFERY MCMILLAN:** It's a classic comedic tale: the wily hero, Figaro, gets the young lovers out of a fix and married -- under the nose of the old folks -- as opera's greatest hits line up, one after the next, in a torrent of Rossinian brilliance. While there may not be a recipe for theatrical immortality, *The Barber of Seville*, as vital and relatable as ever, has all the right ingredients -- and it's sure to dazzle us for years to come. With that look at this enduring masterpiece, I'm Jeff McMillan.

*MUSIC INSERT: SFO's 2015 Il Barbiere di Siviglia, "Zitti zitti piano piano"*

**CHRIS LARGENT:** We'll get to hear Lucas live, very soon, bringing Figaro's wit and virtuosity to San Francisco Opera, in our new production of *The Barber of Seville*. I can't wait to see him breathe life back into this character.

Depending on how you find yourself listening to this podcast, you may or may not know that San Francisco Opera is working toward performing large-scale grand opera again for the first time in nearly a year and a half. But how do we do it safely in the middle of a pandemic? How do we take grand opera, requiring musicians and

technical crew of a hundred or more, and move it outside? To answer that, and many other questions, I turn the mic over to my colleague Jeremy Patfield.

**JEREMY PATFIELD:** San Francisco Opera's home at the War Memorial Opera House has been closed to the public since March 2020. Now we're working toward presenting large-scale grand opera again - it requires a reimagining of what exactly that means - how to make it a reality in a new context for both the Company and our community? Once it became clear that we wouldn't be able to return to indoor performance this spring, we started exploring ways to return to the stage, and we're in California, so we thought: why don't we take the show outside? As one of the first groups in the Bay Area to return to live performance, we've been working closely with doctors from UC San Francisco and the Marin County Department of Public Health to establish health and safety protocols and that's just the beginning. Here's San Francisco Opera General Director, Matthew Shilvock:

**MATTHEW SHILVOCK:** As we think about programming in this transitional period where we still have so many restrictions, one of the biggest challenges is how do you bring back a large audience, and what are the ways in which you can do that safely? And so, as we try to think through that equation, the idea of a drive-in was so important to that because it just eliminates the entire variable factor of the audience - the audience gets to be in their car. They get to be in their own bubbles. They get to be in their own protected environments yet still be in a place where they're watching live entertainment.

**JEREMY PATFIELD:** Live grand opera, performed outdoors, for a drive-in audience. But which opera? Well, going back to 2020 for a minute, we'd planned to produce Beethoven's *Fidelio* to celebrate the 250<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the composer's birth. And we'd built a brand-new set for that production, even though we weren't able to perform it. For this event, though, we wanted something light, a comedy, something we could cut down to 90 minutes without an intermission - that way folks don't have to line up for the bathroom. We chose a familiar, beloved classic that we've turned to again and again throughout our history; Rossini's *The Barber of Seville*. But that *Fidelio* set - it makes a perfect outdoor stage - for reasons that we'll get into later. So,

we decided to call up the original design team from that opera and set them to work on a new concept for *The Barber of Seville*.

**ALEXANDER V. NICHOLS:** My name is Alexander V. Nichols. I'm the scenic and projection designer for *The Barber of Seville*.

**JESSICA JAHN:** My name is Jessica Jahn, I'm the costume designer for *The Barber of Seville*.

**MATTHEW OZAWA:** My name is Matthew Ozawa and I am the stage director for this drive-in performance of *The Barber of Seville*.

**JEREMY PATFIELD:** So, to recap: a brand-new adaptation of an old opera, on a newly built set for a totally different opera, all moved outside. Let me add that the timeline for a new opera production is typically two or three years. This outdoor drive-in performance is being developed in a matter of a few months. I asked our creative team about their reaction when we first discussed the project with them.

**JESSICA JAHN:** I laughed out loud.

**ALEXANDER V. NICHOLS:** When somebody comes up with an idea I'm always game and only later do I freak out and panic about what it is that needs to be done.

**MATTHEW OZAWA:** I have been sort of a project runway director, right. Making it work under extremely unusual circumstances and within strict parameters. And here I was looking at the prospects of a very high-stakes, tight, large-scale endeavor to take the *Fidelio* set and essentially rearrange the production and the designs for a *Barber of Seville*. And our goal through this *Barber of Seville* is to breathe life back into live grand operatic performance and connect with joy, liberation, and love.

