

HOST INTRODUCTION - Chris Largent

Welcome to North Stage Door. I'm Chris Largent. In this episode we are going to hear stories of how opera enchants, has spurred on planes, trains and even dog sleds! AND has created niche skill-sets.

MUSICAL INSERT: SFO 2015 Die Meistersinger, Overture

We'll start by puzzling together the consequences of sound traveling in an opera house. Consider the fact that audience members, in the first few rows, are always closer to the Maestro and musicians in the pit, than an opera singer ever will be onstage. And, believe it or not, what someone hears on stage, versus in the pit, versus in the audience, are three completely different experiences.

So, how are these different sonic realities harnessed into a glorious performance? To answer that question, let's hear from a member of the San Francisco Opera team occupying a somewhat hidden position down-stage.

MUSICAL INSERT: SFO 2009 La Fille du Regiment

PROMPTERS - Robert Mollicone

BOB MOLLICONE: My name is Robert Mollicone, but everyone calls me Bob and I'm a member of the music staff at San Francisco opera. As the prompter, I reside on stage, in this little box, which looks like a ventilation duct.

The prompters box is accessed by way of the orchestra pit. You climb this ladder and then you kind of swing yourself 180 degrees as you land in this little seat. It's like the backseat of a Buick or something that they carved out. I'm not exactly sure, but it's really comfy. And they've put it on a hydraulic lift. So then I click this little button and it kind of, uh, levitates me up. And then I am peering out of a small rectangular aperture covered by a wooden hood, um, where I can see, uh, most of what's going on onstage.

I get the best views, and I feel like all the blood, sweat and tears is happening so immediate to my position.

MUSICAL INSERT: SFO 2017 Manon, ballet in Act III

So you're facing the stage and on either side of my field division, there are two small close circuit cameras, which give me maestro-vision as we call it. So I can see the conductor, what gestures they're giving to the orchestra and to the stage. And then also I have a small audio monitor. And then it's a combination of what I hear. And then what I'm seeing, I kind of triangulate what's going on musically.

The job of the prompter is to help singers remember their lines if they forget them, which is actually a fairly rare occurrence. I tell people, you know, singers even who are working with the prompter for the first time that my job is to close the distance between the conductor's podium and the lip of the stage, because actually that's a pretty big ocean of orchestra pit and space in between the proscenium arch and where the conductor is. So I just try to help knit everything together, musically for the stage and the pit.

MUSICAL INSERT: SFO 2009 Die Entführung aus dem Serail, Overture

Typically an opera rehearsal period will be three-ish weeks in a rehearsal room. Those are rehearsals which are accompanied by a pianist playing an orchestral reduction.

MUSICAL INSERT: Special Effect, SFO 2004 Onegin, Letter Aria

But there's a certain immediacy to rehearsing with piano. The hammer striking the strings. The sound comes immediately versus a full symphony orchestra in an orchestra pit that has sort of a more delayed attack of sound. so that's one big adjustment. And the second being that, the matter of what one hears on stage, even though the orchestra often is playing, with full force passionately, great sound.

Acoustically, what you hear on stage is a highly reduced version of that because the sound is traveling towards the listeners in the audience. So singers can often feel like they're having part of their knowledge of the music cut away from them, compound that with once you start singing at the volume and opera singer needs to sing at, it's really hard to hear anything but yourself, I hate to say it. So it can feel really kind of like, oh, all these things I was accustomed to working with are being snatched out from under me. So my job as the prompter is in many ways to like, restore that, to put the floor back underneath them in a certain sense when it can feel like, um, all these familiar sounds that I was singing with all of a sudden have disappeared.

MUSICAL INSERT: SFO 2015 Barber of Seville, Largo al factotum

Often we have people that have done the parts many times before, prior to coming here. So when Lucas Meacham's comes on stage, and I'm not going to prompt him with Largo al factotum. We know that he knows that that aria is named Largo al factotum. So just trying to find ways of like, oh, I see that you tend to be rushing here. I'm going to give you just a little reminder, but don't worry about it.

