

12-15-2019

Casting for Success: Building Teams for Regional Operatic Productions

Keri Rusthoi

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<http://dx.doi.org/10.34917/18608768>

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CASTING FOR SUCCESS: BUILDING TEAMS FOR
REGIONAL OPERATIC PRODUCTIONS

By

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December 2019

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November 4, 2019

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Casting for Success: Building Teams for Regional Operatic Productions

is approved in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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CASTING FOR SUCCESS

Building Teams for Regional Operatic Productions

Under the direction of Dr. Alfonse Anderson

ABSTRACT

In this document I discuss the most important roles within any operatic production, how these roles are essential to the final product's success and the best practices for casting agents to utilize when determining hiring choices in order to assemble the most creative, efficient and harmonious production team. I delve into the characteristics and behaviors that I consider to be the most valuable when hiring for specific cast and crew positions for full-scale, professional opera productions, and I delineate a few of the typical pitfalls that casting agents and/or artistic directors can encounter when building a team for any production. I address "red flags" for casting agents, band-aids for unfortunate situations, as well as provide resources for the work of pursuing the best artists. This document focuses on issues primarily encountered at the regional professional company level.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

After a Bachelor's in Fine Arts and a Master of Music, as well as several years in Manhattan at an internationally-respected conservatory of music, I had "hit a wall" in terms of my vocal technical capabilities with my maturing instrument. I was lucky enough to finally be taught how to sing properly by a bonafide star from The Metropolitan Opera who had retired just down the street from a family friend in rural New Mexico. Only by sheer chance did the universe bring me the opportunity to work with this amazing artist who had done very little actual teaching over the course of her thirty-year performing career at the world's most important opera house. The eminent mezzo-soprano, Jean Kraft, patiently and insistently rebuilt my voice from the ground up, always believing that I had a unique instrument and an amazing performing talent. Her teaching was unconventional and her pedagogy somewhat controversial, but I'd worked with many, many voice teachers prior to her who had all told me to "do A, not B". Jean was the first teacher to say to me, "Oh my darling, *never* do A, *only* do B." And it worked.

As such, I was extremely hesitant to ever allow anyone to "mess" with my voice and my vocal technique again. I'd been through the ringer, I'd seen both sides as a singer and teacher, and I would "not be fooled again." Thus, I was more than a little shocked to discover that I had, once again by accident, hit the Vocal Teacher Jackpot (casino pun intended), when I began working with Dr. Alfonse Anderson at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, in order to pursue the Doctor of Musical Arts degree. I cannot believe how lucky I have been to have had his vocal guidance, his teaching expertise and his personal support throughout this long process.

Doc, you are a treasure!

DEDICATION

No artist can reach his or her potential without a myriad of influence and support. I cannot even begin to name the innumerable people, both supportive and critical, who have shaped my artistic journey from beginning to present including believers, non-believers, teachers both musical and non-musical, coaches, mentors, business leaders, competitors, choral singers, opera volunteers, patrons and even some detractors who only challenged me to prove them wrong. Each has made an impression on my life that has steered my path past one meandering trail fork toward another winding road. The continued zigzagging lines of my life adventure however, while seemingly haphazard and unfocused have invariably brought me back to music, to singing and to opera every single time.

Creativity and the safe space it requires to flourish, begins in childhood and for that I thank my mother, the late Reverend Dr. Barbara Henderson for supporting my “specialness” as a middle child and encouraging me to follow my dreams without regard to what others might think. She is the one who drug me to my first opera at age ten (which bored me to tears,) and who insisted that I must join choir after I refused to continue with piano and viola in high school. She set the standard and expectation that I would one day achieve a Doctorate as a matter of course, without considering discussion or argument.

My mother had an excellent singing voice and anointed me as the torchbearer of our family’s vocal heritage for the future, whether I deigned to accept the role or not. She never once wavered in her belief that I was meant to be a professional musician, as well as a purveyor of sacred music and an academic professor. After years of resistance, a multitude of other pursuits, and purely by what could be construed as happenstance, I find myself at the crossroad of fulfilling every single one of her expectations. Thank you mom.

PREFACE

I founded an opera company. By myself. From scratch. In the middle of rural nowhere, with no resources, no funding and no board. There wasn't a single other opera singer within 200 square miles, much less a vocal coach or a pianist who could play operatic scores in the area. Ninety percent of the local population believed that opera and the musical theater show *Phantom of the Opera* by Andrew Lloyd Webber were one and the same. There was no opera house, there was no orchestra (at the time), there was no music library of sheet music, or even a library of any recorded operatic music in the town of 10,000 in which I lived.

I was young and ambitious. And I was crazy. To my credit, I had already logged ten years of arts administration experience and had worked at the Santa Fe Opera for many summers as an usher. I had sung in several young artist summer programs, and had recently been on tour with a professional show in Germany, the combined experiences of which convinced me that I could do a better job of mounting a show than the folks managing that touring production. I had endured the unpleasant experience(s) of being an overworked, underpaid and verbally-abused singer, and I had also acquired experience playing in the orchestra pit as an unappreciated violist. So the wide range of perspectives I had gathered by that point was useful with regard to having a basic understanding of the needs of the multi-media art form of opera and the approach that I wanted to take—that it would be a *singers* company.

Starting a business is a challenge in any setting. Starting an opera company is an even bigger challenge as it is really several artistic businesses combined into one (dance, theater, choral, orchestral, etc.) But, starting an opera company without any local production resources or trained theater personnel nearby is the height of ambition (or hubris, as the case may have been.) I learned much about business, about people, about managing those people, about recruiting

people and resources and about the artform of opera during my 15 years of work incubating, launching and guiding Emerald City Opera.

During my tenure at Emerald City Opera, I cast at least one professional opera production each year, and am proud to say that the overall majority of the lead singers cast were those with credits at the Metropolitan Opera. After I started the conjunctive Young Artist Program, I cast an additional two university-level shows each summer. During the rest of the year, I cast and directed an amateur local opera compilation show as a traveling troupe to bring opera into the schools of Northwest Colorado. I also oversaw the artistic choices for two year-round concert series as well as a youth choir. Additionally, I have been asked to direct several local musical productions during and since then. Thus, over several decades I have cast around 50 shows of varying levels of goals, artistic talent and available supporting resources.

When I chose to depart my company in 2014 after completing one of my biggest goals-- mounting a fabulous *Falstaff* production-- I was pleased that the company which I founded, and which was mindfully built on firm principles and organized structures, has continued to thrive.

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CASTING FOR SUCCESS

Building Teams for Regional Operatic Productions

Chapter 1: OVERVIEW: How Casting Productions Plays the Most Important Long-Term Role in an Opera Company's Ultimate Success or Failure

In most instances when one thinks of casting an operatic production, initial thoughts center around which singer would be perfect to cast in each operatic role. Because the singers inhabit the stage and are therefore the most visible vehicles for delivering the drama to an audience, they generally receive the greater share of the initial casting thought process. While this is indeed an intricate and important part of the process, years of successful opera producing have taught me that casting singers is almost inevitably the easiest part of building any operatic production team. Reams of information, established protocol and organizational structures already exist to assist companies in auditioning and hiring singers for their productions (see the list of resources available on pages 75-78 of this document). However, many other technical “behind the scenes” artists in the production play a more central role in the overall success or failure of a show; and while important, the singers are but one cog in a massive, complex machine—a machine which works well only when the entire team of cast and crew are considered as one unit with regard to filling positions and determining hierarchies of administrative and productive functioning.

In this document I will discuss the most important positions of any operatic production and how they are essential to the final product's success. I will delve into the characteristics and behaviors that I consider to be the most valuable when hiring for specific cast and crew positions for full-scale, professional opera productions, and I will delineate a few of the typical pitfalls that casting agents and/or artistic directors can encounter when building a team for any production.

For the purposes of this document, I will use the term “casting agent” to identify the person most responsible for making the hiring decisions relevant to a particular operatic production, including both on-stage and off-stage positions. This document will focus on issues primarily encountered at the regional level.

Casting agents can wield an enormous amount of impact on the art form as a whole through their choices of singers, which, by extension make statements about and set priorities for artistic talent, gender acceptance, racial representation, and age discrimination. Even more than repertoire selection, by the precedents set through personnel choices, the casting agent holds more power over the future direction of the art form than any other working aspect of the operatic field today. In this document, I provide potential resources and suggestions for casting agents to access when building production teams and direct interested parties toward best practices and organizational models that can serve as useful guides for future show building. Additionally, I will discuss the advantages and disadvantages of giving casting agents additional company and financial decision-making abilities that may be needed to assist with the production team build.

Building the production team and casting the vocal roles for any opera performance begins many months, and sometimes even years before rehearsals begin. Thus, the collaborative capabilities of the personalities involved must combine well with the skill-sets needed for the design team in advance of actual on-the-stage action. This patient, behind-the-scenes development work is essential to continue the manifestation of a show’s vision and eventual reality. By his or her selections to fill these roles, a casting agent or Artistic Director’s early employment choices determine success or failure of an opera production long before any singing has even begun. A casting agent must be prescient about each production position’s specific

tasks and overall objectives, in order to be successful. As well, s/he must be psychologically astute with regard to each potential employee's ability to deliver on such goals within the specified time frame, available resources and in collaboration with the other personalities being employed within their separately moving cogs in the proverbial "wheel" of the entire production. One of the most important skills a casting agent can employ is the ability to ask him/herself clarifying questions and go through the detailed process of answering those questions sufficiently to make a good choice.

One of the biggest challenges any opera production may experience is the loss of any one of these essential cogs in the wheel while the machine is "moving"-- i.e. during a production run. After painstakingly building a working team, for perhaps years in advance, to lose one essential member of the team (a stage manager, a solo tenor, or a lighting designer for example) often puts the entire production at risk. There is an inevitable loss of momentum and collaborative symbiosis which was previously engendered via the developmental interactions of the specific artistic personalities involved and their collective experience. Thus, the cohesive unit has been compromised; perhaps irreparably.

Reconfiguring even just one moving part threatens the ability of this unique team's efficacy and even continued existence, due to possible personality conflicts and/or skill gaps with abrupt replacements. The best casting agents do much advance research with regard to each specific roles' creative ranges. They research the tasks required and skill-sets involved, as well as consider deeply the potential personalities and backgrounds of those who might be asked to collaborate together as a team within the company's restrictions and resources. This advance work can circumvent potential crises and conflicts early in the process, before rehearsals even begin. Finding appropriately-prepared artistic talent for any team is a challenge. Quickly

replacing an essential role while in the middle of a production run is a much greater challenge. The ultimate challenge, however, is to not only quickly replace a member of a symbiotic team with an equally-appropriately prepared professional, who is capable of joining said talented team with its ambitious vision while a production is already in motion; but also to find an individual who's personal methodology conjoins with the team's collective personality. Successful casting with this combination of factors could be considered a miracle. Savvy casting agents, therefore, tend to overlook certain personalities, which through experience have proven to be "risks" and also to pay close attention to skill gap "red flags" which might be shared via their casting agent network in order to avoid disasters during production time.

I will discuss these "red flags" in my document as well as ways to deal with certain personality issues when presented with unavoidable conflicts or skill gaps during production. Casting agents also must have a comfortability with determining prioritization of certain roles and personalities in crises, (which can be different for each production and company) as well as understand and prioritize the overarching goals of the company versus the production in order to have a guiding vision.

Opera is the original multi-media artistic platform, and as a result it requires an extensive cast of diverse and talented artists, each with an equally challenging and required specific skill-set to create success. A casting agent must be aware of each role's unique requirements and talents within the context of the overall production, and recognize the typical personalities who inhabit these roles in order to provide the right environment and support for each artist's success. Additionally, the agent must be able to choose the most qualified player for the position within the context of the overall production team's collaborative synergy and with the long term goals of the company in mind. Smaller, regional companies struggle with the additional challenges: the

lack of a local pool of well-trained talent; adequate, available on-site resources to provide to such players for optimum work output; and the ability to provide amenable benefits and incentives so as to attract and retain such artistic contractors. I will discuss some of the techniques and processes available (i.e. “hacks”) that these smaller companies can employ to support the casting agent’s ability to attract and retain professional talent in geographically remote and/or economically limited environments.

Chapter 2: HOW TO BEGIN

Why should casting be difficult? It is an often jokingly cited cliché that one can “lean out of a window in New York City, spit and hit a soprano.” So where are the pitfalls for casting agents, when there are so many available artists? Are there as many productions to fill?

According to the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) 2017 Survey of Public Participation in the Arts, 5.3 million people stated having attended a live opera performance in the previous 12 months.¹ As well, on the comprehensive online performance database, Operabase.com, New York City was recently listed as the 11th highest ranked city in the world for annual opera performances, behind such European government-subsidized and well-known powerhouse opera cities such as Vienna, London and Berlin:

	City	Performances	Productions
1	Moscow	637	139
2	Wien	576	115
3	Berlin	559	108
4	St Petersburg	526	147
5	München	404	91
6	London	398	83
7	Dresden	390	58
8	Paris	353	75
9	Hamburg	331	57
10	Praha	285	43
11	New York	273	47
12	Budapest	270	59
13	Frankfurt	229	40
14	Madrid	203	51
15	Stockholm	196	17
16	Zürich	194	33
17	Sydney	192	15
18	Stuttgart	190	33
19	Leipzig	174	43
20	Hannover	164	20

Table 1. Top 20 Cities Worldwide for Annual Opera Performances, 2018-2019 Season²

¹ National Endowment for the Arts, *U.S. Trends in Arts Attendance and Literary Reading: 2002-2017* (Arts.gov: Sept 2018) pg. 5.

² Operabase.com, *Statistics by city 2018/2019*. <https://www.operabase.com/statistics/en>. (May 19, 2019).

Additionally, within the United States itself, while New York City produces more than three times the annual opera productions and performances of its next closest location rival, it is important to note that the top 20 American cities listed encompass the entire swath of the country from coast to coast, including cities throughout the West, Midwest, North and South. Interestingly, some of the ranked cities support only one active opera company, which illustrates that large, internationally-recognized house levels as well as regional and summer festival producers with smaller budgets are equally contributing noteworthy amounts of performances to the number of annual operatic events in the rankings.

	City	Performances	Productions
1	New York	276	49
2	San Francisco	76	15
3	Chicago	73	12
4	Philadelphia	63	14
5	Los Angeles	63	15
6	Houston	60	11
7	Washington	54	12
8	Seattle	49	8
9	Pittsburgh	45	13
10	Cooperstown	45	7
11	Sarasota	42	6
12	Boston	42	15
13	Saint Louis	41	8
14	Annandale	38	4
15	Santa Fe	35	5
16	Atlanta	35	7
17	San Jose	33	7
18	Dallas	31	7
19	Saint Paul	28	5
20	Central City	28	4

Table 2. Top 20 Cities Nationwide for Annual Opera Performances, 2017-2018 Season³

An unofficial count of North American opera companies listed on the international database of Operabase.com in March of 2019 includes 102 companies, which is clearly not

³ Operabase.com, *Statistics by city 2018/2019*.

comprehensive. In the state of Colorado alone, the essential web resource for Colorado opera aficionados, OperaPronto.info, currently lists twelve active opera companies in the state, of which only the two largest (Central City Opera and Opera Colorado) are listed in the Operabase.com data⁴. Therefore, from the data above it can be inferred that there is at the very least, an average of two major opera companies per state (probably more) casting at least 224 opera productions per year, which breaks down to a minimum of five unique productions per year, per state being cast. More likely, due to a lack of statistical tracking and reporting, the average number is double that figure.

While specific data is lean on the number of working opera singers available at any one time from where a casting agent might draw potential artists, additional inference can reveal correlations between the continuing numbers of graduates in the field of music,⁵ and increasing numbers of auditionees and applicants to young artist vocal programs (YAPs). According to the Strategic National Arts Alumni Project (SNAAP), a national arts data and research organization, 13% of all degrees awarded annually in arts fields are specific to music performance.⁶ Of those music performance students, an unofficial inventory of the top voice and opera Bachelor's degree programs for 2019 as ranked by CollegeRaptor.com, show an average of 10.7% of students at each top music school enrolled as vocal performance majors, with conservatories naturally hosting larger percentages overall than those of top music schools housed within a larger university. With this data, it is clear that the available pool of emerging artists remains robust; if not overcrowded.

⁴ OperaPronto.info (April 10, 2019.)

⁵ National Center for Education Statistics. Nces.ed.gov (April 10, 2019.)
https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d17/tables/dt17_322.10.asp?current=yes

⁶ Strategic National Arts Alumni Project. <http://snaap.indiana.edu/snaapshot/#disciplines>. (April 10, 2019.)