**JEREMY PATFIELD:** Matthew Ozawa told me he thinks *Barber* is the perfect title for this moment: it was written during The Enlightenment, a period of renewed optimism and freedom. It's joyous and communal. There are strong themes of empowerment, particularly women's empowerment, and perhaps most importantly, resilience.

**MATTHEW OZAWA:** I think that something I'm really drawn to of course, is the character Figaro who is a factotum, a Jack-of-All-Trades who really serves as a symbol. You know, he displays determination and wit and decency and resourcefulness. And in so many respects, the qualities of Figaro is exactly what was needed for this project, this opera then embracing resiliency and resourcefulness, we are creating a production that ultimately is about optimism.

**JEREMY PATFIELD:** The creative team settled on a narrative framework for this adaptation that fully acknowledges our current reality: preparing for a first performance in the opera house after a long hibernation.

**MATTHEW OZAWA:** So, imagine, you know, props and furniture and costume racks with costumes under sheets, they pull the sheets to uncover furniture and put on the costumes, turn on projections and essentially rehearse *Barber*, and put it on that night in the opera house.

**JEREMY PATFIELD:** Here's set and projection designer, Alex Nichols again.

**ALEXANDER V. NICHOLS:** We're trying to portray a reawakening in the opera house. And a chance for the audience and the cars to watch that awakening happen through imagery that we've shot in the revealing parts of the opera house, that many of them have never seen.

**JEREMY PATFIELD:** One significant challenge is reconfiguring the opera itself for the drive-in setting: carefully cutting and shaping the music and libretto to fit in the allotted time and streamlining the cast and musical forces and doing so in a way that preserves the DNA of the original work. General Director, Matthew Shilvock.

**MATTHEW SHILVOCK:** We also wanted to experiment with new approaches. What does it mean to have a tighter version of the score where we change the storytelling in a slightly different way?



**MATTHEW OZAWA:** The storytelling is, it will be very different, you know, there is no intermission. And in taking out some of the links of the story, and then looking at what music remained and how to kind of distill it down to 90 minutes, it became apparent to me that I needed to rearrange the order of some of the story and music and building blocks of *Barber*. So, I've taken some creative license to rearrange the musical numbers and thread it together in a completely new way. The most substantial music is in. So, we actually didn't end up having to really cut anything that we felt was essential.

**JEREMY PATFIELD:** While Matthew and his team were busy tailoring the score, Alex Nichols & the Production Department were simultaneously at work on the *Fidelio* set to incorporate the new design elements for *Barber*.

**ALEXANDER V. NICHOLS:** In talking about doing this outdoor performance, we needed a way to get performers up in the space. We needed something that was big enough to say, look at the stage and not at our screens on the side.

**JEREMY PATFIELD:** Here's Production Manager, Ryan O'Steen:

**RYAN O'STEEN:** That screen, I think is 375 feet. So, it's like looking from outfield, from centerfield, looking at the batter from center field in a baseball game.

**JEREMY PATFIELD:** Working with Ryan, Scene Shop Foreman John Del Bono is the chief architect of the transformation of the set.

**JOHN DEL BONO:** It's a cube made out of framed trusses. So, when the idea first started getting kicked around about doing an outdoor show, it made perfect sense to be able to use this because being a big, open erector set, looking kind of thing, it has a very low wind profile to begin with.

**RYAN O'STEEN:** And it creates a really nice two-level structure. The upper level is designed to be individual dressing rooms. And then the lower level frames out a rehearsal hall type space, and all of it gets to be opened and closed by these amazing LED panels.

**JEREMY PATFIELD:** And of course, for a new production concept, new costumes. Here's Jessica Jahn again.

**JESSICA JAHN:** Figaro's costume is this beautiful green moleskin. And the idea of course is sort of that he's an everyman, and then these really yummy sort of camel colored vest and breeches and he has boots, which I always love.

**JEREMY PATFIELD:** Unlike Alex, Ryan, and John, who are tasked with reimagining large-scale structures, Jessica has to focus on intricate details and textures, and make them play in an unfamiliar setting.

**JESSICA JAHN:** Ok it has to be sort of sumptuous feeling because the audience is far away, you know, it's like the combination of the audience being farther away than usual, but then also being closer because of the jumbo-trons, you know, and like, what, how did, what does that feel like visually in terms of like looking at people on stage...