Or some people saying, oh, it's a roll debut. I need all your help all the time. I'm making tons of eye contact. I'm making sure that even if we repeat something for the ninth or 10th time, I'm still going to give them the same prompt. So they feel like they can concentrate on what they need to do in the rehearsal. And people will want and need certain amounts of support in rehearsals. And then we get on stage and it could stay consistent or it could completely flip on its head. But for me, what's important is whatever they do need, they feel comfortable coming to me saying, oh, actually I'm having a hard time remembering X, Y, Z, or now there's this light in my face. Can you please give me a cue here that I've never needed before? My whole point in being there is to help them give their best performance.

MUSICAL INSERT: SFO 2018 Götterdämmerung, Prelude

As far as my relationship with the conductor for production, I'm trying to always be aware of what, what they are wanting musically and what I can improve by either by helping someone with tempo, helping someone remember to begin a phrase sooner. Most conductors are just pretty forthcoming saying, you know, I'm worried about the chorus being 40 feet upstage. Can you keep an eye on them, even though they're not the main event of this particular musical piece?

MUSICAL INSERT: SFO 2008 La Boheme, ACT III QUARTET

For example, there's this beautiful quartet, which ends the third act of La Boheme. And in this scene, both of the main couples are mid breakup Rudolfo and Mimi are having this like tearful, legato, beautiful, long lines, "oh, I'm going to miss you, but this is for the best." And meanwhile, Marcello and Musetta are having a full on cat fight. And somehow Puccini in his genius manages to have one tempo and one musical shape in the orchestra that all these various, breakup conversations are happening on top of. So it's really easy for that to kind of get jumbled. So that's the scene where I'm doing a lot of management of the stage so that we can have the big shape underneath stay nice and calm and do its thing, but particularly for, uh, Musetta and Marcello 'cause they have a lot more text, that's a place where I really could do a lot of good help.

MUSICAL INSERT: SFO 2009 Die Entführung aus dem Serail

There are not prompt boxes in every theater in North America. I think anyone who has aspirations to be on the music staff of an opera company, it is useful to be able to prompt, even if it's only for rehearsal purposes. I think it's a really great skill to have, and I try to teach any Adler fellows that come through the opera or anyone who I work with in my travels outside of this theater, um, a little bit about how to learn how to prompt

First, always breathe with the stage. Second, if you're not 100% sure of where to give the prompt, don't give it. The third tip is don't try to fix something that's already broken, which is to say if there's some sort of rhythmic or disaster of ensemble going on, you shouting at the singers trying to fix the thing that is currently not going well is only going to add to the chaos. You're only putting gasoline on the fire. So instead you have to remain an island of calm, think fast, think what is the next musical place where we can reset this and be absolutely poised to give a very clear prompt that gets everyone reorganized. And we all just get on with our lives.

MUSICAL INSERT: SFO 2017 Manon, Act II Orchestral entr'acte

That's kind of the big one actually, now that I've said it out loud. And you know, it's funny, I've had this experience so many times of thinking to myself, "oh my God, I can't believe XYZ happened. What a disaster." I'll speak to audience members after the show and they won't even know what I've been talking about because for us on stage, it feels like such a crisis. But if you solve it quickly, then, so often people are none the wiser and they just get to enjoy their musical experience.

HOST - Chris Largent

CHRIS LARGENT: Bob, thanks for keeping it all together for us. While the sound of music from pit to stage, travels by way of essential prompters like Bob Mollicone. How has the sound of opera traveled beyond the boundaries of the opera house? Before the advent of recordings, you could whistle a tune to share it with a friend... but what about the holistic experience of opera? How was that to be shared?

MUSICAL INSERT: SFO 2009 Il Trovatore, Overture

Well, my colleague Jeff McMillan tells us about a tradition that brought opera from north to south and west to east...

OPERA ON THE ROAD - Jeff McMillan, Dolora Zajick

JEFF MCMILLAN: Opera in America did not spring, fully-formed from Zeus’s head like the goddess Athena; nor did it sprout organically in the soil like a hearty head of fresh kale. Like many enriching aspects of our cultural landscape, opera is an import—a transplant—and it has flourished here for centuries thanks to the industry of many creatives and an institution that is as old as theater itself: the city-to-city tour.

MUSICAL INSERT: SFO 2009 Il Trovatore, Top of Act II, Anvil Chorus

Long before the birth of San Francisco Opera, the glorious City by the Bay was a favorite stop for touring opera companies. In fact, as far back as the 1850s and the Gold Rush, Italian opera troupes were regularly serving up the lyric art to the miners who needed diversions while hoping to strike it rich.