Top Voice and Opera Bachelors degree Programs - 2019

The average starting salary for a graduate with a degree in Voice and Opera is \$39100

Majors > [Visual And Performing Arts](#) > [Music](#) > Voice and Opera

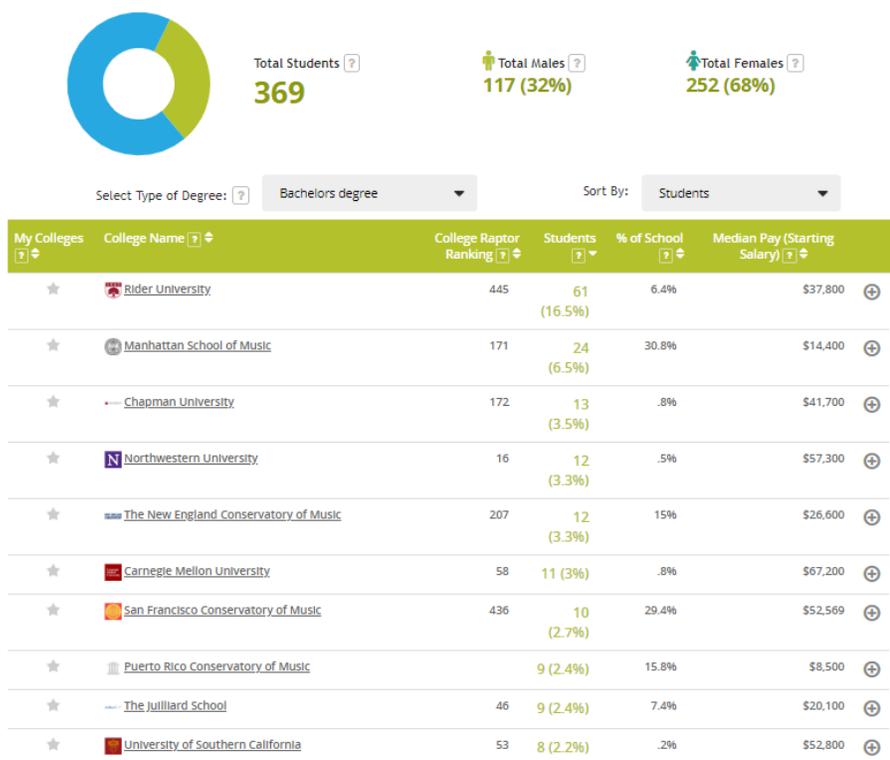


Table 3. Percent of Voice and Opera Bachelor’s degrees at top music schools – 2019⁷

Indeed, Dana Lynne Varga writes in her blog “The Empowered Musician” that, “Glimmerglass Opera (which has used YAPtracker since 2012) received 928 singer applications for the 2018 festival season and heard 432 of those singers live... YAPs have gotten so competitive, most admit fewer than 10% of the singers they audition live.”⁸

⁷ Collegeraptor.com. <https://www.collegeraptor.com/Majors/Details/50.0908/Level/Bachelors-degree/Voice-and-Opera>. (April 15, 2019.)

⁸ Dana Lynne Varga, The Empowered Musician. Blog. “How Many YAPS are Too Many YAPS?” (Sept. 28, 2018.)

A quick calculation of those numbers begets a roughly 4% annual hiring rate for young opera singers at a summer festival production, which leaves a large number of available singers looking for opportunities.

Additionally, in a *Forbes* magazine article dated March 29, 2019, a cited report from the Arts and Cultural Production Satellite Account (ACPSA), compiled by the U.S. Department of Commerce's Bureau of Economic Analysis (BEA), [which] showed that “economic activity from arts and culture increased 2.9% in 2016, the most recent year of th[e] report. That represents 4.3% of gross domestic product or more than \$800 billion of economic activity.” Later the articles state that, “Five million Americans are employed in arts and culture-related industries. The sector has expanded faster than the total economy every year since 2012, and its contribution to GDP is greater than agriculture or transportation. Economic growth in arts and culture is widespread across the nation.”⁹

Thus, if productions and artists are readily available, how does the casting agent sift through the masses to determine priorities in choosing artists for a production? Does every role carry the same weight with regard to importance? Do casting agents need to consider every variable in each decision? The answers vary, but the process usually occurs in a similar fashion.

First and foremost, the best way to cast a successful opera roster, full of talented individuals with extremely diverse skill sets and needs, is to know each artist individually, and have prior experience working with them in a professional operatic production. This reason alone is why return engagements are the best “proof” of an artist’s work ethic and professionalism.

⁹ Benjamin Wolff. *Forbes.com*. “Why The Arts Are The Great Unappreciated Engine Of The U.S. Economy.” (March 19, 2019.)

Barring personal experience and resume proof however, the best way to determine an artist's suitability is through the use of the old-fashioned "word-of-mouth" technique.

Opera is an expensive undertaking. According to Speight Jenkins, the long-respected opera impresario of Seattle Opera, it is "the most complex art form, involving many more people than any other. We are expected by our audiences to present extraordinary theatrical productions with superb singing, great acting, elaborate costumes, handsome sets, and the most modern and inventive lighting....if a major opera company doesn't supply enough...severe criticism not just from music critics but from its subscribers will ensue."¹⁰ Thus, casting and production decisions are bourne with great care to minimize costly mistakes.

An article on *Slate.com* titled, "Paying for Opera: Why It Costs So Much, and What to Do About It,"¹¹ author Jacob Weisberg argues that "if there is any art form that cannot pay its own way, it is opera." He lists the costs, "An opera is a symphony concert, a choral recital, a play, a ballet, a mural, and a fashion show all at once. The number of people who work to put on one of these spectacles – [from] building the set, brushing down the wigs, turning the crank that lowers Don Giovanni down into hell – is incredible."¹²

But more important, Weisberg provides a conclusive reason why opera cannot improve upon its economic cost factors as other businesses often do. He cites William Baumol's "law" from a 1966 book entitled *Performing Arts: The Economic Dilemma* in which Baumol reveals that for "certain sectors, productivity cannot increase. It takes the same number of musicians the same amount of time to perform *The Barber of Seville* today as it did in 1816. (In fact, thanks to union contracts, it actually takes *more* musicians – you pay an orchestra big enough for Wagner

¹⁰ Speight Jenkins, "The Cost of Opera." (Artsjournal.com: OperaSleuth, March 31, 2014.)

¹¹ Jacob Weisberg, "Paying for Opera: Why It Costs So Much, and What to Do About It" (Slate.com: Sept. 27, 1998.)

¹² Ibid.

even when you program Rossini.) In order for the wages of the skilled professionals who perform an opera to keep pace with those in other sectors of the economy, where productivity does improve, the cost must inflate. In short, there's no alternative to subsidy."¹³

As the most multi-media art form in existence requiring extensive resources and funding, risk-taking in any form is therefore often frowned upon due to cost and control factors. A regional company cannot afford to make a mistake in casting its one, annual production's stage director, as finding an affordable replacement on short notice in the middle of an intensive rehearsal period is a mighty challenge, and a box office "bomb" will affect available revenue for future sustainability. Even a large and preeminent opera company cannot take the risk of casting an unknown singer in a leading role, unless they are willing to suffer the wrath of an unimpressed audience, possible mistakes on the stage affecting the quality and capability of the entire cast and crew, and/or a last-minute withdrawal from appearing due to vocal "health" (read: poor technique compromising capability).

Will Crutchfield, the well-known American conductor and musicologist, wrote an excellent article for the *New York Times* in 1986 addressing the scourge of cancellations at the Metropolitan Opera that season, after which he delved deeply into the issues of casting and vocal development. He quoted an anonymous retired opera star in the article who spoke about the upcoming production of *Carmen* saying, "You want to know what's the matter? I'll tell you: You have a Don Jose who forces his voice, a Micaela who forces, a Toreador who forces, and a Carmen who doesn't force, but doesn't sing!"¹⁴ Crutchfield goes on to assert in the article that, "The world's opera houses have at their disposal a generation of singers who sound more worn and less secure than they should. Too many of them will drop out before what should have been

¹³ Jacob Weisberg, "Paying for Opera: Why It Costs So Much, and What to Do About It."

¹⁴ Will Crutchfield, *The New York Times*. "Vocal Burnout at the Opera" (Sept. 21, 1986.)

their time; even more will have a full-length career at a reduced level of vocal function and achievement...The phenomenon of early vocal burnout brings in its wake a further lowering of standards as audiences, by necessity, accustom themselves to hearing voices in poor condition – and one of the central elements of opera is lessened thereby.”¹⁵

Crutchfield insists that:

“there may have arisen a feeling that the strained sounds are in themselves dramatic: that hearing a voice pushed past its natural limits, and empathizing with the performer in extremis, adds an edge to operatic excitement. This is a decadent pleasure: each incremental step away from vocal values works decay on the art that was the original source of the pleasure. The result is a generation of audiences and critics less prepared to listen for the finer points of singing - and a generation of singers less prepared to heed, or even notice, the warning signs...”¹⁶

Finally, Crutchfield addresses the domino effect of poor casting on the overall health of a company when he says:

“Today, the pool of world-class singers is small and shrinking, while the number of houses bidding on them has grown, creating a spiraling demand for advance commitments. Even second-rank singers are hired three, four and five years ahead by all the major houses. And once roles are chosen, designers and directors engaged, it becomes exponentially more difficult for the management to reshuffle its singers or its schedule -or for a singer to say, 'I am no longer comfortable with/should never have accepted/need more time to prepare that part.’”¹⁷

If the world’s best opera houses are facing a crisis in casting, what is the answer?

Utilizing the small and powerful “word-of-mouth” opera network based on colleagues’ actual

¹⁵ Will Crutchfield, The New York Times. “Vocal Burnout at the Opera” (Sept. 21, 1986.)

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

experiences, to identify potential artists via the recommendations of respected associates who have worked with an artist in the past, is the best way to assure success.

Secondarily, the easiest path to achieve an appropriate cast at the level of each individual position, is to cast/hire artists who have already successfully worked or performed in a production of the same opera. Operas are long, complicated art forms, and the more familiar an artist is with a particular work, the more relaxed his or her vocal technique may be, which may allow for more energy that he or she can devote to engaging their character and the deeper intricacies of the plot.

Experience and familiarity invariably bring advantages to the process. However, there are disadvantages to this approach as well. Just because an artist is well-suited and experienced in a particular role does not mean that they are a good fit with the rest of the current production's cast with whom they will share the stage. For example, a mezzo-soprano who is a particularly fine singer and actress and who has performed a specific, desired role several times before, would seem to be an excellent casting choice for a production requiring this role. However, suppose this singer took a great dislike to her character's compatriot on stage, the leading soprano, and actively undermined the soprano at every turn. This would create a great deal of tension among the cast off-stage, and not only damage the camaraderie of the entire team, but ruin a budding relationship between the mezzo-soprano's representation agency and the company. This type of situation, sadly, occurs regularly.

In a professional setting many artists would be more interested in working with a regional company when they are given the chance to try out new roles without the critical glare of an intense opera "scene" watching their every risk on stage. In this vein, a casting agent may not be able to secure an artist with the most experience in a particular role, unless he or she is willing to

settle for an over-rehearsed, “boring” rendition of the role. Furthermore, if a casting agent is working with young singers whose goals are to add an additional role to their resume, offering the same vocal position may not be a strong enough draw for the young artist, who would rather grow his or her list of roles performed.

Finding an appropriate singer for a particular role via either “word of mouth” and/or because of the singer’s prior experience with a role are the most basic cards in a casting agent’s deck. Although it is a cliché in the world of film and visually-graphic performing arts to typecast roles based on the looks of the actor or actress, in the world of opera a form of typecasting also exists when an artist is exhaustively assigned to a specific type of role over and over based on his or her Fach categorization.

A vocal Fach, defined by Grove's Dictionary of Music and Musicians via Grove Music Online (Oxford University Press) states:

Fach (Ger., plural *Fächer*): Term for ‘voice-category’. Rather more than others, the Germans have systematically distinguished between the various types of singing voice and have stipulated which operatic roles are suitable for each of them. The main categories (soprano, contralto, tenor, baritone, bass) each have their own subdivisions, so that the more dramatic type of soprano, for example, may be said to lie within any one of three *Fächer*: the *jugendliche dramatische Sopran*, the *Zwischenfachsängerin* (or ‘in-between type’) and the *hochdramatische Sopran* (the ‘high’ or ‘serious’ dramatic soprano, as opposed to the first type, the ‘youthful’ and therefore lighter type). Roles appropriate to each in turn might be Elisabeth in *Tannhäuser*, Aida and Isolde. Once placed within their *Fach*, German singers have traditionally found it relatively difficult to perform outside it, though this has become less so in recent years.¹⁸

¹⁸ J.B. Steane, Oxford University Press. Definition of “Fach”.

This document will not delve into a discussion about the specific Fach categorizations or their qualities. It will only touch upon the usefulness of the German methodology for defining vocal ranges and timbres in terms of casting value, as well as acknowledge the Fach system's limitations with regard to the same. A chart of thirty-one vocal Fachs in modern usage follows.

Fachs may be useful for role categorization but cannot and should not strictly define a singer for any length of time. As voices mature, many singers move into a different vocal Fach over the course of their career, expanding their stage language and style as they gain experience. A casting agent can use knowledge from a previous hearing to determine a singer's probable categorization, but an artist's current vocal capabilities, range and timbre must be re-determined throughout a notable career. A responsible (and resourceful) casting agent will not rely solely on Fach typecasting and is willing to look beyond the easy and "safe" vocal answer, to regard the entire artist and his or her potential for other roles, both from a vocal and acting perspective.

1 Soprano Fächer	
	1.1 Lyrischer Koloratursopran / Koloratursoubrette
	1.2 Dramatischer Koloratursopran
	1.3 Deutsche Soubrette / Charaktersopran
	1.4 Lyrischer Sopran
	1.5 Jugendlich dramatischer Sopran
	1.6 Dramatischer Sopran
	1.7 Hochdramatischer Sopran
2 Mezzo-soprano and Contralto Fächer	
	2.1 Koloratur-Mezzosopran
	2.2 Lyrischer Mezzosopran / Spielalt
	2.3 Dramatischer Mezzosopran
	2.4 Dramatischer Alt
	2.5 Tiefer Alt
3 Tenor Fächer	
	3.1 Spieltenor / Tenor buffo
	3.2 Charaktertenor
	3.3 Lyrischer Tenor
	3.4 Jugendlicher Heldentenor
	3.5 Heldentenor
4 Baritone Fächer	
	4.1 Bariton / Baryton-Martin
	4.2 Lyrischer Bariton / Spielbariton
	4.3 Kavalierbariton
	4.4 Charakterbariton
	4.5 Heldenbariton
	4.6 Lyrischer Bassbariton / Low lyric baritone
	4.7 Dramatischer Bassbariton / Low dramatic baritone
5 Bass Fächer	
	5.1 Basso cantante / Lyric bass-bariton / High lyric bass
	5.2 Hoher Bass / Dramatic bass-baritone / High dramatic bass
	5.3 Jugendlicher Bass
	5.4 Spielbass / Bassbuffo / Lyric buffo
	5.5 Schwerer Spielbass / Dramatic buffo
	5.6 Lyrischer seriöser Bass
	5.7 Dramatischer seriöser Bass

Table 4: Fach categorizations from the Handbuch der Oper¹⁹

¹⁹ Rudolf Kloiber and Wulf Konold; Robert Maschka, *Handbuch der Oper*, 9th ed., (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 2002), pg. 899.

However, when networks and prior personal work experiences are not available or there are no immediate and more desirable options for determining a casting decision, there are reliable factors that can be utilized to achieve the same goal of choosing the most appropriate artist for a particular production role. When casting roles for any production, there is a dependable list of considerations that can provide organizational precedence as a starting point for the decision-making process.

The following five questions, answered in the order presented, will typically lead the casting agent to a quick, satisfactory final choice without too much struggle. While each question may be able to be answered with a quick “yes” or “no,” many subsequent layers of nuance and further exploration is required for confirmation of initial impressions. But many casting agents must categorize artists quickly and instinctively during an audition situation. By following the step-by-step question format below, the agent can narrow the overall field considerably, allowing for an extended review of a smaller group following the initial categorization process.

Chapter 3: CASTING: A Step-by-Step Guide

The immediate inner dialogue for the casting agent during an audition/interview should be as follows:

VOCAL CONSIDERATION

1. Can the artist healthfully sing/perform at the technical level required for this role/position? This assessment must include a working knowledge of the specific role's required stamina or unique characteristics and an intimate knowledge of vocal technique and Fach qualities.

ACTING CONSIDERATION

2. Can the artist successfully act this character, and be successfully costumed to effectively portray the appropriate "look" for the character? In a short audition situation, in which the singer is often NOT singing an aria from the future role to be cast, this requires a great deal of imagination, innate stage knowledge and scrutiny on the part of the casting agent.

PERSONALITY/WORK ETHIC CONSIDERATION

3. Does the artist's personality seem like a good fit for the opera's cast as a whole? For the company overall? For the production team? For the company's local community in terms of the off-stage culture? Does the artist's presentation represent a work ethic of high achievement? Does their resume reflect previous work with established, respected professionals in the field?

LOGISTICS CONSIDERATION

4. Does the artist's availability align with the production schedule, and will the artist agree to join the production for the fee and details which matches the company's budget and resources?