**JEREMY PATFIELD:** So far we have an adapted story on an adapted set with adapted costumes. The final, perhaps most significant adaptation we have to consider is the venue itself. For this drive-in production, San Francisco Opera is partnering with the Marin Center in San Rafael, setting up a temporary home for 8 weeks in the county fairgrounds.

**RYAN O'STEEN:** We were going to have to take that raw open space and turn it into a drive-in performance venue. We're essentially building a compound, a backstage compound behind the stage, so it's no small undertaking. It is a small city back there.

**JEREMY PATFIELD:** I feel incredibly fortunate to have a front-row seat, to witness and participate in this process. The care and creativity of the whole team is exhilarating. There are so many layers of complexity to this project, unlike anything we've ever done before, compounded by the fact that mostly we can't even be in the same space--working in an artform that's so inherently space-driven, so sensory and tactile. And ultimately, I think that's why everyone involved feels like we need to do

this. To know that we ourselves are capable of adapting, as individuals and as a company. That we can lean on our resilience, and that we can re-emerge from this hibernation with a new story to tell.

**JOHN DEL BONO:** And I'm sure everyone is really going to be loving the opportunity to share an experience together, even in a parking lot.

**CHRIS LARGENT:** Couldn't have said it better myself. While producing *Barber* demands flexibility, imagination, and determination, it's not the first time San Francisco Opera has risen to the occasion...incredibly, the War Memorial Opera House was built during the height of the Great Depression...

**1932 TOUR OF THE WAR MEMORIAL OPERA HOUSE:** Citizenry of San Francisco join me in a greeting and a welcome and I extend you a cordial invitation to join us in the glory of the opera. A dream long denied, fulfilled and the Opera House at which the most enthusiastic opera lover could feel a just & glowing pride. Tonight San Francisco celebrates the completion of the War Memorial Opera House. As I'm speaking, the crowd is still arriving and what a colorful sight it is! Limousines, taxis and privately-owned cars continue to roll into the memorial court

**RACHEL GAROON:** That was an NBC radio correspondent on the opening night of the War Memorial Opera House. And what I wouldn't give to have been a fly on the wall for the historic grand opening of our beloved War Memorial on October 15, 1932...

Just imagining the glamour and anticipation - people decked out in their gowns and tuxedos, entering the foyer with its dazzling white marble floor for the first time, the bustle backstage before the curtain rose on the very first performance. How we miss this place. And while this incredible building has been closed since March of 2020, due to the pandemic -- and it feels like forever to many of us, it's a good time to reflect on the past -- and to consider that it took twenty-two years to realize the dream of San Francisco's Civic Center as a cultural hub, with the War Memorial Opera House as its jewel. Amazingly, this glorious building came into being at the height of the Great Depression.

In 1911, community energy coalesced around an idea of creating a cultural center that would include an Opera House. Seven years later, veterans of World War I proposed building a Veterans Hall and a War Memorial. And in 1920, plans for the new Opera House and Veterans Memorial were combined into a single project, the War Memorial Complex. This marriage of the two buildings was a savvy way to increase the fundraising pool – a true Kickstarter long before Silicon Valley was a twinkle in David Packard’s eye – it had the benefit of making veterans invested in the success of a new opera house for the city.

Fast forward to the boom days of 1927: There was such a desire from the community to get the opera house built, a city bond was approved by voters -- to the tune of 4 million dollars! But then came the crash of 1929. Thousands of San Franciscans were reduced to lining up at food kitchens, living rough on the street. You might have imagined that this economic bust would have derailed plans for the building of a new opera house, but no. Incredibly, the city government doubled down, it recognized the value of the community being nurtured by art, especially in the midst of such hard times. And so, in January 1931, construction began on the Opera House and the Veterans Building. Over the next 18 months, the city watched the opera house take form before its very eyes. And on October 15, our home was ready for its big debut!

[COOPER SMITH, READING FROM THE ARGONAUT](#): It was San Francisco’s night, the greatest artistic night she has ever known, and her children paid her the homage of a love that has survived every trial that such physical misfortunes as fire, earthquake and famine can impose. Neither the play nor the players were the thing at the gala opening of the new War Memorial Opera House; it was the audience, the building itself, and most of all, the spirit of San Francisco, the best beloved city on the continent.