SFX INSERT: Saloon Montage, Horse trot & Dogs; wheels/metal (mining), Chisel sharpening, Hammer on stone

Thanks to touring songbirds, San Franciscans were remarkably up to date on the latest and greatest in new music. In 1851, Giuseppe Verdi’s still-new opera, *Ernani*, was a local favorite. Its principal aria, “Ernani, involami,” could be heard wafting out of every saloon -- speculators were whistling it out in the gold fields.

MUSICAL INSERT: SFO 1968 Ernani, Aria: “Surta e la notte...Ernani! Ernani involami”

Among the early opera boosters in San Francisco was Gaetano Merola, a Neapolitan violinist who immigrated to the U.S. in 1899 and worked as a vocal coach, recital accompanist, chorus master, and finally as an itinerant conductor. After twenty years of presenting opera in new cities every week, Merola’s repeat visits to San Francisco inspired a desire to settle down out west.

Following the devastating 1906 earthquake, it was an open secret that San Francisco wanted to build a new city-owned opera house. Plus Merola was convinced that the city needed and would support its own resident opera company AND he was just the guy to lead it. In 1923, the wily conductor founded San Francisco Opera and here we are almost 100 years later.

To ensure his company’s success, Merola was guided by two bedrock principles: 1) great opera needs great voices and so he hired several of the top singers in the business, and 2) he would need to tour if he was to offer those artists enough incentive to justify the long journey to California.

SFX INSERT: train whistle, then chugging

Throughout his 30 years at the helm, Merola's San Francisco Opera tours extended northward to Portland and Seattle and south reaching Pasadena and San Diego. But the primary tour stop was always Los Angeles, or, more precisely, Hollywood. During the 1930s, the film-making capital was in the midst of a Golden Age and could offer opening night glamour and sparkle unlike anywhere else in the world.

In 1938, San Francisco Opera featured the return, after a seven-year hiatus from the American stage, of Beniamino Gigli, the world's greatest living Italian tenor. Gigli opened the season in his favorite role, Giordano's *Andrea Chénier*, which he repeated a month later on the road in Los Angeles.

Act I of the performance was broadcast live over the radio on the west coast and astonishingly a recording was captured and preserved. There are a handful of A-list, absolutely essential, must-hear opera bootlegs, and *this* is one of them. The tenor's building intensity and ringing voice at the end bring the house down!

MUSICAL INSERT: SFO 1938 Andrea Chenier, Act I, Chenier's aria "Un di all'azzurra spazio"

After a month of shows in San Francisco, Merola along with Gigli and the Company's 212-essential personnel packed up 7 opera productions and made the 500-mile trip to LA.

INSERT SFX: Create a sound montage of trains and trucks

CHRIS DAVIS: The crowd in front of the auditorium was in a gay mood. Autograph hunters worked quietly—impressed undoubtedly by the gorgeous gowns and furs. The cream of Los Angeles society stormed the doors of the huge building but the autograph fans made no move toward them. It was the movie stars they were waiting for. The film celebrities did not disappoint them. Joan Crawford, Norma Shearer, Jeanette MacDonald, Nelson Eddy, Bing Crosby, Edna May Oliver, Basil Rathbone and wife, Mr. and Mrs. Edward G. Robinson, Ginger Rodgers...

JEFF MCMILLAN: Among the other celebrities walking the red carpet were composer Sigmund Romberg, soprano Lily Pons (who was also a movie star in her own right) and emerging entertainment mogul, Walt Disney.

Touring with the leading opera stars proved to be a bankable model for decades, helping to nurture interest in opera regionally and precipitating the founding of resident companies in many West Coast cities.

By the 1960s and with the advent of jet travel, the post-season tour became a harder sell for the established singers who could easily hop on a plane and get to another high-paying engagement vs playing the grinding succession of regional theaters. Despite showcasing Leontyne Price, Cesare Siepi, Dorothy Kirsten, Jon Vickers, Regine Crespin—some of opera's greatest stars—the 1969 LA tour would be San Francisco Opera's last.

INSERT SFX: Train brake/squeal

But that wasn't the end of touring all together. Change was in the air and things were about to get interesting.