ADDITIONAL BENEFITS/DETRACTORS

5. Are there additional benefits to hiring this particular artist, which add value or override detriments? (E.g., an accompanying spouse who could fill a needed role; or the artist is a terrific, willing spokesperson for production marketing purposes; or the artist has an important agent or network that would develop the company's reputation, etc.?) Conversely, are there issues that detract from the value of using this artist? (i.e. will the artist require extra housing for family or childcare; or does the artist require airfare from Europe rather than a more local and cost-effective region; or does the artist require special/additional costuming costs, etc.?).

Once these five questions are answered to the best of the agent's ability through initial observation of the artist, the casting agent can begin to sort through the pool of artists, picking a smaller subset to pursue with further investigation and discovery of more sophisticated details.

For example, with regard to the first question about an artist's ability to healthfully perform the role, a casting agent must be well-versed in not only the technical aspects of the vocal art of singing, but also well aware of the specific technical requirements for the particular role being cast. It would not serve the company to hire a lovely voice which has never sung a full role on stage, and therefore does not understand the need to pace oneself vocally both during a

show from start to finish, but also during the intense, preceding weeks of production rehearsal. An inexperienced singer might not have the pacing and/or stamina “know-how” to endure the harder rehearsal periods of a regional company’s compressed schedule, leading to a lack of vocal “shine” once the performances finally arrive or a lack of stamina for the third act back-to-back duet and coloratura aria. As well, a deeper question for the casting agent is to further consider whether the artist’s vocal timbre fits the character of the role and additionally, whether the artist’s vocal timbre is a good match with the vocal timbre of his or her onstage love interest, should the two roles have a great deal of duet passages to sing together.

A role’s vocal demands must be considered as well. Certain roles require much physicality to portray, require extended periods of time on stage, or have lengthy sections with high tessituras, all of which require a physical, mental and technical stamina. An article in USA Today discussed a new production of Richard Wagner’s *Die Walküre* at Chicago Lyric Opera in 2017 and alluded to the demands. Singer Alexandra LoBianco, who has performed in a range of operas since 2011, was quoted for understanding why vocal demands are often misunderstood:

I equate opera singers with a long distance marathon runner meets a heavy lifter meets a gymnast. All of this long drawn out singing, and you look at a long drawn out Wagner opera — *Walküre* [sic] is five hours! — and while the valkyries are only on stage for 30 minutes of that, that 30 minutes is as intense as any workout you would get doing crossfit or with a trainer. You’re sweating buckets by the end of it.²⁰

The article continues with her discussing the lead tenor’s role, saying:

²⁰ Maggie Hendricks, USA Today.com. “Why an opera singer has to train like an athlete to hit every note.” (Dec. 15, 2017).

[His] character dies at the end of act two, but he is onstage for all of the first act and most of the second. He's exhausted by the time the show is through... It's funny, I don't think people think of opera as physically demanding, but singing takes a lot out of you. All of these aspects, the mental, there are so many different facets of putting on an opera, and then when you put intense physical demands, it can be exhausting.²¹

Beyond the physical and vocal stamina required, an additional, deeper inquiry about question three, regarding an artist's "fit" for the role within the production is to consider if the artist must play a swaggering "Don Juan" character onstage, but is himself personally, not cisgender. How might this compromise the onstage chemistry between his leading lady love interest and his own character?

A casting agent might choose to decline the offer of an appearance by a Metropolitan Opera artist in a leading role in a regional production if the leading soprano (also a Met artist) requests it. Perhaps as an artistic colleague working together at the same company, the soprano already knows that she would not be able to convincingly act the part of being in love with the tenor. Should the leading soprano suggest to the casting agent that her potential on-stage paramour, as a non-cisgender artist, could not appropriately represent a heterosexual lover in the production, the casting agent must take note. While an artist's personal life should really have no bearing on his or her ability to act a role onstage, in this particular instance, securing a casting coup by contracting the soprano for her debut performance in an important role should take precedence in order to keep her engaged and excited about the production which could serve to be her vehicle for presenting a new leading role in her career.

²¹ Maggie Hendricks, USA Today.com. "Why an opera singer has to train like an athlete to hit every note." (Dec. 15, 2017).

In this case, a casting agent could acquiesce to the leading soprano's gentle but firm request for a different leading man for the good of the overall production team, onstage chemistry and the future reputation of the company. Should this soprano go on to become a big stage name the accompanying potential marketing clout by hiring her outweighs the potential damage done to the company's relationship with the tenor's supporters by not accepting him for that particular role. A casting agent must weigh the intricate factors and make the best decision for the overarching goal of that production.

Further discovery requires that the casting agent be willing to let go of a perfect fit when scheduling, fees and/or additional logistics impede. An artist who might be a great match for the production, but is already contracted by another company for a different and overlapping production cannot be accommodated if it compromises the company's overall ensemble rehearsal schedule, budget or camaraderie of the crew (i.e. "why are *they* allowed to arrive late to the rehearsal period but I was not?"). Or, an artist who demands company-sponsored childcare and additional family housing cannot be indulged, if the financial bottom-line is unduly compromised.

**** TIP:** If an artist begins to present as "too demanding" for the company's available resources prior to the start of the production run, and the company will be better served by relieving the artist from his or her contractual agreement, it behooves the casting agent to have already secured a back-up artist with all details and logistics completely in place before discussing the first artist's dismissal with them.

TIP 1

All artists and production companies engage in a dance of nuance, testing and stretching the boundaries of each factor and limit. Can the company provide more? Can the artist be more flexible? Can the rehearsal schedule be modified? Can the costume be enlarged? Can the housing be changed? Can a local car be provided? Can I bring my dog? Et cetera. The most successful artists are flexible with regard to details and logistics, while maintaining the highest level of professionalism and the most successful casting agents are inherently problem solvers for both the company and the artists.

One final “trick of the trade” must be noted, when discussing how casting agents make decisions about artists. It is a common urban legend that audition settings can test a singer’s collaborative ability and collegiality by placing the singer in situations in which they may not realize they are being auditioned. This can include pre-audition observation by company staff in both the practice and waiting rooms, as well as in the audition room by musical staff such as the accompanist. The people behind the table watching the auditionee are not always the casting agent, artistic director or those who might make the final decision. Comportment, collegiality and congeniality can be important final determinants for a casting agent when choosing an unknown artist for a role in his or her upcoming production. As well, these important attributes in a potential employee can be more important for certain roles than any talent displayed. I enjoyed attending opera auditions or competitions as a singer myself, observing other artists as they prepared and/or waited and interacted with other singers or artists. A casting agent can get a much better feel for who an artist really is, and how he or she might really work behind the scenes with others, by waiting backstage or in the hallways of an audition location. Once in the audition room, an artistic director or casting agent is presented with the best version of the artist

that can be mustered with regard to the singer's look and vocality, however this is not a good representation of the actual skill set needed to work in a production with a team of professionals.

**** TIP:** Word-of-mouth is the most potent marketing agent. I have been at several auditions where the singer sang well, presented themselves professionally and in every aspect was suitably impressive. However, once the singer left the room the consensus of comments among the other panelists at my table with whom this singer had previous work experience was telltale—most of them felt the need to say out loud that this particular singer simply “auditioned well” but did not have a history of being a good cast member.

TIP 2

Auditions are extremely limited in what they can show in such a short time that actually relates to the job to be done. As Gregory Henkel (Artistic Planning Manager, LA Opera) recently said while teaching an audition technique class, “Auditions are a short job interview in which you have a limited time to demonstrate how you might function in a variety of other settings.”²² While there is a movement to create blind auditions similar to what professional orchestras employ today, in an attempt to avoid unconscious bias, I am not in favor of this idea. Opera is a multi-media art form and one's look and physicality, while flexible due to the magic of wigs, make-up and costumes, is still an essential part of delivering one's character on stage.

Thus, the word-of-mouth type of recommendation carries much weight in the small world of opera, whether it be with regard to a singer, designer or production crew member. Singers

²² Joshua Winograde, Wolf Trap Opera website. “The Audition Game.” (Jan. 25, 2008).

often move from the stage to the conductor's box or the role of director with ease after a long career and decades of operatic knowledge and experience and all participants in opera productions would do well to remember this fact. For example, I recently sang the lead role in a university production at which another lead singer did not know his role at the time of the sitzprobe. While the artist is a fabulous singer and great onstage, he would not be a good fit for one of my compressed-schedule, professional productions for the sheer fact that he was not prepared when he was supposed to be, which did and would place an undue and unnecessary burden on the other team members of the production.

This truth carries over into other production roles as well. Regional productions often enjoy fewer resources, most especially that of time. Arriving at the rehearsal period fully-prepared, either musically or organizationally, is a must for all roles. While casting the onstage singers for a show is only one small part of the production team build, it is one of the most prolifically-discussed aspects of the field and therefore merits time in this document. However, hiring and casting other production roles must also be addressed, although protocols and organizational structures for those roles are less defined.

At the Audition Itself

So how does the casting agent, potentially sitting through dozens if not hundreds of vocal auditions that day, make the snap decisions listed above? Most vocal auditions last three to five minutes, and incorporate two to four documents (singer's headshot, resume, aria list) as well as the components of visual and aural input. It is a cliché in the business, that auditioning singers often feel that they are hardly being listened to or observed in an audition situation. The panelists behind the table are often shuffling papers, reading documents, making notes or even conversing

among themselves rather than politely watching the singer's performance. While this may be true, it does not indicate a lack of interest on the part of the panelist. After years of listening and participating in casting auditions, I have found that I tend to gravitate to a particular order of input when presented with a lot of information to digest in a very short amount of time.

First, as the singer is entering the room and introducing themselves, I read the singer's presented list of arias for the audition. A prepared singer brings a (well) written list of his or her chosen arias for the auditioning panel to consider in order to present themselves in the most complimentary vocal light (i.e., the most solid, completely prepared arias pertinent to the role desired.) This list should represent the Fach of the role the singer is interested in landing, and in the case of a younger singer, may sometimes include one or two arias that suggest future vocal potential. Primarily, the arias list should specifically point to only one Fach and should not (or rarely) deviate from the singer's current level of artistry. Anomalies will instantly be noted by an experienced auditioner and will invariably attract interest in both good and bad ways. If a singer primarily lists arias from larger spinto roles, but includes one coloratura or soubrette aria, this may pique the interest of the auditioners. How does this singer handle both types of vocal challenges? Or, does the tenor list both baritone and tenor roles? Is he in the process of transitioning from one fach to another? Is he vocally ready to take on a role in his new Fach? Multiple clues present themselves to the savvy auditioner, simply on the arias list page. Is the singer experienced enough to understand their voice? Do they understand their vocal capabilities or are they reaching too far? Is the artist choosing age-appropriate repertoire (i.e., for his or her current vocal developmental stage) for themselves which matches the "look" of the roles the artist is choosing to promote? It is a balancing act for a singer to present a list of arias for which any auditioner could easily agree they are a fit, while at the same time balancing the list with

arias that support the performer's vision of him or herself beyond what an overworked, bored casting agent might not have the energy to creatively envision by him or herself.

Conversely, it is the casting agent's job to remain creatively open to the vision that an artist might wish to present, whether or not the agent's split second observation of the auditionee matches that artist's personal vision for him or herself.

After the singer's entrance and introduction and my quick reading of arias list, I generally encourage the singer to begin by looking up and waiting for their initial first notes. Another well-known cliché in the business is the idea that an auditioner can determine how they feel about an artist within the first three notes sung. While this may be a slight exaggeration, it is not without merit. I have generally placed the singer into a category by the end of the first several phrases. While my initial categorization may change based on the continuing vocal presentation, it gives me a chance to begin the next phase of the process— reviewing the singer's resume for confirmation of my categorization. Does their vocal level match the amount of experience I am seeing on the resume? Do they have a list of performed roles that exceeds the ability and quality I'm hearing? Is their list of performed roles rather short for the advanced artistry I'm hearing, and if so, did they attend a large, highly competitive conservatory to explain that short list? If I am interested in the singer for a role in one of my productions, I will scan the resume for any coaches, teachers or producers that I personally know, so that I might confirm either via association or in actuality, their opinion of the artist. If I am not going to offer the artist a main role, does their resume suggest that what I am going to offer them would be a step in the right direction for their career?

Finally, after categorizing the singer's technical ability and stage experience and determining if he or she is vocally appropriate for the Fach, as well as observing the auditionee's

artistic capability to act the character for any of the roles I might have to offer, I mentally reconfirm my choices by looking at the artist's headshot. Is this singer marketable in the role for which I'd like to offer them the opportunity? Does their "look" match the production and/or their potential onstage love interest? For example, several times I hired a fabulous lyric soprano for a lead role, who was quite tall. One role she was very excited about, as she was vocally perfect for the role but never thought she would have the opportunity to perform it being far too large to act as a petite, frail woman as the character is described. Determined to cast her, I chose to compromise on the timbre of the tenor voice that I hired to play her love interest on stage by choosing an even taller performer to sing opposite her. The two singers were fabulous together onstage, and both very professional. Vocally, I might have made a different choice for the tenor lead had the soprano been a shorter individual, but overall the match was acceptable.

Finding an appropriate singer is not, however, the end of the casting process. Indeed, it is only the beginning. There are innumerable other factors that go into making a final casting decision, especially within the context of a production and furthermore within the context of a company's goals. Prioritization order changes every production and every financial year, and the natural aging of the singers and the audience changes perceptions and needs over time. Casting is a constantly changing choreography of dance of steps, and the casting agent must always be on his or her toes.

Casting for the Company Versus for a Show

How one assigns roles for each specific opera production is more than just the choices made for the benefit of that particular opera cast or that particular production. Casting should be recognized as one of the largest factors in a company's long-term well-being, because it can

instantly affect both the artistic reputation of a company (with singers, agencies, audiences, promoters, critics, etc.) as well as the overall fiscal health of the business far beyond the current production being cast itself. Operatic productions, indeed, any meaningful artistic undertaking, inherently asks for its performers and artists to allow themselves to be deeply vulnerable together in a way that other jobs do not require from employees. Therefore, trust and respect between actors must be acknowledged in all casting choices for success to be achieved, not only in the production at hand, but for the company's long-term result.

For example, while a nationally-known singer might be perfectly suited for a role in the company's upcoming repertory and have an influential manager or agency which could forge a future network of support for the casting agent/company, prior relationships developed over time with the company's most reliable, regular performers could be jeopardized by utilizing that better-known singer. Prior incidents may have occurred at other companies between the proposed "star" and the company's regulars, and the casting agent may deplete valuable emotional resources and goodwill within the company's ranks, should they cast the "star" over the considerations of other involved artists. A role assignment such as this, would make that casting choice a long-term, overall cost to the company's morale and the team trust for that specific production as well as future shows with the reliable regionally-based singers. Or perhaps that particular professional singer is perfectly suited to the role and has no prior baggage to consider, but his or her agent negotiates a fee that is so incongruent with other artists as to cause dissension. Or the negotiated fee is too large a chunk of the production's overall budget that to commit to cast that singer would undermine the fiscal strength of the company for years to come.

A casting agent has both trust and money to spend with each casting decision, and must choose wisely what the better investment is for the long-term health of the company. With this

essential umbrella view, casting plays one of the most important parts in an opera company's ultimate success or failure.

Opera is the Original Team Sport

Any opera producer of worth knows that a passionate opera fan is a rare and precious resource. As well, the extensive production needs of the art form necessitate an unquestionable embrace and coddling of just about anyone who shows interest or who may unwittingly find themselves in the crosshairs of a production. As such, it is my professional philosophy that there is *always* a role, position or place for everyone to shine in a production, whether it be onstage, backstage, in the pit, in the front-of-house team, in the audience, or in a support role preparing for the curtain months in advance. No team is successful without having every necessary role filled with competent (or, at the least, easily-trained) engaged individuals. Volunteers are an essential facet of this formula for success and are no less important than paid professionals in collaborating together for the final outcome.

However, one of the most important aspects of a casting agent's job is to determine where a person and his or her accompanying skill set (or lack thereof) can make the most impact for the good of the production or the company as a whole. The casting agent's analytical determination and subsequent role offering is not always that in which a person wishes to be placed. While it may not fall to the casting agent to accomplish, cajoling may be necessary to encourage an artist or volunteer to take on a role which they do not see for themselves, but which the casting agent or producer has ascertained is a good fit for a particular personality and skill-set. It is essential for the outcome of the production that each actor be committed and engaged in

the duties required for the position in which the casting agent has determined this particular person would excel.

Another intuitive skill, which is the hallmark of a resourceful and creative casting agent and which is essential for a regional casting agent, is the ability to envision a combination of two or more roles from disparate areas of the production which fit the skills of a certain, available individual. Picking up on the most obvious strengths of each person's character and background while also (perhaps secretly) acknowledging possible weaknesses in experience or skills, can do nothing but serve the casting agent and the company well, when directing limited resources into the needed production functions and duties of the show. There are even important and necessary roles for complete neophytes to the world of opera. For instance, someone who has never been to an opera before, but who has access to a construction labor crew can be very useful when it is time to load in/load out a large set to the theater; a budding visual artist might be willing to try their hand at assisting in the painting of a set (with guidance); or a local insurance agent might love the opportunity and excitement of doing a walk-on, non-speaking cameo appearance in the show. Prior opera experience is unnecessary, but anyone willing to support the work, can be an important part of making a grand production come to life. An experienced producer will always find a way to incorporate interested individuals, not only to encourage their involvement in the arts in general, but also to benefit the needs of the specific show.