[RACHEL GAROON](#): That was a quote from Homer Henley, reporting for *The Argonaut* in 1932

We still feel a buzz of excitement when we start a new season. It’s not just the singers, chorus and orchestra, crew and all the people backstage supporting the performance,

it's the sense of connection to the audience -- and their attention and energy that help bring performances to life.

**1932 TOUR OF THE WAR MEMORIAL OPERA HOUSE:** Perhaps you will pardon me if I suggest that you accompany me hurriedly in the forbidden land backstage. The stage itself is 83 feet deep and 131 feet wide, and 140 feet high. And now the lights at the Opera House have gone down. And we're ready for the first act of Puccini's opera *Tosca*.

*MUSIC INSERT: SFO's 2017 Tosca, Overture*

**RACHEL GAROON:** That grand opening night in 1932 was the first of many auspicious occasions when our company would present -- as one early detractor called it -- Puccini's "shabby little shocker"! But the biggest attraction of that opening season, and one that would pay dividends for decades to come, was the SF debut, on October 17<sup>th</sup>, of a petite French soprano. She would win the Nation's heart and become one of the greatest operatic celebrities of the century - enter Lily Pons.

*MUSIC INSERT: RFA Recording 1930s, Lucia di Lammermoor, Mad Scene - Lily Pons*

**RACHEL GAROON:** Standing about 5 feet tall, a stunning beauty, customarily dressed in très chic Parisian fashions, and a veritable magnet for publicity, Lily also happened to be a singer of magnificent technique, gifted with a captivating onstage charisma, and she could sing long, complicated coloratura lines at whatever speed, gracefully delivering a few thrilling and perfectly placed high C's along the way. There was no "will she make it" suspense when she sang; she always made it, with style and, above all, charm.

In the inaugural season at the new opera house, Pons was scheduled to sing one performance of *Rigoletto* and one of *Lucia di Lammermoor*, but her performances were of such overwhelming interest that a second performance of *Lucia* had to be added. When this extra show immediately sold out, Mayor Angelo Rossi was called upon to help share the performance even more broadly.

Large speakers were wheeled into Civic Center Plaza and Auditorium. Picture cables extending all the way from the new Opera House. Word quickly circulated that people who couldn't manage to get tickets could listen for free to a broadcast live from the stage -- this would be San Francisco Opera's very first simulcast.

**CHRIS DAVIS, READING FROM THE NEW YORK TIMES:** Almost 20,000 persons heard Lily Pons sing *Lucia di Lammermoor* here today. It was the city's tribute to a singer unequaled here, observers said, since the days of Tetrizzini. The new War Memorial Opera House, which has 3,285 seats, was filled to capacity, with hundreds standing. The Exposition Auditorium, a block away, likewise held a capacity audience of 15,000 and an overflow crowd stood in the public square opposite the City Hall.

**RACHEL GAROON:** That was a quote from the New York Times.

After Pons took her bows onstage, the Mayor escorted her to the Civic Auditorium -- there, 15,000 fans were waiting patiently for Pons to make her entrance. Having sat in the auditorium listening to her through the speaker system, they at long last were able to glimpse their songbird-- and they went nuts! Pons as the doomed *Lucia* would become a San Francisco Opera tradition. Of her 16 seasons with the Company, she sang *Lucia* in 12 of them!

Opening night in 1932 found SF Opera celebrating its 10<sup>th</sup> season in the midst of the Great Depression. When many other opera houses around the country were dark, SF Opera was a beacon of light. In the most trying of times the arts create a space for us to celebrate a shared experience providing a sense of community, of wellbeing, and of resilience in hard times.

We will be celebrating our 100<sup>th</sup> season in 2022. Planning a centennial celebration during a pandemic is definitely a challenge but in the best of ways it has allowed a space for the Company to think more deeply about what it means to be San Francisco's opera company and how we can bring together this opera-loving city safely and in the most meaningful of ways. Resilience in hard times ... we'll start there.