MUSICAL INSERT: SFO 2009 Il Trovatore, ACT 1 SCENE 3

The National Endowment for the Arts was established by Congress in 1965; its first director, Roger Stevens, was visiting San Francisco in June of 1966 and SF Opera's second general director, Kurt Herbert Adler, a charming and persuasive man, had a few ideas kicking around. One of which was Western Opera Theater or WOT for short.

Adler's vision for WOT was threefold: to take *professional* opera to people who ordinarily wouldn't see it; to introduce students of all ages to opera; and to provide a vehicle for young artists to gain experience without having to go all the way to Europe.

Well, mission accomplished. In 1966, WOT received one of the NEA's first grants for \$105,000. Rehearsals began in December; the first tour began in January of 1967 with performances all around the state.

MUSICAL INSERT: SFO 2017 La Traviata, ACT I, Brindisi

For the first two decades, educational outreach was central to WOT's mission – performances were sung in English and staged not only in the Bay Area but all the Western States from Idaho to New Mexico, with performances on Native American reservations in Arizona and on oil rigs in Alaska - arrived at by dogsled!

INSERT SFX: Dog sleds and dogs barking

In 1982, under SFO's third general director Terrence McEwen, the vision for WOT shifted from being largely educational outreach to developing singers for the main stage. Another significant change was increasing the reach of WOT to include the East Coast.

One of the leading mezzo-sopranos of our time, Dolora Zajick, came up through the Company's young artist training programs - the Merola Program in 1983 - and then as an Adler Fellow from 1984 to 1985. In between she was on the road touring with WOT.

DOLORA ZAJICK: I remember doing 44 performances of Madame Butterfly. I was doing Suzuki.

MUSICAL INSERT: SFO 2016 Madama Butterfly, Act I introduction

What we did was when we weren't singing a part, we sang relatives because we didn't have a chorus. It was extraordinary because I hadn't had a lot of stage experience. And by the time I was finished, there was so much more polish and professionalism, just from doing it over and over under many different circumstances.

We were basically on the continental US. We were in Montana and Idaho and California, New York, Texas, Kentucky, Kansas, the great lakes area. So we really got around. And sometimes the acoustics were just horrible and sometimes we were in very nice theaters.

JEFF MCMILLAN: By 1991, 49 cities in 23 states were on the tour calendar! In fact, tours had expanded beyond the US to include China, Japan, Guam, Saipan, and Pohnpei. The 1987 tour to Shanghai and Beijing was the first time a western opera company traveled to the People's Republic of China.

MUSICAL INSERT: SFO 2008 Bohème, ACT III Downbeat

Puccini's *La Bohème* was presented to audiences, most of whom had never witnessed Western-style opera before.

All in all, WOT tours reached more than two million people. By 2002, WOT had been operating at a significant annual loss. With the proliferation of regional opera companies, it was dissolved in 2003. And yet ... its influence lives on in an unintended way ...

In 2006, Dolora Zajick founded the Institute for Young Dramatic Voices; a Nevada based training program for “large or unusual voices.” In reflecting on her time as a young artist touring with WOT she relates ...

DOLORA ZAJICK: It was a very innovative system and very cleverly designed. There was a three tiered process that made it a superior program in terms of sifting. And by the time you became an Adler fellow, it was pretty evident who was going to have a career and who wasn't, you proved your mettle.

MUSICAL INSERT: SFO 2016 Madama Butterfly, Act II Intermezzo

I learned a lot watching how it functioned. I was thinking, well, what are the strengths that San Francisco had and how can I incorporate them? I got probably half of my ideas from how it was done back then and transferred it to our program, which is turning out to be very successful.

JEFF MCMILLAN: Ensuring that the legacy of nearly seven decades of touring by plane, train, bus, truck and dogsled can't be denied. For North Stage Door, I'm Jeff McMillan

MUSICAL INSERT: SFO 2003 Trovatore, Stride la vampa

HOST - Chris Largent

Dolora Zajick... thrilling voice - it's what first comes to mind when I think of opera. The unique sound produced by a great singer. But, many roles performed on stage are silent. From soldiers and prisoners in Aida to the Nürnberg towns-folk in Die Meistersinger, opera directors have populated stages with characters that never sing or say a word — but are essential to filling out the story. Here's my colleague, Katherine Baltrush with more on opera's silent players.