It is one of my fondest sayings that, "If you are not passionately in love with opera, you have simply not seen good opera yet." I consider it to be a great privilege, and indeed I had many an opportunity while running a rural, professional opera company, to introduce those who may not believe that they enjoy opera, to the massive intricacies and machinations that must occur in order to bring an opera production to its opening night. With so many different facets and varied

aspects to the work, even an avowed “opera hater” may be able to find themselves respecting the work, listening to the rehearsals and potentially succumbing to the power of the art form. I often say that the power of opera is undeniable, but bringing people close enough to reach the threshold of access may often need to be approached with surreptitious advocacy. A great sports coach knows how to motivate people to play together as a team in the same way that a casting agent/artistic director/volunteer coordinator might encourage all the members of a production to work together toward a successful show result.

Casting as the Foundation of the Production’s Success

While there is always a place for everyone in any production, often not everyone agrees with the same vision of where a particular person might belong in a specific opera production. A casting agent’s understanding of this Key Factor is essential for successful team building. The first aspect of the Key Factor is this quintessential human attribute-- one is often less aware of one’s actual talent capacity within the context of a production’s needs, whether amateur or professional, than an observer; and the second aspect is the casting agent’s ability to appropriately manage or direct this human attribute. Together, these two aspects make up the Key Factor that determines an agent’s success or failure in building a production team.

To be more specific: it is an *artist’s* job to avoid comparison and negative critiques throughout their development in order to creatively build their talent; however, it is the casting agent’s job to provide appropriate *employees* at a specific moment in time, which requires a completely different approach to a performer’s “talent capacity.” Thus, when turning art into economic output (which is a sad, but necessary aspect to producing opera in America), the casting agent must balance both aspects of this issue. If a casting agent were to assign a role to an

artist for which he or she is not yet professionally prepared, regardless of how much the artist might desire to take on the role, this one choice would compromise the entire production by adding weight to other artists responsibilities and dragging the efficiency and competency of the overall production machine down. In this way, a casting agent must be brutally honest with him or herself about the strengths and weaknesses of a beloved artist or important collaborator to ensure overall success.

While developing an artist's range and providing opportunities for growth are valuable approaches for casting university or community productions, the role of the professional show caster must be more focused on the needs of the production's dexterity. An artist needs to feel trust and collegial support in order to freely create their performance. An inexperienced artist, whether on stage or in the lighting booth, will most likely hinder all other artists' capability for inspired performances and/or cause issues that require expensive fixes, either financially or emotionally. In some situations, there may be a reason to accept a compromise on experience-- if the role is small, if the artist is in an assistant capacity, or if the position is non-essential, in order to achieve other, larger goals (see the section on "Hacks" for more on this subject.) Or perhaps, the artist has a proven track record of success but is exploring a new idea, and the production and artistic team can readily trust the artist to arrive prepared and give their full professional attention to the job at hand. This balancing act, in terms of allowing for such a risk, falls to the casting agent, to be astute and determined in order to make a choice that can support the artist while not compromising the production's economic and emotional capability or artistic and financial integrity. The initial assignment of roles, therefore, long before the production begins developing, designing, rehearsing or performing, determines much of the success of the production's run.

Conversely, “over-casting” can sometimes undermine an amateur production if the end goal is to grow a young cast’s experience and career skills. It is often inappropriate to bring in a big-name performer if he or she is not interested in nor available for mentoring younger artists. A situation like this can cause misunderstandings, resentment and set examples that further division and disregard for the artform. A casting agent is not simply choosing a performer for a role—a responsible casting agent is placing a person into a vulnerable position with regard to other roles, or placing a person into a position of trust with regard to other people in the cast, for which the character of the individual artist must be a good fit for the other persons within the intimacy of a production team.

What evidence is available to the casting agent, to determine the best assignment for each role in a production? What clues can inform the casting agent that an artist is right for a particular role or production team?

Casting Agents as Protectors or Destroyers of the Art Form

With such a huge responsibility for finding the right people for each role in an opera production, casting agents enjoy an outsized influence on the future of the art form. Advocacy and perception are the richest tools of today’s world economy and each aspect of business always returns to the root of the product. What is opera’s product? It is the ability of a live performance to move an audience to an emotional response. A well-cast production, both onstage and off-stage, will never fail to have an impact on the audience (regardless of the repertoire), and this is the key to the future of opera. No amount of marketing will save a company over the long-term if their artistic product is uninspiring to audiences. No amount of financial support can overcome disconnected staging and set design. No amount of fabulous

singing will overcome an exceptionally bad front-of-house experience for an audience patron. Opera has been fighting elite perceptions since it began, in both positive and negative ways. Putting people into the right roles for their personalities and abilities will allow for each individual to shine and is the most sure-fire way to secure success for everyone involved in creating or attending a production, and for this reason an excellent casting agent can change the future of the field.

Casting agents must be aware of the particular and specific mission of the company for which they are casting. For instance, when I was at the helm of my company, I was specifically interested in casting and supporting true *bel canto* singing (my definition of which is: a long, supported lyric line capable of fast, florid passages sung with healthy power) and I often passed on opportunities to hire available, well-known singers if I felt this vocal quality was lacking. Some companies, however, might be more interested in casting and supporting modern works for which that same singer might be considered a casting coup to contract. Or a company might forgo the best *bel canto* singer in order to satisfy the stage director's vision for the character. Some companies might focus entirely on what repertoire choices will allow them to sell the most tickets rather than search for "big names" for the cast or might choose repertoire or performers that would allow them to receive the most critical reviews. The focus of each company is an essential factor in weighing all of the many elements that make up a casting decision.

How does a Casting Agent make this all-important critique as to what an individual's best role is for the company and/or production and what type of person is comfortable assessing artists in this way?

Chapter 4: A PORTRAIT OF THE CASTING AGENT

A. What Does a Casting Agent Need to Know?

1. Vocal Development and Preparedness, Acting Ability for Each Specific Role/Opera

More often than not, casting a vocal role is the easiest job of the entire production. While it is still one of the more important aspects of the show and requires a vast body of knowledge to accomplish well, casting vocal roles is generally not the most difficult facet of production building. Not only is the needed body of knowledge about each vocal Fach appropriate for each vocal role already well-established, but also most traditional roles have a plethora of available, experienced and appropriate singers from which to choose. Auditioning opportunities and/or video of previous performances are increasingly easily accessed. Filling on-stage roles also tends to be easier than filling backstage roles, as more people are addicted to the thrill of performance than are excited about the (literally) unsung backstage heroics required to mount a production. However, while the odds of finding a great fit for a particular operatic role may seem better than those for perfectly filling other production roles, it still remains a chess-game challenge to accomplish and is therefore the initial impetus behind all casting decisions. As discussed earlier in this document, the casting agent must be intimately aware of the vocal requirements for each role s/he casts. Can the artist healthfully sing/perform at the technical level required for this role/position? Does the specific role's required stamina, pacing or unique characteristics fit this singer's abilities? This knowledge is more necessary when casting school and community shows, and less of an issue at the professional level, so will not be belabored here.

2. Singer Personality, Collaborative Ability, Reliability

Not only must a casting agent find the right VOCAL qualities for a particular operatic role (solid range, correct vocal timbre for era and character, stamina for the dramatic and musical trajectory) but s/he must also find those vocal qualities within the individual PERFORMER with the correct temperament for the character, acting ability for the drama, and age/body for the character. Additionally, the casting agent must find all these important vocal and performer qualities present in the right individual EMPLOYEE for the company and the resources of the production. Will they arrive “off-book” as the contract states? Will they take proper care of their health during an intensive rehearsal schedule at altitude? Will they be on time, and flexible when/if the rehearsal schedule must change? Will they handle their own personal needs themselves in terms of finding childcare for family as needed, or manage their allergies properly if placed in a location that doesn’t work?

Finally, if the right vocal, performer and employee qualities are all present in a singer, the last question to address is whether or not this individual is a good fit for the production team. Are there other singers in the cast that would “clash” with the artist? Are there ways in which this artist might undermine the health or reputation of the company? For instance, in my first full production, I hired a well-known regional artist who could fill a difficult vocal part to cast. While the artist, as a singer and performer was a terrific stage personality and musically professional, this person felt entitled to special perks that my fledgling company was not prepared to provide. After receiving a “no” from the company regarding her request, the artist took it upon herself to demand these perks directly from the largest company (and most important philanthropic entity) in town. Not only did this artist jeopardize the company’s relationship with an important donor, but she ruined the perception of operatic artists (a new, exotic creature in town) for years within the town’s business networks and squandered the subsequent good will needed to engender in-

kind donations. I had much collateral damage to abate and determined that this artist, while artistically professional as a vocalist, performer and production employee, was a horrible representative of and fit for the company as a whole and have since refused to hire her ever again.

**** TIP:** When a casting agent is also a performing member of the production, separating the two jobs becomes very complicated. A young artist may be seeking networking opportunities and career advancement through a friendship with a more experienced performer. However, a casting agent also acting in the role of a performer colleague must be very cautious with any friendship extended. Career advice and casting decisions can be taken “personally” either by the young artist or more typically by the young artists’ team of coaches and teachers, harming relationships for the company.

TIP 3

3. Production Roles

Production roles encompass a multitude of very different types of artists. Included in this category are the subcategories of the Artistic/Designer positions such as the Stage Director, Conductor, Lighting Designer, Scenic Designer, Scenic Artist, and Costume Designer. These production artists are to be considered as equally creative and specialized in their training as for which the on-stage artists are recognized. This acknowledgement of their artistic essence (and the often accompanying artistic “attitude” for such) is essential to maintaining balance and respect within the various categorical ranks of production personnel. It is also essential when determining contractual obligations that these artistic roles be given equal weight to the on-stage

roles, with regard to all arrangements regarding payment, housing, travel and acknowledgement in production materials.

Other equally essential production roles, which fall into the subcategory of Manager positions (although still art forms in and of themselves, when performed well) include: Stage Manager, Personnel Manager, Front of House Manager, Sound Booth Manager, Technical Director, Costume Mistress, Propmaster/mistress, Orchestral Contractor, and all assistants to both the Artistic/Designer and Manager groups as well as the backstage run crew and production build crew.

These production artists generally operate with a more practical approach to production duties, being more of the manifesters rather than the visionaries, which is often reflected in their personalities and communication styles. These types of players often require a much more direct approach from management, with specific schedules and rigorous protocol functions to accomplish their tasks. One of the more “fun” aspects of “production-ing” is to observe the interactions between these backstage personalities with those of the onstage artists. One might expect that the more professional the level of the cast of players (both onstage and off), the less friction or drama will ensue, however this is not always the case.

As noted previously, for regional casting agents and production managers, avoiding drama between the various subcategories of production personnel is a top priority during a production. Merely casting working professionals into any specific role is not, unfortunately, a guarantee of professional behavior during a production run. Thus, the casting agent must be aware of typical personality clashes between personnel categories and anticipate the potential for breakdown when hiring for specific roles. As an example, propmasters/mistresses are often under

a great deal of stress to create, improvise and source unusual items needed in short amount of time, as the stage director works through the show and determines a specific need. This can create situations in which the propmaster may have invested a great deal of effort in order to produce a specific item, either in creating from scratch or wheeling-dealing with a recalcitrant, local business; and if the onstage artist using said item does not treat it with care or replace it in its proper place offstage, the propmaster may become frustrated with the performer in such a way that is not conducive to the overall camaraderie backstage.

Choosing artists who have the type of respectful understanding of each player's importance in creating the overall production's success is often a regional casting agent's best weapon. Not only is this desired trait (a respectful approach to each member of the team) not always a "given" when hiring professional artists, it is a doubly-important factor when hiring professionals for a regional or smaller company which might struggle to provide standard resources a professional singer might take for granted at larger houses.

B. Surveying the Regional "Operascape" and Finding a Company's "Niche"

A casting agent can specialize with a specific type of role or a specific type of artist. For instance, some casting agents might utilize their national networks to specialize in casting singers with a large audience following, or specialize in knowing and casting specific types of operas (i.e. contemporary operas, Mozart roles, or regional house levels). A casting agent must decide what "niche" a company fills within the wider landscape of companies and work within the realm of that company's expertise. A regional company is not going to be interested in casting a big-name singer if it overstretches the production budget, nor is a higher-level, nationally-

renowned company going to be interested in an unknown up and coming singer for a traditional Mozart role that hundreds of well-established singers are capable of handling.

The most effective casting agents are aware of their company's goals (spoken or unspoken) and work to support the desired end result in their casting choices. For example, a regional company may be at the developmental stage of establishing its reputation and therefore may be more interested in presenting extremely fine bel canto singing on stage versus utilizing well-established names for its roster who might not be the best fit for the opera's vocal requirements. Or conversely, a regional company may be at the point of expanding its reach onto a larger national stage and may therefore, wish to attract more well-known singers for marketing reach rather than being as concerned with perfect technique or stylistic purity for a show. Some companies pride themselves on programming new works and championing specific composers, for which a casting agent must become aware of the pool of specialty singers who best represent that composer's ideas and/or vocal style.

C. Reading Artists for Team Building

1. Company and Production "Fit"

So, what is the secret? How does a regional casting agent find the "perfect fit" for each role in the production, when each subcategory of player requires such a unique skillset and varied personality type? This is not an easy job for a mere casting agent, who is intent on building a production team rather than on the deep analyzation of multiple personalities; nor is it a job at which most trained, psychological professionals would excel if asked to predict the success of complex interpersonal interactions at multiple skill levels based on reading a resume or five-minute interview/audition.

To be most successful, a casting agent can focus on three primary factors: intuition, company knowledge and resourcefulness. Most casting agents come by their work through years of experience “reading people” well enough to establish a set of base observations which serve them well on an intuitive basis at the first level of assessment. Many of these intuitive assessments have very little to do with knowledge of the artform itself and have more to do with general characteristics of team players versus individualists, leaders versus followers and creators versus generators. My favorite base observations include observing someone’s *flexibility* with regard to any requests I might make during an interview or audition situation (i.e., “Can you please try that again from this perspective?”), their *background* knowledge of the field and major players (i.e., “name-dropping” for lack of a better word, to determine their level of immersion in the field), and the *presentation* of their work, both with regard to the creative aspect as well as the business approach (i.e. Were they on time? Do they spell things correctly? Are they neat and clean in their appearance?). While these observations can be specifically codified, a good casting agent may subconsciously absorb most of these items all at once, in an intuitive manner, which then allows the casting agent the time to utilize the second and third factors of assessment-- company knowledge and resourcefulness-- for further determination.

Once a general, intuitive assessment of an artist has been reached, the casting agent must then weigh the artist’s personal information against the facts and realities of the company’s situation. Does this artist’s ability to be logistically flexible match the company’s resources? Will this artist’s previous network and body of work in the field support the possibility of success in the agent’s current company structure? Does this artist exhibit the type of attention to detail that this role will require in this particular production?

For example, an established artist who is less flexible in his or her ability to shift ideas about a character which they have previously performed, may not be a good fit for a production which will be utilizing a stage director intent on “modernizing” a traditional, well-known opera. Or, an artist who has only worked in large, well-established houses may find it extremely difficult to be successful (i.e., a happy team player) within a small, regional production in which several, typical production roles may be not be operating (for example, individual, assigned costume dressers for each principal artist) and which would therefore require the performer to be more independent in their preparations during the show. As well, if an artist’s network is extensive enough, such that they may have contacts in the field who have worked with the casting agent’s company in the past, they may have already determined that the company’s resources will be acceptable to them. However, an artist who has not done such advance research, or who’s network is not large enough yet, could be in for a rude surprise if their expectations don’t meet the reality of their new working conditions.

Finally, should a casting agent find an appropriately prepared artist who seems, intuitively, to also be a good personality fit for the role and production, as well as a good match for the company’s level of resources, the last assessment must be made: references. This is the area of casting which often requires the most resourcefulness on the part of the agent. All artists and potential employees can be expected to attempt to present themselves in the best way possible. It is, therefore, the casting agent’s job to determine to the best of their ability, if initial impressions coincide with previous work experience. This can be done through a casting agent’s network of professionals, who may or may not recommend certain artists after having worked with them in the past. This can also be somewhat determined by looking at an artist’s resume. Does their resume reflect numerous re-engagements with the same company, or multiple

productions with the same directors? As well, a casting agent can now access numerous online resources to verify information listed as well as potentially view the artist's work sans the inevitable "editing" that the field of entertainment requires of freelancing artists in their personal marketing. Finally, a casting agent can evaluate the obvious influences upon an artist's body of work for matching values. Do they primarily work with agents known to be toxic in the field, or conductors well-known for either the highest musical expectations or conversely, for abusive tactics? Does the artist return, year after year, to teach at a summer program that is notoriously predatory towards young artists, or reside at a university that has an excellent reputation for shepherding new talent?