*MUSIC INSERT: RFA Recording 1930s, Lucia di Lammermoor, Mad Scene - Lily Pons*

**CHRIS LARGENT:** Thanks to segment producer Barbara Rominski and Rachel Garoon, for that illuminating peek into our past. While the War Memorial was built in the 30's, another icon was born - who's popularity, just like our opera house, would last throughout the years. I'm talking about Bugs Bunny, the Looney Toon chief troublemaker created by animator Chuck Jones. Jones' cartoon "What's Opera Doc" is as hilarious now as it was when it aired in 1957. Our segment producer, Troy Smith, and Michael Bragg were lucky enough to sit down with two of Bugs' and Elmer's biggest fans. Here's Michael, with more on this story...neeeaaaah, What's up Michael?

*MUSIC INSERT: SFO's 2015 Il Barbiere di Siviglia, Overture*

**MICHAEL BRAGG:** OK, be honest. What images came to mind when you heard that music? Opera purists may shrug their shoulders, but for many, Rossini's score conjures images of Bugs Bunny, of course, The Beatles, Fellini and Pixar's "The Adventures of Andre and Wally B." -- instead of Figaro, Rosina and the Count. And it doesn't stop there. Looney Tunes' iconic rendition of Wagner's Ring, in "What's Opera, Doc?" is viewed as one of the most influential pieces of animation in history. But why is opera a marriage made in creative heaven? Why do these two artforms seem to complement each other so well?

We've invited two influential voices to weigh in on this topic: Craig Kausen, Director of the Chuck Jones Center of Creativity - and the grandson of that legendary Looney Tunes director, and Pixar's Chief Creative Officer Pete Docter, an Academy Award winning director. So, let's dive into "Why Opera, Doc?" Opera and Animation - the great collaboration.

*MUSIC INSERT: SFO's 2015 Il Barbiere di Siviglia, Overture*

**PETE DOCTER:** I think music is, it's like a direct line to communication, even more direct than language.

MICHAEL BRAGG: That's Pete Docter.

PETE DOCTER: And I think it's the first language we learn, or maybe we're born with it. I don't know. I mean, even when my kids were babies and did not speak and couldn't understand what we were saying, music had an effect on them. It's like it reaches into your spinal cord or something.

And so, the connection between animation and music ever since there's been sound, I mean that before they did dialogue, they did music. That's how important it was. The first four short films that Pixar has done are all just silent, you know, with musical accompaniment. And I think it also plays to the strength of animation. So, you have a visual medium where movement and expression and gesture is really the coin of the realm that you're dealing with. As an animator, it's not fun to animate slow stuff because every second there are 24 drawings. And so, if something's moving slowly I have to do all these drawings that are kind of all the same. So, I would much, rather as an animator have characters moving around and active, that's a lot more fun.

*MUSIC INSERT: SFO's 2015 Il Barbiere di Siviglia, Overture*

MICHAEL BRAGG: To drive the action in *The Rabbit of Seville*, director Chuck Jones used Rossini's music in brilliant fashion. Bugs Bunny and Elmer Fudd take hilarious liberties with the story. Here's Craig Kausen.

CRAIG KAUSEN: When they would, come up with a gag, in the case of *Barber of Seville*, with *The Rabbit of Seville* the idea that all of a sudden within this storyline, you put Bugs and Elmer, and then the gags just start to go. And it happens to be my favorite cartoon of all time. So, it's always a good challenge.

PETE DOCTER: Wouldn't it also be accurate to say that it was a bit of selecting opera as a straight man to act opposite that you, you know, this is at least the perception is that opera is refined and cultured, and then you send these crazy characters in here to play off of it. Opera's like the Margaret Dumont to the Marx Brothers, you know?

*MUSIC INSERT: SFO's 2015 Il Barbiere di Siviglia, Overture*



**CRAIG KAUSEN:** That's the thing that I love about that the sequences you're talking about, cause it's just like, dun dun, dun dun, dun, dun, dun dun, you know, whether it's the fingers or, the ears coming in on Elmer's head or the feet, it all works so well without needing that dialogue. There's such a discipline with it and they did it right. I mean, they animated the fingers, even though Bugs only has four fingers, you know, they animated it. Right. So that it was on it. Wasn't just playing as, you know, fingers flying. It had to hit the notes just right so you get that timing. So really Elmer in the chair, being worked on by Bugs, that scene is one that every single time I see it, I will laugh out loud. So, Rossini and *The Barber of Seville*, I would pick over anything else just because of those memories. And I've never seen it in person, if it's ever done, you know, it's on the bucket list to go see it for real. And I will imagine Bugs Bunny up there on stage.