MUSICAL INSERT: SFO 2016 AIDA, Act II Triumphal March

SUPERS - Katherine Baltrush, Trey Costerisan, Helen Lew, Karsten Guthridge

KATHERINE BALTRUSH: The dictionary defines the word 'supernumerary' as a person or thing in excess of the normal or requisite number. But to us in opera, the performers known as supernumeraries are entirely necessary. Supernumeraries, or Supers as we call them for short, are kind of like extras in a movie. While they don't sing or dance, or play an instrument, their presence helps make the setting and characters seem all the more real. Sometimes, they help fill in the crowd of a grand procession. At other times, they are singular servants, guards, or passersby on the street of the set.

Supers are volunteer performers. They spend hours in rehearsals, getting into costumes, waiting in the wings. This might sound thankless, but each time we announce auditions for our Super roles, the courtyard outside the opera house starts to feel like a scene from a Chorus Line.

Our Rehearsal and Facilities Manager, Trey Costerisan, joined us to tell us more. Trey has been with the Opera since 2014 and when he started, casting and supporting our Supers was his full time gig.

TREY COSTERISAN: We begin the process by holding casting calls and auditions. In the past we've had as many as 300 people show up. We, um, try to cast as wide a net as we can.

KATHERINE BALTRUSH: We cast a wide net because, often, an individual Supernumerary has to tick so many different boxes. They have to fit the director's vision for their silent character, they have to be up to the physical demands of working onstage, they may have to fit into a very large or very small costume that already exists. Finding the right super for a specific part can be like looking for a unicorn. So, how do we go about finding the right people, and how do we prepare someone for the stage when they may not have ever worked in a theater before?

MUSICAL INSERT: SFO 2009 Die Entführung aus dem Serail

TREY COSTERISAN: You know, supers are basically volunteers. They are people who, for whatever reason, are very excited to be at the opera. As volunteers obviously are not paid, so they might be someone who has a theatrical background. They might be someone who really just loves music and wants to be involved somehow. They are expected to be at every rehearsal. So they, um, are very dedicated volunteers. It's not just a come when you're free sort of a situation, they're really dedicated to being at the opera house, rehearsing sometimes every day for hours to be a part of our shows.

We often say to people, you don't need to have any experience. You just need to show up. We'll teach you the rest. We'll show you how to be on stage. The main thing we need is we just need a person who's passionate about the art form. And that really is what defines a supernumerary. They're here because they love the art form, the music, the acting, in some cases, just the building itself. They just love being here.

MUSICAL INSERT: SFO 2015 Die Meistersinger, Act 3 Scene 5

In some cases, we might need a stilt-walking-juggler, and, you know, frankly in my day-to-day life, I don't run across a lot of stilt-walking-jugglers, but if you're doing certain productions, you need to have a stilt-walking-juggler.

KATHERINE BALTRUSH: Trey is talking about David McVicar's production of *Die Meistersinger*, which we produced in 2015.

TREY COSTERISAN: So that was a really challenging role to cast. But we found them. It was really satisfying to know that, okay, those people are out there. You just have to look and you will find them.

KATHERINE BALTRUSH: Now that we know what a supernumerary does, and just how "super" they are, let's meet some of the amazing individuals who have given so much of themselves over the years. To start us off, here is supernumerary, Helen Lew.

HELEN LEW: My name is Helen Lew. I'm a lecturer at UC Berkeley. I teach biology.

MUSICAL INSERT: SFO 2018 Das Rheingold, horns into Act II

When I started graduate school, there were people in my department who went to the opera. And I loved *Das Rheingold*, and I remember thinking about being a super. and I thought, oh, well sure. Why not? I thought I would die happy, now I've supered for San Francisco.

KATHERINE BALTRUSH: It's a special thing when a volunteer not only works long, hard hours to bring nuanced storytelling to audiences. By creating together with the pros, they become part of the fabric of the institution itself. Here's Trey again.

TREY COSTERISAN: Some of them have been here longer than I've even been alive. In some cases, we have children who have been supernumeraries with us. They've worked here longer than I have. We had one recently, he started at four years old in *Madame Butterfly*. He's 16 now. And it was amazing watching these children grow up literally in front of our eyes.

MUSICAL INSERT: SFO 2004 Onegin, ACT III Entr'act

And they are known by name, the chorus knows them, everyone on stage knows them. And their parents have the trust that they let their children come work with us at the opera house.