The art of casting is an inexact science. However, by utilizing these three primary factors-- intuition, company knowledge and resourcefulness-- in his or her evaluations, an agent can be assured of reaching a solid assessment of an artist and their possible fit within a particular company's upcoming production.

A final word about the intricacy of the job of casting is required. While a casting agent must trust and rely upon their own personal intuition, combined with their extensive experience and company knowledge, backed up with comments and research from the field's network, the hardest aspect of the job may be to "throw it all out the window." An agent must resist his or her desire to place a favored artist in a role that seems to be a good fit in *most* ways, in order to maintain relationships, or to move onto the next role in building the whole team. Unfortunately, while a known artist may have been an excellent fit for last year's production, it is often a reality that the current production is NOT that artist's area of expertise and that during production, the other minor ways in which that particular artist is not the right fit will inevitably rise to the surface and negatively impact or compromise other areas of the production that were well-cast.

An agent can be lulled into believing that a personality that matched a company once, will always match the next production. This is one of the more difficult aspects of casting-- to build relationships with artists that require trust and respect, but to also require an artist to step back without affront when the agent overlooks them for a different opportunity without undermining the future possibilities with that artist and company working together.

Chapter 5: PRIORITIZING THE FACTORS

How does a casting agent weigh all of the many factors we've already discussed in this document, to determine the best choice for any one role? Depending on the number of artists clamoring for a specific job or role, a casting agent may need to be more or less willing to take risks at the company's expense. If the role must be filled, and there are few interested, appropriate applicants, the prioritization duties become less dependent on the agent's understanding of the company's "landscape" at the time of the production and more dependent on need. However, in situations where a plethora of choices are available (usually with regard to the singers' roles, especially sopranos), a casting agent must weigh the many factors at play in a company's long term viability against the needs of the imminent production, to assign the best artist for *that* role for *that* production for *that* company in *that* location with *that* group of accompanying team members. Some of the many facets that the agent must consider include:

- Casting for the company's long-term needs versus for just a show (for vision)
- Casting for the overall team versus the perfect artist (for peace)
- Casting for marketing value (for ticket sales)
- Vanity Casting (for the artist or the Casting Agent's clout)
- Casting purely for the art of singing (for the art)
- Casting purely for entertainment (for the audience)
- Casting for vocal care and proper development (for integrity)
- Casting artist partners, friends and donors (for the bottom line)
- Casting for consistency-- both with artists and with repertoire (for reliability)
- Casting for growth (for shattering expectations, artist development and wow factor)

For example, in a situation where a young artist has the right look, the right Fach/timbre, and is at the right moment in his or her career to be a nice company fit, but is not receiving rave reviews for various reasons throughout the region, a casting agent might decide to “take a chance” on the young artist such that, with the right stage director to bring out this artist’s inner acting ability, he or she can shine on the stage and defy critical expectations. Or, a lighting designer might have a reputation for being a “drama king” for which the casting agent may have heard warnings to stay away from engaging that artist. But artists’ lives change, and artists/people grow and develop at different times. A savvy casting agent may be able to inquire surreptitiously about previous extenuating circumstances and may be able to determine that the time is now ripe to give this artist “another chance” at proving their abilities, with the right kind of support. Or, although an artist may seem to be perfectly matched with the company in every way, an upcoming role which fits their Fach may be simply one-too-many-times that this artist is presented onstage for the dedicated fans to enjoy again. A casting agent, as noted above, must be aware of the impact of every choice on the artist him or herself, on the company’s short term and long-term viability, on the audience, on the backstage production team, on the art form’s integrity as well as on the overall chemistry of the actor-singers on the stage in the characters they will inhabit. These are numerous aspects to consider, and each year the order of prioritization may change based on the company’s financial situation, regional reputation and repertoire projections.

One of the best ways a casting agent can satisfy the myriad factors involved in making a casting decision, is to be clear about the priority that year for the company and the production. Is the company flush this year, and able to take a chance on a young artist? Is the production utilizing an “avant-garde” approach to stage direction, and a somewhat unstable, but creative

genius in the lighting booth is worth the management headache? Is the theater this year under new management and therefore a seasoned, calm and ultra-professional technical director is an absolute requirement?

The Role of Artist Managers in Building Teams

Some of this relational difficulty is meant to be mitigated through the use of the Artist Manager network structure. By acting as a “go-between” from the artist to the producer and/or casting agent, some of the challenges facing both artist and casting agent during the negotiation of a contract are relieved. The agent, just as with real estate transactions, is meant to act in the artist’s best interest, garnering the highest fee possible and the most agreeable terms for the logistics of the artist’s residency. Conversely, the casting agent need not be concerned with hiding some of the details of their thought process when determining the ultimate value that an artist brings (or does not bring) to an overall production. An artist manager should be aware of the company’s structure and resource abilities when choosing what artist to recommend, and a casting agent must be aware of an artist manager’s reputation for understanding the nuances of a particular show as well as the specific subtleties of each composer’s style needs and the required individual Fachs. The artist manager should be pre-evaluated for his or her noted honesty (or lack thereof) in the contractual process with regard to discussing their pro-offered artist’s abilities and specialties.

An artist manager who does not consider the needs of the company in their negotiations and artist recommendations will not build a long-term relationship with that organization. As well, artists need to be aware of the impact their agency/manager may have on a smaller, regional company, and continually assess whether the agent is helping or harming their future

work possibilities. In my casting experience, I have avoided working with artists managers whenever possible, unless my network of available singers/artists for a particular role is exhausted. Artists managers are often uninterested in both the regional opera scene as well as the fees available for such, and tend to offer only their B roster. In the cases where an artist has been discovered/approached prior to including the artist's agent in potential hiring discussions, an artist manager tends to graciously remain unengaged in the regional contract, to the benefit of both the artist as well as the company. However, if a casting agent approaches the artist manager for assistance in finding a singer for a particular role, this is the best-case scenario for a symbiotic relationship that furthers the goals of the art form.

Unfortunately, it is not always possible to garner services for an appropriate artist through the artists manager network, if the artists manager is unfamiliar with the company, or the production need is urgent and specific. I have rarely used Artists Managers except in cases where finding the specific vocal skill set desired proved especially challenging. For instance, finding professional singers who are excellent Mozartians tends to be more challenging than one would think. Singing Mozart well is quite a feat, and those who are capable tend to be in great demand and/or often pressed into other roles/opportunities as their technical abilities allow for such and the work is available. Mozart's operas are thus often relegated to the university level show if done in America as the professional singers are contracted elsewhere. If a professional company wishes to produce a Mozart opera, collecting all the appropriate singers into one production is a challenge and artists managers are not always a great resource for a small, regional company with high vocal expectations. The manager may send a fine singer who is available, but who is not an authentic Mozartian voice. Or, if the voice is appropriate, the singer herself may not be a good fit for the company. Mozart voices, being in high demand as the most technically advanced,

are often housed in the most “diva-like” personalities, which makes it harder for the issue of company fit to occur. The handful of times that I have utilized Artists Managers to find hard-to-cast roles, more times have related to Mozart voices than any other. Sadly, more times than not, the collaboration has been less than stellar due to the nature of the last minute need or request.

However, the most successful Artists Managers are keen to provide an appropriate singer or designer for a role that can build their artist’s career and resume either through bigger name company experience, network building or new role development in safe environments. Thus, if the timing is right (i.e. at the right point in an up and coming artist’s career, the right production with the right director, or with enough advance inquiry on the part of the company) there are many times when a collaboration between an Artists Manager and a regional company can be beneficial to all.

The Casting Agent as Artistic Director and/or Executive Director

Some companies enjoy the advantage of having the same person charged with making the primary financial decisions (the Artistic Director, the Executive Director or perhaps the President of the Board) also inhabit the role of Casting Agent. In my opinion, this is highly effective for small, regional companies. Many of the hacks for smaller companies that I have previously discussed require that a casting agent have the ability to negotiate unusual agreements beyond the purview of either a fiscal agent or an artistic director alone. For example, a casting agent in that role alone might not be in a position to agree to allow the well-known tenor’s girlfriend to accompany him and share his housing during production unless she were also on board the cast or crew for the show, as a fiscal agent would certainly not agree to that allocated housing or additional travel cost without justification. However, a casting agent may realize that

while the extra party/paramour is an untested crew or cast member with no prior experience or recommendations, by accepting the proposed arrangement, and assigning a (less important) role to the tenor's partner, the production will be better served by having a happy star tenor at his summer gig. This might be an important selling point for an overworked professional singer and avoid his declination of a lower-level opportunity due to the length of time he must be without his girlfriend. Indeed, by assigning the unknown partner entity with a paid position, the production can not only save on housing costs for that additional role (the two lovers will presumably reside together in one room) but the company will also hold a minor influence in the management of the off-stage antics of two employees that might impact the production's efficiency and vocal health of the principal singer. In other words, by keeping the girlfriend busy, the tenor happy, by saving on housing and by being able to manage the girlfriend as an employee, the production is better served overall. It is this overarching impact that a dual Artistic Director/Casting Agent situation creates which can aid smaller companies in reducing costs and keeping a show on track. Unhappy principal singers do not tend to advance a production's best effort or a company's extended reputation in the small professional world of opera.

Can a beneficial arrangement like the example above be created with a separate artistic director and casting agent? Yes, but not without time and communication between the two positions and often the fiscal agent as well. Frequently, time is of the essence when a casting agent is attempting to secure the commitment of an important artist. Removing one (or two) steps in the communication and commitment process is a boon for smaller companies which are focused on securing the highest-level artists possible for regional productions.

Chapter 6: FILLING AND SUPPORTING THE ROLES

A. Peaks and Pitfalls for each Role

1. Performers (Soloist, Choral, Orchestral, Dancer, Actor)

While every member of a production has unique needs and special requirements in order to do their best work, it is the singer who endures the reputation for being the biggest “diva” in any production. It has been my personal experience that this is hardly the case in most instances. See the section on “The Diva Factor” in the Conclusion for more information on this subject. Singers necessarily do need to pay very specific attention to how they treat their bodies, which are their instruments, during a rehearsal and production run in order to deliver their best vocal performances. This can sometimes translate into requests that can, on the surface, seem demanding: no down pillows; I need a humidifier; I cannot be around perfume/smoke/loud noise; I cannot come to a vocal rehearsal earlier than 10 am; etc. None of these special needs should be seen as excessive requests, as they are standard needs for vocal health. In fact, the best companies are well aware of these needs and do their best to provide such accommodations upfront for the singers’ health and comfort.

I prided myself for modeling my company as a “Singers’ Company” where the needs of the singers/performers took precedence over the needs of the other artists, as can unfortunately, often be the case in the current opera economy. Typical singer needs are to require extra time for adjustment to altitude before beginning rehearsals, needing time in between rehearsals to rest, and no more than two rehearsals per day. For regional companies, the rehearsal schedule is usually very compact (to save on housing and imported-orchestra costs) which can be taxing on voices, especially if it is a new role. Dancers needs the mylar flooring that is a safe footing on which they can dance. Principal artists need separate dressing rooms from chorus and

supernumeraries. Orchestral players need a large, lockable room in which to place their instrument cases, and in which to warm up. Orchestral players also need the proper (and comfortable) chairs designed for their respective instruments as well as proper lighting for their music. Choral singers need overt appreciation and great costumes, and possibly a backstage conductor in order to be successful as well as clearly notated acts/scenes listed and posted backstage for optimum entrance preparation.

For my company, one of our biggest draws for the out-of-town artists was our location in the rural mountains. We had to make sure that the artists were given enough downtime to actually enjoy the surroundings, not only to encourage their love of the valley and their enjoyable experience with the company, but also to keep them properly rested. Knowing one's artists is key, however, and this opportunity to explore one's surroundings must be properly managed by staff, from the perspective of the visitor-athlete who must be able to remain at the top of their "game" for the stage, in spite of any recreational pursuits. In my company, which is located in a valley touted to have some of the world's best fly-fishing, several times we had to stage interventions with vocal artists who are overly-enthusiastic in their love of fly-fishing, as they have used the opportunity to pursue their pastime on a production day off. Unfortunately, this has often resulted in a dehydrated, tired and sunburned singer the next day, which does not advance the production's needs. Emerald City Opera staff learned to recognize the fly-fishers and provide guidance for altitude fishing before the singers undertook their next adventure.

As well, many a professional singer (and any other imported artist) may not have prior experience with rural communities' habits with regard to transportation (little to no public options, or the artist may not drive regularly at home in a large city which is required in rural America), unintended interactions with wildlife and again, with hydration combined with alcohol

and hot tubs at altitude-- issues that my company in an alpine resort town, always has had to be sure to address with early information and strict suggestions. One evening, after a long rehearsal and then a late donor party, while walking outside in the dark to my car, I encountered a bear in the middle of the road, next to my vehicle. Another time, the coach/accompanist wanted to immerse himself in the local culture and decided to go country dancing one evening. This didn't go well, and the call from the hospital was less than pleasant. It is never good for a production to lose a performer or artist due to ignorance of the local culture or environment.

2. Artistic Design (Stage Director, Lighting Designer, Costume Designer, Set Designer)

Designers and Directors tend to have different needs than the performers. These artists' needs tend to fall more into the logistics and materials category rather than talent management. For instance, the lighting designer has discovered that the local theater does not have the specific type of light gel which is needed *today*, the closest of which is 200 miles away; the stage director has changed her mind and wants an antique eighteenth-century lantern as a prop, which is physically impossible to acquire in the production timeframe in our rural setting and requires the propmaster to create a replica from scratch; the costume designer wants the standard number of fittings for each onstage role which cannot be accommodated within the tight and compressed rehearsal schedule; the Set Designer failed to design a set that fits off-stage during Act II, as the local theater has very little wing space. Because these artists are often faced with the most constrictions as compared to other members of the production, with regard to their ability to manifest the production's vision, their patience and demeanor are often of more importance to the production manager than that of the "Divas" mentioned previously. A show cannot be successful without a strong and supported "behind-the-scenes" production team, therefore when

prioritizing fires to be put out, an experienced production manager and/or technical director will address the designer/director needs long before an on-stage artist's issue.

Therefore, a wise casting agent will be aware of the past reputation of specific designers and/or directors and their level of tolerance for surprises or will devise a way to determine this prior to offering a role/position. An artist who does not do well with creative substitutions or alternative solutions will most likely, not be a good fit for a regional or rural company. Being aware of these tendencies prior to casting someone in a role that will overly test their ability to remain congenial, is an excellent way to avoid crises during the production run.

This ability to remain flexible while still pursuing the highest artistic ideals for the production is one of the paramount characteristics a good Designer can possess, when working with regional companies. That being said, the ability to cast a flexible Stage Director is the most important act of any casting agent's job when compiling a team for an opera production. Stage Directors are the brain and heart of a show, and without their vision and persistence to bring the vision into manifestation on stage, the show will not only fail to arrive on time, but it may also fail to be interesting.

**** TIP:** The most key element of any production's success or failure is the role of the Stage Director. A production can fail for innumerable reasons, many of which stem from the choices and organizational structures utilized by the Stage Director. A poorly organized Stage Director, or one without a complete vision, can be "overcome" by the combined efforts of the other players on the team, but these efforts for such undermine the energy that can create a cohesive and compelling production overall.

TIP 4

3. Production Crew (Producer, Stage Manager, Vocal Coaches, Set Builders, Propsmaster, Backstage Crew, etc.)

Production crew are often the least “artistic” in nature but are often the nuts and bolts that hold a show together when/if the artists or designers behave unprofessionally. It is almost a cliché that these individuals are the most calm, drama-free and necessary yet the least acknowledged members of a production team. These folks are usually most interested in knowing where they should put their trash, whether or not they can bring their dog with them to the provided housing, or where the best local bar is located. They are often the ones who become the most immersed in the local community, as they spend much of their time running to the hardware store, paint store, local office supply store, etc. When hiring for these positions, I look for people who are good at interacting with the type of residents in my town, as I know that they will often be tasked with asking local businesses for donations on behalf of the production. These workers also tend to be very good communicators, as they have to be resourceful at finding the proverbial “needle in a haystack” and must ask numerous questions to get to the proper result. As well in contrast to the (often international) artists, they are extremely helpful to the production in numerous ways as they are generally comfortable driving large trucks and operating construction equipment. Experience as an electrician, a builder and/or with art class (for making props) and moving large objects quickly and quietly (in the dark) are desired skill sets. A large cadre of black clothing is a plus. While these roles are not usually difficult to fill, many are needed, and finding enough local folks to commit to the full production run is often the challenge. I have often found that, while excited about being involved in the show, production crew are equally interested in the tastes of the local brew tavern.

4. Audience Support (Front of House, Box Office, etc.)

Individuals who inhabit the Front of House roles such as Box Office manager, ushers, concessionaires and their overall Front of House Manager, tend to be those who are not typically performers/designers/artists themselves, but rather fans of such and supportive patrons of the artform without the accompanying large monetary purse. These people are the bread and butter of the audience and patron experience and must be properly acknowledged, trained to perform the duties as would be expected at a professional company and thanked profusely with as much access to company parties, interaction with the production's stars, and available production swag as possible. Even though I was taught in Germany that "*Nur den tot ist frei*" (only the dead are free) with regard to admittance to the show with a paid ticket, I always allowed my front of house volunteers an extra ticket to distribute to a friend or family. In a small, regional company, goodwill and gifts or opportunities that need not be purchased outright by the company, are oftentimes worth *much* more in the long run than the earnings of one paid ticket.