**MICHAEL BRAGG:** For Pete Docter, the influence of Chuck Jones was profound.

**PETE DOCTER:** Yeah, I mean, I grew up in the pre-streaming days when we didn't even have VHS. They were desperate for material for television so they're like, hey, we got all these shorts in the archives let's put them on and Saturday mornings. And so, I would rush down, I'd be there at like 5:30 that didn't start till seven, but I didn't want to miss anything. That's the power of cartoons.

*MUSIC INSERT: SFO's 2015 Il Barbiere di Siviglia, Overture*

Chuck for me was the, the gold standard because he had the wackiness of the Warner Brothers, but he had this solidity and form of Disney in a way to the characters, a believability of fleshiness, you know, you see characters like mush against each other. That doesn't happen in a lot of the other films.

*MUSIC INSERT: SFO's 2015 Il Barbiere di Siviglia, Overture*

I was exposed to so much culture, thanks to Chuck Jones and the Muppets. I grew up in a very classically oriented family. So, there was a lot of music going on in the world around me, but those were what made it accessible, those were it, what made it fun to

watch for me as a kid, you're like, I just like cartoons, that's all I really want. And then this was like, okay, let's reach out and connect with some of these other artforms and more serious conversations that could be had. And I feel like in a sense I'm continuing that by embracing psychology or, you know, some of these themes that we've been dealing with in *Soul*, you know, that probably come from the short films and work like this.

*MUSIC INSERT: SFO's 2015 Il Barbiere di Siviglia, Overture*

**MICHAEL BRAGG:** So, whether you're watching *The Barber* or *The Rabbit of Seville*, it's easy to get why Rossini's music -- in any medium -- enchants us!

**CHRIS LARGENT:** Speaking of enchanting, our next guest is one of the most beloved performers at San Francisco Opera -- she's performed more than 30 leading lady roles on our stage! She may be an international superstar, but to us, she's family. My colleague Rachel Garoon had a chance to chat with the one and only: Patricia Racette!

*MUSIC INSERT: SFO's 2012 Tosca, "Tosca e un buon falco!"*

**PATRICIA RACETTE:** My relationship with San Francisco Opera is a long one, is a deep one. I call it my artistic home for a very good reason because I, at the young age of 21, turning 22, came to the Merola Opera program. And did I don't remember the last count 30 plus leading lady roles over the past three decades. So, I grew up there and enjoyed many aspects of, in roles in my career on the San Francisco Opera stage in front of that beloved audience and that phenomenal orchestra and that fantastic chorus.

**RACHEL GAROON:** So, then what was your first opera experience ever?

**PATRICIA RACETTE:** This is a little embarrassing. Okay. So, I went to school, it was then called North Texas State University. It's now called University of North Texas and very well known for its jazz program. I went there to study jazz for a number of reasons. I missed my audition. And so, I was forced to study classical music, and that's how I got into opera. It wasn't my intention. And so, I was not sold on opera for some time, way late. And I think my sophomore year, but my first opera that my teacher made me go to was Pearl Fishers. I think it was Fort Worth Opera. And so, I'm ignorant about the operatic art form. I'm not enthusiastic about it. And you're going to

have me sit through Pearl Fishers? That didn't happen. I've set, lasted the first act. And then I went out for TexMex.

RACHEL GAROON: Are you serious?

PATRICIA RACETTE: Yes, isn't that terrible? Now, to recoup some respectability. I did absolutely nosedive, fell in love with opera when I was, I think it was late sophomore year in college. And my teacher thought she has this natural ability for this, but she doesn't like it, how am I going to get her hooked? Opened the score, she gave me the Senza Mamma from *Suor Angelica*. And so, I thought I'd listened to the whole thing. And it was on a cassette tape just to date me a bit here, but I'm listening to it. And it was like the sky opened. It was a Thunderbolt. It was, Oh my goodness. I have got to do this.

RACHEL GAROON: Do you have a character then? That's just like your favorite both that you've played and that you've maybe seen or played against that just, I mean is right at your heart, is your favorite character.

PATRICIA RACETTE: Yeah. I mean, I love playing the role of Tosca, Floria Tosca.