KATHERINE BALTRUSH: We're lucky enough to have a truly extraordinary Technical team that keeps all of our performers safe in rehearsals and onstage. But anything that happens live can still go wrong in a million ways- and our supers are not immune. You may remember a conversation about Opera Disasters from our last episode. Here is how one of our supers averted an opera disaster of his own.

MUSICAL INSERT: SFO 2018 Siegfried

KARSTEN GUTHRIDGE: Hi, my name is Karsten Guthridge. The 2018 Ring Cycle, I was offered my first role with the San Francisco Opera as a supernumerary understudy. Siegfried features a mischievous bear in Act One. And I was the Cover Bear, which means mostly I shadowed the Super Bear to learn the ropes of the opera for the two months of rehearsals, which were fascinating. So less than 20 hours before the final performance the Super Bear was out due to a tennis elbow of all things. But that's not the only bizarre thing that happened, the helmet, which supports the very heavy bear head. It wasn't tight enough. And as I was chasing Mime around the stage, the helmet's aligner fell over my eyes and that blinded my forward field of view. So I could rise up on my hind legs occasionally to get a glimpse of obstacles, but obviously you can't do that very often and if you want to look like a real bear. So I summoned my best, Luke Skywalker, blind navigation skills to get me off the stage with only one minor collision with an upstage prop. It was terrifying at the time, but definitely that's one of the coolest things I've ever done. And thankfully, my following stints as a supernumerary were far less stressful.

KATHERINE BALTRUSH: What's most profound to me about Karsten's story - besides the epic Luke Skywalker reference - is that even after that frightening experience, he came back. I couldn't help but wonder if any of our supers *ever* get scared off after working on a show, but Trey said that's almost never the case.

MUSICAL INSERT: SFO 2019 Marriage of Figaro, FINALE of the opera

TREY COSTERISAN: After they've done one show, I've never had a person who's walked up to me at the end of the show and said, I never want to do that again. Unanimously to a person if you super one time, they are-begging to get back on stage again.

KATHERINE BALTRUSH: Begging to get back on stage... Because Supers know how transformative that immersive experience of this dynamic, all-encompassing art form can be. Each volunteer is an essential member of a huge team - hundreds of people strong - who come together to make opera possible. And we couldn't be more grateful for them. For North Stage Door, I'm Katherine Baltrush.

HOST - Chris Largent

CHRIS LARGENT: If your interest is piqued and you'd like to apply to volunteer as a super, email us at supers@sfoopera.com or go to our website and search supernumeraries.

And whether you're silently marching in the triumphal procession in Aida or sitting in the back row of a gymnasium at a touring production of *La Fille du Regiment*, experiencing an opera for yourself is wholly unique. Especially if it's your first time...My colleague, Michael Bragg, shares stories of encounters that have hooked novices on the artform.

MUSICAL INSERT: SFO 2013 Così fan tutte, Overture

MY FIRST OPERA - Michael Bragg, Jodi Gage, Molly McBride, Chris Davis, Jeff McMillan, Jordan Amann

MICHAEL BRAGG: Do you remember the first time you watched a movie and cried? Or the first time you and a friend laughed so hard you couldn't breathe? First experiences are incredibly powerful, so powerful, that we spend a lifetime trying to recreate them. On a recent road trip with friends someone asked the group what our first Dolly Parton song was. And what struck me was how varied and interesting everyone's answer to the question was. So interesting, that I felt that I was experiencing their first time listening to a Dolly Parton song. Btw, mine was 9 to 5 when I was 6.

Among opera fans the experience of this question "what was your first opera?" is almost a rite of passage into the community of opera lovers, and hearing the wide-range of people's entry points to the art form is one that is both fascinating, as well as communal.

MUSICAL INSERT: SFO 2007 The Rakes Progress, Act I Scene 2

I still vividly remember being overwhelmed by my first opera, Stravinsky's *The Rake's Progress*...I was probably 16, 17 years old, and I just happened across a PBS special from Glyndebourne, with Barbara Hendrix and Jerry Hadley. And I was in awe of the beauty of the complexity of the music. It was in English, so I could understand everything. And it was the first time I'd ever heard a piece of music that sounded like thought. Stravinsky really brilliantly and beautifully writes in the characters' thoughts, without them having to sing. And I thought that was just an incredible thing. You know, everybody's got a first. And here are some of my colleagues with their first opera stories.