5. Company (Marketing, Show Program, Funding, Donor Recognition, etc.)

Casting agents don't work in a vacuum. They must have good administration supporting their choices in order to succeed. Good administration requires structures that enable the artists to do their best work without having to worry about practicalities. Therefore, a small, regional company's casting agent must not only understand the challenges associated with being a professional singer/artist, but also those unique challenges that arise from being regionally/rurally located and the combination of these two factors. The successful casting agent incorporates some of these considerations, logistics and details of the practicalities that the production and artists will face into their ongoing thought processes and discussions for the team

build of an opera production's needs. For example, an artist who is used to living in a large, metropolitan area may be used to the independence and convenience of public transportation. The artist may not even be someone who drives a car. In a rural setting without much public transportation, combined with a small company garnering donated housing which comes as and where it may, it would not be enough to provide this artist with a vehicle to transport him or herself between rehearsals, lodging and grocery stores. The administration would need to provide a chauffeur for such an artist, creating a labor issue as well as a hospitality concern for the artist. Hiring a singer and placing them in donated housing 45 minutes away from the venue is a questionable choice, albeit free lodging. However, placing that singer in the outlying residence with another artist who did not have a vehicle with the expectation that the first artist will provide all transportation needs for the second artist is a very poor administrative choice in numerous ways. One can also argue that it is disrespectful to the first singer's personal time and schedule for a long production run. Making assumptions like this can require uncomfortable conversations and last minute resource adjustments.

**** TIP:** While the Stage Director is the most key element of casting success for any production team, no production team can be successful without an appropriate administrative structure to support the artistic pursuits. For the purposes of this document, the company's administrative structure is assumed to already exist and function properly. However, even the most talented casting agent cannot be successful without the accompanying administrative support for his or her work.

TIP 5

Some of this required administrative support falls into a category of support provider that tends to be rather mercenary in my experience. For example, marketing is a complicated job involving resource allocation, community analysis and an eye for design. However, marketing opera is a much harder version of this job than one might think. Furthermore, marketing opera in a rural community is exponentially more difficult. Those individuals who choose to pursue marketing as a career are often very good at seeing possibilities where others may not and are often very entrepreneurial in their approach, since to work as a successful marketer usually requires a new perspective not previously tried. For example, the Sydney Opera House in Australia is leading a movement to update its marketing approach using digital media. “In 2015, the Opera House embarked on a major digital transformation project-- including a newly redesigned website and publishing workflow -- laying the groundwork for the organisation to take its content and marketing strategies to the next level, with video at the forefront.”²³

Therefore, in a rural community it can often be an advantage, if not a necessity, to have a marketing agent who does not know all that much about the artform. With a layperson’s approach to the art, they may be able to see an angle or perspective of the production that would appeal more to an audience that doesn’t know the story or the intricacies of the musical details.

Diehard opera fans can be passionate and loyal almost to a fault. Although the Rocky Mountain region hosts the most active opera-going audience per capita in the country (National Endowment for the Arts), there is still a huge portion of the area’s population that is remarkably under-aware of the artform. A marketer will be successful with the initiated regardless of his or her approach, but a neophyte to the world of opera may not even understand that the performers are not amplified. In today’s world of huge arena concerts, the uninitiated potential opera-goer’s

²³ Zak Silvernail. Brightcove.com “Architecting A Powerful Video Marketing Strategy At The Sydney Opera House.” (October 31, 2017.)

expectations must be managed for a successful first encounter for opera. Thus, a rural marketer of opera has a huge job that falls more in line with Advocacy for and Education about the artform before marketing a specific show can even begin.

For instance, a recent article in HuffPost states, “One of opera’s greatest obstacles can often be that people stay away, believing the stigma that opera is boring, old, and stuffy. New and exciting marketing strategies have the ability to bust these stereotypes wide open while possibly entertaining and informing customers about what opera really is.”²⁴

For this reason, I find that rural marketers of opera must be more than just mercenary. They need to be truly curious and inspired by the artform in order to make an impact in such a difficult environment. Indeed, in a recent article in the business periodical Inc., shows this to be true. The writer Kevin Daum states:

Many people think of opera as an antiquated, boring art form that doesn't appeal to anyone under the age of 75 or under a net worth of \$1 billion. With these assumptions commonplace, there's nearly zero media coverage of the industry... But how does anyone actually know opera doesn't appeal to a wider audience and a younger generation? No one's ever really made an effort to give it mass appeal.²⁵

Two opera-loving brothers realized that opera was not being marketed well by the status quo approach and decided to do exactly that-- make an effort to give opera mass appeal. They started an opera marketing machine and “...since its launch in December 2016, OperaWire has become a leading publication in the industry, with its content cited by other publications and

²⁴ Jennifer Rivera, HuffPost.com “Are We Entering the Golden Age of Opera... Marketing?” (Updated Dec 06, 2017).

²⁵ Kevin Daum. Inc.com, “With the Right Marketing, You Can Create Buzz Around Any Product--Even Opera”. (April 17, 2019.)

shared by companies and artists around the globe. The site publishes over 60 articles per week, and its readership spans over 150 countries.”²⁶

Thus, a successful member of the production team in the role of the marketer, will be passionate about the art form and have a desire to share that passion with both the experienced opera fan as well as the uninitiated. In a rural region, the uninitiated potential opera audience is much larger than the aficionado. Therefore, before any hiring/casting for this role can begin, a tutorial on the artform is required in order to assess the potential marketer’s interest in the challenge before them.

I cannot count the times when I would share locally about an upcoming opera production and someone would invariably respond with, “I *love* Phantom of the Opera!” While it is important to enthusiastically encourage a love for any artform, especially in a rural setting, it is necessary to describe the differences between the two genres of musical theater and opera as well as highlight the importance of the kind of technical singing involved. A marketer who is a “good fit” for the company and the production will be one who can understand the unique differences between the genres and appreciate the Olympic value of the singing in an opera versus a musical theater show.

To that end, my company has had a unique advantage when marketing the “Olympic value” of opera singing. Situated in the high mountains of Colorado in the ski town of Steamboat Springs, the community often markets itself as the premier generator of Olympic skiers. Thus, Emerald City Opera had the perfect way to market opera to this athletically-driven population by comparing the Olympic pursuits of local skiers to the Olympic type of singing in the upcoming

²⁶ Kevin Daum. Inc.com, “With the Right Marketing, You Can Create Buzz Around Any Product--Even Opera”. (April 17, 2019.)

opera production. It is the marketer's job to find these unique perspectives for each company and/or production to capitalize upon when building a campaign for a rural show.

The type of personality who is successful in this role, tends to be a well-rounded, well-traveled, organized and curious person. In her self-titled blog, author and marketing guru Ayesha Ambreen writes about the fifteen “Essential Traits That All Marketers Must Have to Succeed.”²⁷ While it would be difficult for a Casting Agent, Executive Director and/or administrative hiring team to identify and contract a person with all of these “essential” traits, and especially in a rural community, the blog writer and this author agree that passion, teamwork and a love of life-long learning are essential to being a good marketer. In a niche market such as opera, these traits are even more indispensable. As our world becomes more and more technologically connected, this role also needs to be aware of the most cutting-edge methodologies for delivering content as well as willing to work with multiple mediums, (as the audience may be remarkably varied in its tech usage habits), including the location and development of free streams of advertising.

Multiple other company roles support the advocacy, education and marketing of the artform, not the least of which is the Development Director. Working in tandem with the marketing director, the development director must be willing to look “outside the box” when mining financial support in a rural location. Corporate sponsors may have no interest in supporting an artform which is notoriously considered elite and loved by only a small slice of the general population. A development director's job is to inspire potential sponsors and donors to see beyond the clichés (which more often than not prevail in rural areas) and to show them

²⁷ Ayesha Ambreen. AyeshaAbreen.com. Blog article, “The Essential Traits That All Marketers Must Have to Succeed.” (July 19, 2018.)

instead, that the participation of the local community in the production is their “audience.” As well, in a resort community the amenities which exist for the tourists are often an important factor in development pursuits. Thus, a development director for a rural opera company must be adept at creating connections within the business community as well as at the individual level, with both opera aficionados as well as uninterested regional economic players. The type of personality who excels at development pursuits in the challenge of a rural setting, is going to be an advanced communicator and resourceful networker. Smaller companies are not usually in a position to lavishly wine and dine their large patrons, so overt recognition is the primary form of donation compensation.

In a small-town setting, the development director’s biggest asset is the production’s playbill and the opportunity to obsequiously display the supporter’s logo and/or name within it, trumpeting their support and recognizing their invaluable contribution. This type of exchange requires a somewhat shameless pursuer of people. Whereas the marketing director must find unique ways to display interesting material to encourage people to bring themselves to the show, the development director must be willing to physically reach out to the donor/patron/sponsor and “bring the show to them,” so to speak, whether or not they are aware and interested in the event at the time. These are completely different skill sets and require different types of personalities. While the marketing director is a “go-getter,” curious and excited to reach all people, the development director is typically more methodical, reserved and specific with regard to whom he or she approaches. The marketing director advocates for the artform and the production, whereas the development director advocates for the company as a whole and for the patron’s giving goals.

B. Casting for Professional vs. School vs. Community Productions

The specific suggestions for casting a production's roles shift dramatically when a casting agent is asked to fill positions in a professional production versus either a school production and/or a community show. While an entire dissertation could be written on the differences one must consider for each type of production, it is only necessary to report here that the opportunity to make a choice for casting the best person for the position invariably becomes extremely limited when the options are negated by lack of availability of operatic training in the region and/or lack of funds (or housing, or transportation, etc.) for supporting the position's needs. Casting tips and discussion in this document primarily addresses the actions when choices and funds are available to attract a pool of trained individuals to the production. Without such, a casting agent is often limited to utilizing simply the most available and interested party regardless of experience, training, talent or team spirit.

When a casting agent has the opportunity to choose between *volunteers* for a role in a regional, community production, the factors for prioritizing shrink to only a few-- who has the most experience, is the most available and shows the most interest? It is important to note that consideration of *talent* is of relatively little use when the previous factors are not a part of the casting equation. While someone with a great deal of raw talent may still be the best choice for a role, raw talent alone is often a detractor if interest and a basic understanding of how a show operates (experience) are missing. However, if these factors are not in abundance enough to definitively sort the potential performers/artists, a further inquiry into whom is best connected to potential supporters of the production can illuminate good choices. Opera is a multimedia and therefore expensive undertaking. Casting an appropriate and well-connected local volunteer into a role can often be an excellent return on investment, to motivate the actor to network action when it comes time to ask for aid for the production.

On the other hand, raw talent is often the best indicator for casting acumen when creating a team for a student production. Almost invariably, student productions are filled by volunteers with little experience. Therefore, raw talent usually accompanies a great interest in being on the stage, which is a natural motivator for behaving in the manner of a good production team member. While the natural motivation to be on the stage is a great start, there is no guarantee that members of a student's circle understand the requirements of being a member of a production team. At the pre-collegiate level, this lack of understanding is often the biggest challenge for show producing, especially in rural areas where opera is an unknown artform.

Collegiate productions also present unique casting challenges for team creation, as there may be a plethora of available singers, and a healthy budget for production needs, but experience may be lacking and/or production designers and crew may be pre-selected without regard for personality considerations.

C. Casting Issues Specific to Regional Companies

Regional companies have many issues that present challenges which larger, more metropolitan companies do not face. For instance, my company is in a remote location-- more than three hours from a large airport with almost no public transportation available between the town and the airport. Thus, the cost of importing artists is a much larger chunk of our production budget, as well as a huge time commitment if an artist requires pick-up by a company member. Additionally, many higher-level opera artists may not be licensed drivers, and in a remote town such as Steamboat Springs, Colorado, which has hardly any public transportation to speak of, the company cannot simply provide a vehicle to the artist to manage their own transportation needs to and from rehearsal, the grocery store, their temporary residence, etc.

Another important aspect for regional companies to consider is the unfortunate difference between the political landscapes of large, multi-cultural and extremely diverse large cities and rural, typically conservative and homogeneous western towns. Several times over the course of the many productions I managed in Steamboat Springs, Colorado, I had an artist experience direct discrimination from local crew or volunteers based on the artist's religion, culture and/or gender preference (or a combination of all). According to the National Endowment for the Arts, the performing arts as a conglomerate workforce is far more diverse than the comparative professional workforce in America²⁸ and importing this modern aesthetic into a less worldly region with little experience in the arts can create situations which confront both sides with uncomfortable realizations about the vastness of America's diverse population.

In this way, I firmly believe that opera is an essential and defining element required for the expansion of awareness and acceptance of diversity in small towns throughout America. Every regional opera company working and performing in the little towns throughout America is doing its part to advance the social dialogue of our country.

Other issues that affect regional companies, primarily, are the lack of appropriate personnel for comprimario and supernumary roles as well as other minor, but technically difficult production support roles. It is not economically feasible for a small company to hire a comprimario or minor production artist who requires extensive travel and full fee costs. As the role itself is "minor" the accompanying costs must reflect that percentage of the budget. An excellent propmaster/mistress is well-worth his or her fee but adding travel and housing costs may make the import implausible. One solution I often employed is to tap the local, amateur performing arts groups for interest from their volunteer supporters, to see if anyone might have

²⁸ National Endowment for the Arts, *Artists in the Workforce. Research Report #48*, (May 2008) pg. 21.

enough backstage experience to be successfully trained with little to no preparation by the professional opera crew/artists which arrive just for the production run. Using a local, willing talent not only saves the additional costs of travel and housing but may very well create a resource for future productions.

**** TIP:** Local, amateur talent can be just as good as the talent of a professional. What is more-than-often NOT comparable between the local amateur and the imported professional is the understanding that “the show must go on” regardless of the challenges, timing and the local’s regular, daily life. This is by far the biggest obstacle to hiring locals and/or amateurs. Reliability, rather than talent, sails the ship.

TIP 6

Comprimario artists require the same level of artistic talent (sometimes more) as the leading roles of any opera, but are simply not required to be on stage, (thus also at rehearsal), for as much time. This can present a huge challenge for an amateur who is unfamiliar with the show, or the way in which a professional production is run backstage. So unfortunately, this solution is a gamble in many ways and can often result in a last minute importation of a comprimario artist at even greater expense. But when given the choice, I often choose to believe in the local amateur first. Several times, the first Sitzprobe of a production is a “deer-in-the-headlights” moment for the local singer, who, when given the opportunity to take on a small role, thought it would be easy-peasy like the local comedy fundraiser. If the reader has never been in the uncomfortable position of sitting through a Sitzprobe with a large cast of very well-prepared

professional artists, knowing that when the time comes for your role to perform you will not be able to deliver, consider it a blessing.

I once had to replace a young local artist whom I had cast in the role of the Witch in Humperdinck's *Hansel and Gretel*. She was vocally and theatrically a perfect fit for the role. She wanted to perform but she unfortunately, did not believe her voice teacher that she needed to spend the time and costs necessary to completely prepare her role with a vocal coach. She was a terrific performer with a great work ethic, but she was inexperienced with regard to the artistic requirements of professional opera productions. She believed she could listen to recordings and learn the role more cost-effectively without having to travel long distances from our rural location to get the coaching she needed. At the Sitzprobe she was not prepared for the live sounds, different tempi and stressful situation. She could not deliver and the conductor refused to continue until she was replaced. The next week we were able to import a male singer who had recently done the role in falsetto, but the entire production was brought to a halt for half the rehearsal time period and new costumes were required. The young woman was devastated and embarrassed, I was disappointed in her lack of preparedness, and the company had additional expense. The young singer learned a valuable lesson, and eventually performed a large segment of the role in a scenes show that summer. This is the risk a casting agent takes every time he or she "takes a chance" on an inexperienced talent, especially the local variety.

Chapter 7: MANAGING THE ARTISTS/SHOW AFTER CASTING

A. Following Through on Team Creation

Once a show has a complete roster of artists, designers and crew, how does the company and/or casting agent evaluate the effectiveness of the choices made? What determines a successful team of production members? Many casting agents do not participate in the production after they have completed their duties. However, observing the interactions of the players throughout the production run is essential, especially at the regional level, to determining the efficacy of the casting choices made in creating the production team. For instance, singers and production crew rarely have time to interact with each other as their respective duties fall during opposite times in the daily schedule. Rarely have I experienced personality conflicts between on-stage and off-stage artists for this reason. However, designers and production crew can often clash with regard to their ideas about implementation and timelines. Thus when casting roles, a casting agent can focus on juxta-positioning complementary personality types who will work more closely together than with those from other aspects of the production.