*MUSIC INSERT: SFO's 2012 Tosca, "Vissi d'Arte"*

You have to understand this is one of the characters that finally breaks out of any sort of victimization and takes matters into her own hands. And to do that for the first time was just liberating on so many fronts, so many fronts and, you know, doing a role like Salome where she's just so naughty after being so good for so many years on stage. It's just, it sort of expands your artistic repertoire, your interpretive repertoire. And I very much enjoy experiencing those. But I mean, the passionate relationship between Tosca and Cavaradossi I think is just amazing and well-informed, well fleshed out in my opinion, which you don't always get in operatic relationships. You know it's sometimes, in my view, the female is a little bit simplified in a way that I think is unrealistic, unfair, and not total not complete. You know what I mean?

RACHEL GAROON: So, would you say then, do you identify with Tosca maybe the most?

PATRICIA RACETTE: I pride myself in just immersing myself in whatever character I'm playing. I mean, I'm not a 15-year-old Japanese young woman, but I've found moments in her story that are, there's just so pure, they're passionate, they're noble,

they're honorable, they're ferocious. You can find these things in yourself and, infuse that into whatever character, but in terms of who would I rather go have a cocktail with might be Floria.

**RACHEL GAROON:** What, if anything, is the most bizarre thing that's happened to you on stage?

**PATRICIA RACETTE:** I was doing *Don Carlo* at the Met and it was that amazing opulent production and part of, my, the first act costume was this huge necklace of these large pearls. Well, Johann Bota, may he rest in peace, was singing Don Carlo. And he was down on the ground and the costumes had all the detail that they would back in the time. So, he had these big buttons and I'm sitting there and very close to him and my necklace gets caught. I wasn't aware - when you're in that many layers and a corset you can't tell what's touching you. I stood up the necklace broke. And for the remainder of the scene, you could see and hear these pearls, just rolling down the raked stage, some of it into the prompter's box, some of it into the orchestra. It was actually very difficult not to react and laugh my head off at that. And also, it was a little bit dangerous in walking 'cause some of them stayed on stage.

**RACHEL GAROON:** I was going to say how do they get them off?

**PATRICIA RACETTE:** They were like marble size, you know? So, they were so, so they were, you know, I always say this though, live performance cooking on high heat.

*MUSIC INSERT: SFO's 2012 Tosca, "Vissi d'Arte"*

It is. Cause it's, there's no redoing it. The music moves in one direction and you've, you've gotta be on that ride or forget it. That's what I love about it. That's what the thrill is.

**CHRIS LARGENT:** Many thanks to Patricia Racette! And with that, we come to the end of our debut episode of North Stage Door! We're delighted that you joined us and we hope that we've enticed you to come to the drive-in -- to experience, or revisit -- what makes *The Barber of Seville* such a timeless and vibrant comedy.

*MUSIC INSERT: SFO's 2015 Il Barbiere di Siviglia, Finale*

None of this would be possible without the contributions of medical experts, and everyone at San Francisco Opera -- from our crew to our musicians and performers!

And despite recessions, earthquakes, wildfires and pandemics, we'll continue to bring live opera back to the Bay Area - be it onstage, or in a parking lot.

North Stage Door is a production of San Francisco Opera.

Our team includes Michael Bragg, Chris Davis, Jodi Gage, Jeffery McMillan, Jeremy Patfield, Barbara Rominski, Troy Smith, Celine Strouts, and Kali Wilson.

Our sound designer and audio engineer is Tod Nixon.

Our show was developed with help from Marisa Brink and Trey Costerisan.

Rachel Garoon is our coordinating producer.

Our Consulting Producer is Elena Park, and our Executive Producers are Molly McBride and Jen Good.

San Francisco Opera's Music Director is Eun Sun Kim and our General Director is Matthew Shilvock.

North Stage Door is supported by the Creative Edge Fund, founded by Carol and Dixon Doll, and by an OPERA America Innovation Grant, supported by the Ann and Gordon Getty Foundation.

We want to thank all of our labor organizations whose members, artists, and craftspeople bring our operas to life.

Special thanks to our guests, Patricia Racette, Lucas Meachem, Pete Docter, Craig Kausen, and everyone working on *The Barber of Seville* Drive-in production!

Tune in for the second installment, where we'll focus on San Francisco Opera's Da Ponte Trilogy.

I'm your host, Chris Largent - I look forward to meeting you next time at the North Stage Door!