MUSICAL INSERT: SFO 2009 La Fille du Regiment, Act 1 "Chacun le sait..."

JODI GAGE: Oh, so my first opera was *Daughter of the Regiment*. It was a touring production from Cincinnati opera, part of their outreach program. And they came to my cornfield-surrounded small town and played in the, like, basketball arena. That was their part of the university, and they piped the music over the loud speakers because it was such a ginormous space. As a high school student, we got free tickets for our choir. And I sat way up in the nosebleeds. And I was just mesmerized and I was hooked.

MUSICAL INSERT: SFO 2008 La Boheme, Act III Mimi's aria "Donde lieta usci..."

MOLLY MCBRIDE: My first experience with opera happened when I was in college, I was an exchange student in Europe and I'd fallen in love with an Italian boy, and he'd taken me home to meet his parents. And we're walking around the streets of Verona and we hear this music coming from the arena theater, the old Roman theater in Verona, and it's *La Boheme* and of course we were too poor to get tickets. And so we sat outside enraptured with each other and enraptured with the music. And I have loved opera ever since.

CHRIS DAVIS: Uh, the first opera I ever actually went and saw was *Wozzeck*. 'd have to say it wasn't maybe the best choice for a first opera. Didn't make a huge impression on me. It was over 15 years later before I went to another.

MUSICAL INSERT: SFO 2017 Elektra, "Orest, orest..."

I went and saw *Elektra* and loved it. And I've been a season ticket holder ever since.

MUSICAL INSERT: SFO 2018 Das Rheingold, Rheinmaiden music ACT I

JEFF MCMILLAN: My first opera actually wasn't in an opera house. It was watching television. *Das Rheingold* was on in the summer between junior high and high school. And I remember watching it and thinking, what in the world is this? I was really into mythology as a kid. So I was making certain connections. Like the guy with the eyepatch is Odin. The guy with the hammer is probably Thor, but the rest of it was not what I thought I knew about Norse mythology, but musically, it was kind of amazing. So it kind of opened up a whole nother world for me.

MUSICAL INSERT: SFO 2015 The Barber of Seville, "Largo al factotum"

JORDAN AMANN: My first opera experience was in elementary school. We went on a field trip to the big theater downtown, and they showed us a scene from opera and a scene from ballet. And I remember the scene from opera was from the *Barber of Seville*. It was the big Aria, Largo, al factotum. The "Fiiiigaro, Figaro, Figaro," and I just sat there in disbelief. It was the coolest

thing I'd ever seen. I couldn't believe that something like opera existed, I had just never heard it and experienced it before. And I think after that moment, seeing all of the excitement and passion and watching somebody sing so many words so fast, I just, I was hooked.

MICHAEL BRAGG: Opera's power comes in part from the fact that it takes such a large group of people working together, to create it - including our audience.

MUSICAL INSERT: SFO 2018 Götterdämmerung, Act III Prelude

Every night, a new community comes together - individuals that first came to know opera in different ways. Thousands of people, hearing and seeing the same thing, each one having a unique experience. Thanks to my San Francisco Opera colleagues Jodi Gage, Molly McBride, Chris Davis, Jeff McMillan and Jordan Amann for sharing their firsts. For North Stage Door, I'm Michael Bragg.

CREDITS - Chris Largent

CHRIS LARGENT: North Stage Door is a production of San Francisco Opera. Our production team includes Katherine Baltrush, Michael Bragg, Chris Davis, Jeffrey McMillan, Jeremy Patfield, and Barbara Rominski.

Our sound designer and audio engineer is Tod Nixon. Our show was developed with help from Marisa Brink, Trey Costerisan and Troy Smith. Jodi Gage, Rachel Garoon and Celine Strouts are our coordinating producers. 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.

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Thank you to our guests Dolora Zajick, Robert Mollicone, Trey Costerisan, Helen Lew, Karsten Guthridge, and Jordan Amann.

For more on this and other episodes, visit our website at sfoopera.com, and type "North Stage Door" into the search box. We want to hear from you! If you have something you want to ask the North Stage Door team, follow the survey link on our website. We'll meet you next time at the North Stage Door!