In fact, sometimes a casting agent can create a “sanctioned” pairing in which there is too much chemistry between artists, which causes a different type of tension. Artists are well-aware of the intense emotions that arise when creating intimate art with each other. It is important to be aware of the reputations that precede some artists with regard to their ability to professionally manage these powerful emotions and refrain from acting on these impulses off the stage with their colleagues. This is especially important to consider when combining a young artist program with professionals in a mainstage production. Well-established professional singers and/or designers may not be aware of the company’s responsibilities with regard to students with whom the artist may interact, nor of the challenges of working with younger artists who are eager for

the opportunity to be recognized and appreciated by an older artistic mentor and or possible paramour. The #MeToo movement has been long overdue in the world of opera, and young artists are especially vulnerable.

A responsible casting agent in tandem with a responsible company must set boundaries between professionals and students that support the production's highest artistic value while maintaining safe emotional space both on and off the stage for all involved in a production. Without firmly stated rules and boundaries, the team may be compromised by one intense but inappropriate love affair between two castmates or one diva moment backstage between two important members of the production team. Tension, whether from personality conflict or from intense attraction, is the single most damaging factor to a production team's success. A casting agent can assist the company in keeping production fireworks at bay through the careful, well-researched casting choices that he or she makes long before the production starts.

B. Dealing with Afflictions that Attack the Team

It is not always possible to foresee and pre-avoid through careful casting the tensions that inevitably arise over the course of a production run. If the "tension-meter" seems to be rising throughout a production team, there are several factors that can be considered as culprits and various methods with which to respond.

If the production incorporates both professional artists and students, conflicts (or passions) between these two categories of artists may be the first place to investigate and any inappropriate relationships countered with firm discussion and rules established for both. Otherwise, culprits are often 1) frustration over lack of resources or time, 2) inequities in the disbursement of housing or travel resources, 3) overlapping of roles/duties creating confusion

and jealousy, and 4) aspects that are required for optimal functioning that have been overlooked or disregarded by management. In all of these cases, the production manager can usually relieve the tension quickly by asking questions, listening to the parties involved (perhaps separately) and simply issuing an edict as to how the issue is to be resolved and a declaration to continue moving forward. The edict itself is less important to the parties involved and the health of the production than the *urgency* of the decision. The decision instantly resets the meter and movement towards the common goal refocuses the energies of all involved.

With regard to listening to the parties involved, more often than not, the discussions can occur in the theater or rehearsal hall and be dealt with immediately. However, when the conflict is more personal, I have found that the local Starbucks is one of my company's best conflict resolution assets.

C: The "Star-bucks" Contingency

Sometimes, careful casting is simply not enough to create the alchemy needed for a production team to run smoothly from start to finish without the inevitable bumps along the way. After many years, I learned to expect at least one "artistic temper tantrum" per show, and usually several from various people. Through tracking over fifteen years, I can report that the number of artistic temper tantrums which were thrown by performers paled in comparison to the number performed by the designer/director category of artist. I learned that these types of expressions were a necessary evil in the run of a production, as my rural company often challenged the designer/directors with its lack of available local material resources and/or almost-impossible rehearsal and production schedule. These challenges, while not insurmountable, were often beyond what would be considered standard in a professional's usual experience.

Thus, I instituted the Star-bucks contingency budgetary line item. (The “star” being the latest diva in the production, and the “bucks” being the money spent at the coffee shop while listening). Having a plan for when The Diva Factor strikes is a production manager’s secret weapon. If the casting agent failed to circumvent a Diva personality within the production team, and the best intentions of the production manager and other crew were unable to assuage the festering personality, providing a one-on-one listening (in my case, most often at the local Starbucks café) between either the Production Manager, Artistic Director or General Director of a company with the production artist diva-of-the-day, often did more to keep the (production) ship’s keel on track for smooth sailing than any other method. Team members usually had highly valid concerns, perfectly acceptable reasons for feeling aggrieved, and important observations that served the future of the company. Although much of the grievances were not able to be addressed within the constraints of the production timeline and the resource allocations, understanding the source of the issue and applying effective “star-bucks” from the budget can make the affected team member feel more like a star in the production’s constellation, and aid in the continuation of their commitment to the outcome.

A wise production manager will note the shared issue(s) for future managerial adjustments and then provide the casting agent with important knowledge which can aid him or her in future decision-making with regard to filling certain roles, so as to potentially avoid similar crises in the next production.

D. The “Show Must Go On” But Your Career May Not

The final option, when dealing with a production team affliction is to simply proceed, as the “show must go on.” This well-known saying exists for good reason-- sometimes there is

simply nothing that can be done to alleviate the tension or rectify the problem other than to simply carry on with the show as best as one can in light of the challenge. Step around the problem, work without the item, smile and grit your teeth, but keep doing your job regardless, knowing that the show will end and you will be able to go home. I have experienced several situations in which this remained the only option available. The production team suffered, the show suffered, the art suffered, but in the end the only consequence to be administered is to be sure that the offending artist may never work/be cast with the company again in the future.

In decades past, and perhaps in other aspects of the arts, a “blacklist” might still be a formidable tool. It has never been my approach within management, that an artist for which I am clear my company should never again engage, should receive active negative marketing from me out in the wider field. However, I have found that the business of opera management and opera casting is so small (relatively speaking), that I need not actively parlay any feedback into the general conversation unless directly asked regarding a specific artist for that artist to reap what he or she has sown on his or her own merits. There is a reason that some artists tend to rise to the top of the field and remain there for years, while others who seem equally talented shine bright for a few years and then disappear from the rosters shortly thereafter. From my experience as an Artistic Director and casting agent for many years, I have found that talent only opens the door for an artist. Professional demeanor, work ethic and team collegiality are ultimately, what create an artist’s rise to the top of the field and his or her staying power in the rosters of opera companies around the world. Reputations are created over time by the experience of those who work with an artist day by day and who are also traveling the world recommending the artist to casting agents at the next company with whom they are contracted. Artists who create tension are

often not the first person who may come to the mind of a colleague when the opportunity to provide a recommendation arises.

While a young artist may be full of potential and ambition and may well have the technical chops to rise above other colleagues, a viable, long-term career will be built and sustained by the day-to-day interactions the artist has with others in the productions with whom the artist works. Those who are reliable, pleasant, flexible and prepared are the ones with careers that are successful long term, via the network of recommendations that pave their way. Potential is temporary. Ambition is nothing without solid technique to back it up, but long term success is only possible through a steady diet of polite, hard work and patience.

Chapter 8: RESOURCES AND SUGGESTIONS FOR CASTING AGENTS

The worldwide web and a phone call are amazing opportunities for researching companies, artists and resources for regionally located or isolated companies. The availability of such operatic resources at one's fingertips and which were not formerly accessible outside of large metropolitan areas, is the reason that smaller, regional companies are burgeoning and thriving in America. Not only is the access to the information easy, no serious artist or opera company can exist today without an online media presence. A list of hardcopy resources is discussed here, however, a quick Google search is the most comprehensive and cost-efficient access option for enterprising casting agents.

For casting agents, it is imperative to know the specific vocal or technical challenges related to an individual role before attempting to find the right singer or artist to inhabit that operatic character/design function. Also imperative are the cuts, the specific score and the language that the conductor and/or stage director wishes to use. These can affect singer (and chorusmaster and vocal coach) choices as well. Thus, unless the casting agent has sung or performed the actual role his or herself, there are multiple resources required that must be tapped in order to achieve this knowledge, the most important of which is first-hand knowledge from a reputable and technically-astute performer, teacher or producer. Beyond that, while less-than-ideal, other resources that might assist a casting agent include:

A. Written Resources

Hardcover

1. *Handbuch der Oper*. Kloiber, Rudolf and Wulf Konold, Robert Maschka. (2002), Kassel: Bärenreiter
2. *Opera Production I: A Handbook*. Eaton, Quaintance, Da Capo Press, 1974

3. *The New Kobbé's Opera Book*. 11th ed. - Peattie, Harewood, Kobbé. Hayhurst, P. Z. (2011). In its 75th year, this opera-lover's bible now incorporates nearly 500 operas. Lord Harewood's strongly individual commentaries, together with his unparalleled knowledge of and enthusiasm for opera, is a guide to virtually every opera the reader is likely to come across.
4. *Opera Recordings* – This may seem counter-intuitive, but a great recording (whether audio or video) will have much important information about the roles, the opera, the history and backstory which can inform a casting agent's choice. For instance, are there any performance traditions associated with the role?

Online

Unfortunately, the opera world is not as organized (or perhaps not as commercial) as the musical theater world and therefore lacks some of the consolidated resource options available to casting agents and producers. For instance, at MuscialTheaterInternational.com, the page <https://www.mtishows.com> provides complete lists of show casts which include a description of the character, the type of voice and acting required, the vocal range of the role as well as some of the specific needs a casting agent must consider, such as voices that require the ability to duet well, or a note that the role must provide physicality in addition to singing and acting. As well, the site provides an extensive marketplace where companies can sell, rent or buy costumes, sets and sheet music for specific productions.

An entrepreneurial opera fan might do well to create a site such as this, specific to the needs of opera companies. Until such time, other resources include:

1. *Operabase.com* – Supplies performance and season listings in 23 languages for over 900 theaters with access to the current, last and announced future season. Search by artist, title of work, composer, city, company and/or date.
2. *Operastuff.com* – A resource for lists of singers, links to books, broadcasts, composers, operatic goods and services, recordings, sheet music, opera houses worldwide, competitions, management agencies, young artist programs, etc.
3. *Musicalchairs.com* – An online platform that provides a cost-effective means for orchestras, opera companies, conservatoires and schools to advertise to the highest possible caliber of candidate for classical music job vacancies worldwide.
4. Individual artists' websites
5. <https://www.yaptracker.com/>: An online database of all upcoming classical, vocal auditions.

B. Advisor Networks

Each casting agent will have developed years of contacts throughout his or her work lifetime, and each agent's list of advisors and networking possibilities will differ. Below is a list of some of the resources I've relied upon.

1. *Personal contacts within the business* – Don't be afraid to call up someone whom you respect for their years of opera experience and be honest about your questions regarding any role or opera. I rely on other singers, conductors, directors, and former professors or coaches I've worked with in the past. Sometimes I'll even call upon choral and/or musical theater contacts for ideas. Great ideas can come from anywhere!

2. *Opera America* – This organization is a great resource for lists of jobs available in the field (as a guide for job descriptions and fees for collaborating artists) as well as lists of what productions member companies are mounting in any given year. Collaborating with another company working on the same opera or looking for the same position is always useful.
3. Women’s Opera Network
4. State music organizations (i.e. Opera Pronto website, Colorado Music Alliance)
5. Local universities’ music departments
6. Other regional opera companies
7. Local and/or regional arts councils

C. Artist Management Agencies

A quick internet search of Opera Artist Managers shows a list of over 80 Artist Management firms worldwide who specialize in opera voices (operastuff.com).

Any opera artist management firm will be happy to discuss a company’s vocal needs for upcoming productions. Be aware, however, that not all singers are a good fit for every production or every company, and an Artist Manager is not required to pursue the best fit, only the most lucrative contract on behalf of his or her artist. Not all agents are willing to work with small, regional companies, but there are several agencies who enjoy excellent reputations as representatives of their artists, the art form in general, extensive knowledge of the art of singing and individual voice characteristics as well as collegiality within the field. I can personally recommend the following agencies for expertise with operatic voices and willingness to work with smaller companies:

ADA Artist Management

Belcanto Artist

Herbert Barrett Management

Neil Funkhouser Artist Management

Pinnacle Arts Management

Robert Lombardo and Associates

Uzan International Artists

Chapter 9: CASTING AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

A Brief History and a Glimpse at the Future of Opera Casting

The genre of opera began as an experiment in secular emotional expression through music in the late 16th century. The Florentine Camerata in Florence, Italy was searching for a way to imbue a larger variety of human experience into musical art than the standard sacred forms of the time would allow. This pursuit led to the development of staged scenes with dramatic musical vocalization and immediately gained a lofty foothold in the public's consumption. Composers delighted in the more expressive vocal lines they could write with expanded liberties regarding text and subject matter, dramatic expression, pitch and dynamic range, rhythmic variety, and textural timbre being culturally accepted for the new genre. This burgeoning of a more demanding and more intricate musical and dramatic vocal style required advanced vocal technique to deliver well, and thus gave rise to the practice of "casting for outcomes" to ensure public satisfaction.

The Golden Age of Opera is often considered the mid to late eighteenth century, but the audience's embrace of the genre at its earliest beginnings, and especially of its primary portrayers-- the singers-- has never wavered. As the genre developed into a solidified and standard entertainment, the singer was the pivotal player. John Koopman writes in his treatise *A Brief History of Singing and Unsung Songs*:

As producers and impresarios tried to establish and maintain their audiences in an increasingly competitive field, they sought to present the best performers available. Gifted singers found themselves increasingly in demand and, as box office attractions, their position within the hierarchy of the opera company rose considerably. Opera had become the entertainment industry of its time, and the finest singers were becoming stars of international renown. The losers in this process were the stage designers, for librettists no longer centered their plots on

sensational scenic effects but instead sought ways to feature and favor the new vocal stars. No doubt the funds formerly devoted to constructing stage machinery were now being used to attract famous singers.²⁹

This increased demand for vocal virtuosi, combined with the plethora of traditionally-trained choir youths who aged-out and were released each year from sacred echelons, promoted the disturbing cultural phenomenon of the Castrati opera singer. Although the existence of castrati pre-dated the rise of opera, their period of influence, both sacred and secular, encompasses a roughly 250-year period from approximately 1575 to 1825. The *musicato*, an 18th-century derogatory term for castrated male singers, dominated the new art form of opera for much of its youth, bringing the genre to the forefront of society in both equally inspiring and decadent ways.

Mr. Koopman, describes the musicis impact on productions and casting as such:

Trained as thoroughly in the art of ornamentation as they were in vocalism, these phenomenal virtuosos expected, like all singers, to elaborate and complete the composer's musical outline with their improvisations. In doing so, they gained a hold over their audiences comparable to the most popular entertainers of today. Their fame and fortune was so alluring it became the dream of many poor families that their son might help them escape poverty through such a career. Riding the crest of public adulation, it seems the musici should have little fear for their future. Yet in reality, their fabulous fioritura displays were becoming excessive and badly slowing the movement of the already meager drama. The restless public would soon find the light, comic interludes (*intermezzi*) performed between the acts of the serious operas--like half-time shows in modern day sporting events--were more to their liking than the main event.³⁰

²⁹ John Koopman, *A Brief History of Singing and Unsung Songs*. Lawrence University, Appleton, WI (1999)

³⁰ *Ibid.*

While the castrati themselves may have fallen out of favor by the early 19th century, methods enacted to secure famous castrati appearances in prosperous and/or politically powerful productions still serve as guides today for many casting traditions still in practice. Generally, the portrayal of the singer to the public was the utmost consideration at the time. In today's environment, commissioned composers hold more sway in their artistic license, but the singer is still often the primary factor which must be secured and cast before the production takes flight. Again from Mr. Koopman's treatise:

A composer could not write his opera until he knew precisely which singers would be singing it, for he was expected to shape his music to fit the particular capabilities of the performers, that each might be heard to the best possible advantage. This ability to feature the special skills of the singers, while minimizing their technical weaknesses, was considered a great virtue in a composer. (The practice has continued; Gian-Carlo Menotti often wrote roles expressly for Marie Powers, Benjamin Britten for Peter Pears, and Samuel Barber for Leontyne Price.) The slow accretion of such works--specifically tailored to display the utmost, sometimes freakish, abilities of several centuries of vocal artists--into a basic repertory for the present day, imposes a challenging composite of demands on modern-day singers. There is, for example, an opera in the current repertory with two famous tenor arias: a florid one especially designed for the singer who created the role, and a substitute, legato aria written for a subsequent production in which the new tenor couldn't manage the original florid aria, but specialized instead in a delicate style with superbly sustained line. A modern-day audience expects its tenor to sing them both... There was no expectation a newly commissioned opera would ever be performed anywhere else or by another cast.³¹

Not only does such specialized vocal expectation present a challenge to the modern-day singer, it provides extreme tests for the modern casting agent. Where does one find a contemporaneously "freakish" singer, with the dual capabilities for the original inspiration of the

³¹ John Koopman. *A Brief History of Singing and Unsung Songs*.

florid vocal line as well as the legato required for the substitution aria, within the ranks of the modern training ground producing professional singers today? And should such a trained singer exist, would they be sufficiently capable as a dramatic stage actor, sufficiently camera-worthy as demanded by the culture's modern technology, politically and calendar available, musically interested in the work as well as affordable? Thus, the modern casting agent must utilize much the same technique today, employing "tricks of the trade" to secure the virtuoso singer in his or her production, as during the age of the castrato.

Can Opera Casting Agents Change the World?

A recent article by David Salsbery Fry in the periodical *Classical Singer* magazine called, "Diverse and Inclusive Casting Is an Artistic Breakthrough of Operatic Proportions" states that:

...we must accept that social inequality exists, that it is possible to identify a privileged class and thus those who do not possess a specific privilege represent a marginalized class, subjected to discrimination and oppression. Opera is an art form that is strongly linked with Western European culture, as a consequence of where it was created, where it is popular and the stories it tells.³²

This foundational understanding of opera's origins presents challenges to the progressively-minded casting agent. Casting a role, while intricate and rife with pitfalls, can be simplified to the statement that it should be based upon the best available singer and performer for the character packaged in the best available employee for the production at hand. While this definition places no limit regarding gender, age or race, the character list from any traditional

³² David Salsbery Fry. *Classical Singer Magazine*, "Diverse and Inclusive Casting Is an Artistic Breakthrough of Operatic Proportions" (Aug. 6, 2018).

opera is most likely going to be populated by Caucasian characters of privilege. A casting agent must decide, and be guided by company policy, as to how authentic or traditional the look of a cast need be. Do characters that are narratively related by a parent-child relationship need to look the appropriate ages? Ageism has been utterly renounced in opera since its beginnings. Do roles need to be sung by the gender attributed to the character? This question has long been answered by the operatic field with a resounding no, in the form of castrati and countertenors. Must *Otello* be sung only by a dark-skinned singer, or *Madama Butterfly* only portrayed by Asian sopranos? History would show clearly that opera companies and their audiences do not feel that racial casting is required for success.

Indeed, in the first opera I cast for Emerald City Opera (*The Magic Flute*, 2003) it never even occurred to me to consider these outdated attributes, and our fabulous Pamina was sung by an African-American singer, whose onstage mother was portrayed by a Caucasian singer, and whose love-interest was an Hispanic Tamino. As well, in several productions I cast, with necessity being only a secondary aspect to the choice, the best non-singing actor for an onstage male role was in fact, a local woman with an extensive Shakespearian theater background.

The film industry in Hollywood has been negatively portrayed for many years for engaging in a “whitewashing” type of casting trend³³ and traditional ballet is all but colorless with regard to the characterization of any role. Thus, it would seem that opera as an art form, may be capable of being a leader in progressive casting as compared to other genres. Further, beyond the casting of specific roles in an opera production based solely on the character’s description, casting agents can also approach their duties with an eye to stretching the expectation of traditional looks for traditional roles in collaboration with the overall narrative.

³³ Parker. Danowski, Mxdwn.com website. “Whitewashing, Bland Storytelling: The Deeper Cultural and Narrative Implications of Hollywood’s Casting Problem.” (Sept. 7, 2017).

For example, in a recent production of *Die Fledermaus* (J. Strauss) UNLV Opera Theater cast the lead female role with a Caucasian woman and her romantic counterpart with an African-American man. In 1890's Austria, the setting for the operetta, this would not have been an accepted pairing, but modern opera holds no bias for such casting decisions, and indeed the genre as a whole eschews such limits.

Indeed, opera has often led the way in forwarding social consciousness or at least flouting it none-the-less. Consider stalwart repertory icons such as Mozart's *Le nozze di Figaro* and *Don Giovanni* as case example-- not only did Mozart's dramatic storylines openly challenge the "untouchable" qualities that the white, rich nobility enjoyed at that time with regard to legal accountability for their actions, but these dramas also highlighted the immoral and unethical hypocrisy on the part of the aristocracy, specifically with regard to the supposedly-vacated *droit du seigneur* for the Count and the Don's rape and pillage of innumerable women throughout his region respectively.

Unfortunately, in spite of Mozart's attempts at promoting progress, this aspect of society seems not to have advanced much outside of the theater, as is evident from recent current events surrounding the elevation of Supreme Court Justices in the era of the Trump Administration in America. The Count was only held accountable through a "full-court press" of shaming on the part of all his subjects, and the Don was only brought to justice by supernatural means. The privileged, white status of the characters most often portrayed in standard operatic repertoire to this day does not vary too widely from the general pool of trained singers available today from which a casting agent may pull. This truth, combined with today's technological advancements, which have created an almost unattainable expectation for believable stage productions, make

diverse and inclusive casting more challenging than in previous decades. As Philip Kennicott wrote in his February 2016 article for *Opera News*:

Opera will never be politically correct. There is simply too much history involved, too many centuries of social change and evolving moral codes, since the form was created more than four centuries ago... The disturbing reminders of how far we've come, scattered throughout the operatic canon, are best left intact, not just because we owe it to our historic sense of ourselves, but as a goad to thinking about our own contemporary moral blindness, in how we relate to animals, the planet and the billions of people who occupy economically subordinate roles in the world economy.³⁴

Challenging though it may be, to incorporate diversity into traditional repertoire with believability and authenticity, opera has never relied on believability as a driving force in casting. As discussed previously, the concept of castrati bended the gender lines long before our modern conversations of cisgender versus non-binary gender, and the vocal requirements for a Verdi heroine have never been available to a thirteen year old girl to portray the character as described in the drama. Thus, a healthy amount of imagination has always been required for opera audiences, to overcome ageism, racism, genderism and xenophobia.

To its credit, modern day opera narratives are quickly filling the gap in advancing both the character constructs in contemporary works, as well as the social fabric of our opera culture in more inclusive and diverse ways. Such operas as *Treemonisha* by Scott Joplin reflect the experience of black America and incorporate aspects of the culture into the music with syncopated dance rhythms, barbershop harmonies, gospel hymns and ragtime. Carlisle Floyd's *Susannah* is a tragic homage to life in America's Appalachia drawing on the folk songs of the

³⁴ Kennicott, Philip. *Opera News* magazine "Discomfort Zone". (Feb 2016).

region with a dialectic narrative, a developmentally-disabled character and a hard-hitting expose of white male privilege, religious fundamentalism and hypocrisy harkening back to similar themes in Mozart's operas. *Nixon in China* (1987) by John Adams exploits a well-known, contemporary political event in a part of the world to which Western opera has rarely ventured for its settings. All of these newer approaches to the dramatic narrative for opera expand the ability of the casting agent to creatively fill onstage roles so that not only is a more diverse set of artists supported in the profession as a whole, but the optics of the art form are widened and made more appealing to a larger and more diverse audience.

Another aspect of social change in which opera can play a leading role, is within the gender diversification of leadership in the administrative realm. While the Fachs of the voices on the stage are usually preset by the composer and of course by biology, production roles are gender-flexible. Administrative roles, one of which the casting agent inhabits, should also be gender-flexible, but historically have not shown equality. Female leadership positively impacts organizations as a recent study at Princeton University shows. The research states that, "Appointing female department chairs reduce[s] gender gaps in publications and tenure for assistant professors and shrink[s] the gender pay gap. Replacing a male chair with a female chair increases the number of female students among incoming graduate cohorts by ten percent with no evidence of a change in ability correlates for the average student."³⁵

One can infer from this data that a female casting agent could easily have a similar impact on the operatic art form. The working data shows how managers of people make a difference by examining the typical duties of managers (which directly correlate to the duties of

³⁵ Andrew Langan, Princeton University Economics Department. "Female Managers and Gender Disparities: The Case of Academic Department Chairs" (Nov. 2018).

a casting agent) “dividing and negotiating for [departmental] resources, staffing [admissions] committees, and dealing with professors (artists) who have received outside offers.”

Limitations and Opportunities

A. Trouser Roles, Racial Issues and Gender-Bending Fachs

One of the more bizarre aspects of opera, in the context of modern society, is the Trouser Role-- a male character requiring the voice of a female singer. This type of role stems from the gender discrimination of the culture during the early Baroque era as opera developed, when women were not allowed to perform onstage. The cultural restrictions thus engendered the subsequent advent of castrati for the necessary purpose of portraying female characters on stage. A century later as the castrati fell out of favor and the general public began to accept women in leading roles onstage, these gender-bending roles were adopted by the mezzo-soprano Fach and remain almost exclusively in their realm. As Kate Hopkins on behalf of Britain’s Royal Opera House wrote last year in her article, “Girls being boys being girls: a short history of opera’s trouser roles,”³⁶ that the evolving gender acceptance of the Trouser Role presented opportunities for savvy impresarios and not surprisingly, Mozart seems to have capitalized eagerly:

Towards the end of the century, Mozart became probably the first composer to recognize the trouser role’s erotic potential, with Cherubino in *Le nozze di Figaro*. His adolescent passion for Countess Almaviva is made all the more risqué by the fact that the lovesick page is sung by a woman, and Mozart and his librettist Da Ponte have additional fun when Cherubino dresses up as a serving maid.³⁷

³⁶ Kate Hopkins, Royal Opera House website, “Girls being boys being girls: a short history of opera’s trouser roles.” (Jan. 11, 2017).

³⁷ Ibid.

To effectively cast a singer in a trouser role, it is generally better for the production's overall impact to require a physique for the position that isn't utterly incongruous with the idea of a male character. However, as modern society begins to become more gender-affirming for all manner of gender non-conformity, it seems that our "progressive" society is simply catching up to what the field of opera has been championing for centuries.

Other opportunities for social progression exist throughout opera's repertoire. The "suspension of belief" required for watching a 200 pound soprano portray a character who is dying of consumption continues. Who can forget the infamous firing of Deborah Voigt in 2004 by Covent Garden for being "too fat"? Voigt was cast in the role of Ariadne, but the stage director refused to allow her to perform in the production as she didn't fit his idea of what the character's physical evolution (into a skinnier person) would be within the storyline. The fallout in the opera world, of the blatant discrimination against one of the field's foremost singers, included accusations of both physical discrimination as well as gender discrimination and impacted almost everyone. That casting choice was heard around the world and had an immediate effect on the individual singer's career and future casting choices at multiple companies. A more svelte Ms. Voigt returned to Covent Garden four years later to sing the role for which she was originally cast.³⁸

As well, some operas designate specific racial characteristics to lead characters, such as with Verdi's opera *Otello*. The Metropolitan Opera recently navigated a changing cultural landscape when it announced that it would no longer utilize blackface in making up the singer portraying the character of Otello (described as a "moor" in Shakespeare's original play of the

³⁸Anthony Tommasini. The New York Times. "Second Date with a Little Black Dress." (June 11, 2008).

same name) with regard to the casted singer's skin tone. In an article in *The Guardian*, author Alison Kinney writes:

Otello in 2017 raises an issue at once visual, ethical and extrinsic to the plot: the number of tenors capable of singing the virtuosic lead role has always been small; to this day, that list remains overwhelmingly white. How should the Royal Opera depict the “dusky” man whom Iago calls a “murky”, “thick-lipped savage”, when the white tenor's skin evokes the “lily fairness” of Desdemona? . . . Until very recently, white opera singers cast as non-white characters had recourse to dark theatrical makeup. Keith Warner, who is directing Covent Garden's new *Otello*, has roundly rejected this. “It's about the audience making an imaginative leap,” he says in an interview on the Royal Opera House's website. “And on top of all that, [blacking up] is of such offence to the black community in London and elsewhere.”³⁹

While it may be a new approach to an old issue, the fact that opera companies around the world continue to grapple with so many socially-important issues with regard to gender, race, size and educational access are a testament to the centuries of leadership the field brings to progressive advancement. Later in the same article, Kinney states:

For certain literalists, seeing a white singer in the role frustrates their desire to see *Otello* with textually correct *atro tenebror* (the “black darkness” in Boito's libretto). But Peter Gelb, the Met's general manager says it won't be happening again, at least not under his watch. “If anything, I think putting dark makeup [on] in these days causes a distraction. It takes you away from the story, rather than keeping you in it, because people understand that it is not appropriate.” And not only in *Otello*. “When we revive *Aida*, we are not using dark body and face makeup, as we once did. And someday we'll have a new *Aida*, and we're only going to move forwards.” . . . Gelb preferred to talk about casting. “The Met has the largest stage of any opera house around. So, singers who sing on our stage – in particular, roles like *Otello* that require big voices – have to have bigger voices.”

³⁹ Alison Kinney, *The Guardian*. “*Otello*: opera, identity politics and blacking-up.” (June 15, 2017.)

He has his eye on tenor Russell Thomas, who is black, and “who, as his voice grows, is thinking about and planning to sing Otello ... It’ll be wonderful when we actually are able to cast an African American or a black person as Otello. But until that time comes, we will have white Otellos.”⁴⁰

Opera is an expensive art form which originated (as did almost all new music at the time) via its wealthy Baroque patrons. For that reason alone it has suffered centuries of the elitist label. However, the art form also requires an excessive amount of education and training from its participants in order to succeed in today’s business climate. Thus, with a high cost to produce and a high cost to participate, the snobbery continues. Simply google “is opera elite” and thousands of articles, both current and archived, are at one’s fingertips. Is this elitist label accurate however, and can casting agent mollify this enduring perception? The answers are No and Yes, respectively, and the path is through education: education of the general public regarding the current role of opera in mainstream life as a progressive driver; education of the patrons and financiers of art regarding the costs and progressive benefits of opera to society and participants; active pursuit of creating equality of access to the education and training of a more diverse set of the artists and designers who will make the art of opera, which will then provide the Casting Agent a wider variety of choices in his or her work to advance social equality onstage.

In another article by Kinney published on *Good.com* entitled “Blackface, Diversity, and Getting Opera Right in 2015,” she reviewed and interviewed artists involved in creating the new *Magic Flute* (Mozart) production for Glimmerglass Opera that year:

⁴⁰ Alison Kinney, The Guardian. “Otello: opera, identity politics and blacking-up.”

The controversy has revealed the doublethink of white opera traditionalists who accept the whiteness of the talent pool as meritocracy—who don't agitate to bring more artists of color to the stage—but who still insist that *Otello* be painted to *look Moorish*. ... Dr. Gregory Hopkins, artistic director of Harlem Opera Theater says, “I don't consider [dark makeup] hurtful—as long as you're willing to give an African American an opportunity to play something other than an African American. Worldwide, only a handful of tenors can sing the demanding role of *Otello* and nearly all are white; But the scarcity of tenors didn't happen in a vacuum. Opera artists of color face significant structural barriers to obtaining musical education, funding, opportunities and roles.”⁴¹

The article continues:

University of Michigan musicologist Dr. Naomi André says, “People talk about how casting should be true to the race of the role. That is just not the full story.” ... as [Director Francesca] Zambello says, “For me, it's always about the best person you can cast, and having open eyes about diversity is key.” ... Diversity in opera is about casting, commissioning work, filling leadership positions, but also about deciding whose stories get told, whose identities and perspectives give vibrancy to the work. ...Resolving the opera's historical ugliness is hard work, much harder than keeping or tossing old makeup: it means commitments from funders, artists, the media, and ticket buyers. But it's necessary work, for the greater revelation of beauty. The Glimmerglass *Magic Flute* sought not to whitewash Mozart or apply a quick fix, but to engage new artists with his work in its entirety: to quarrel with it, vivify it, and bring out all its loopy effervescence, its grandeur and genius, and its problems. This was keeping opera alive for old and new audiences. This was doing opera right.”⁴²

Opera continues to grow as an art form worldwide. In fact, a relatively recent (2011) economic research study conducted by the Ifo Institute for Economic Research in Munich, Germany states, “opera houses attract well-educated workers who prefer to live near cultural amenities. Proximity to an opera house can increase regional growth by as much as 2 percentage

⁴¹ Alison Kinney, Good.com “Blackface, Diversity, and Getting Opera Right in 2015”. (Sept. 21, 2015.)

⁴² Ibid.

points.”⁴³ Thus, as the art form continues to maintain if not increase its foothold in cultural currency for both social and economic change, casting agents are at the forefront of bringing opera to new audiences by challenging old traditions onstage. In this way, casting agents must be willing to accept a role themselves-- that of Change Maker in our society-- and embrace the risks and rewards of being such pivotal leaders for the country and the world.

⁴³ Jack Ewing. Economix.com. “Culture as an Economic Engine.” (March 18, 2011.)

Chapter 10: CONCLUSION

A Theory of “The Diva Factor” in Opera Production Teams

As an art form, opera and its productions require and attract a unique type of personality-- one that is passionate, sensitive and deeply committed to detail and expression of emotion of all kinds. While the common discourse is that a female opera singer is the consummate Diva that one must fear and disdain, those who work regularly with operatic production staff and crew are intimately aware that this is an untruth. It is my personal theory, based on experience, that while singers as well as production crew are drawn to work in the field of opera due to an inherent affinity for and comfortability with large, grand emotions and displays of boundary-pushing emotional genius, it is only those few singers who take the stage to perform in public for each production, who can experience the cathartic emotional release of acting out a drama as written with their creative impulses that shape and drive the narrative, which allows them to maintain their emotional balance off-stage.

The remaining 80% of the operatic production team, as well as the audience itself, is left to expend its heightened emotion, driven to a fervor by the art designed specifically to engender such strong sensations, through its own channels and without sacrificing one’s professionalism in the working environment. This is no small feat for emotionally-driven, creative beings such as operatic personnel, brought together into intimate, pressure-filled situations which require sustained intensity and detailed perfection. As such, after years of producing I learned to expect at least one significant blow-up, meltdown or diva tantrum per production run from a member of the production team-- a mini-operatic performance which invariably was not delivered by any singer in the show.

**** TIP:** Be prepared! The personal drama usually presents itself about two-thirds of the way through a production’s rehearsal period. People are tired, overworked and artistically-challenged. The timeframe seems too short to accomplish the overall goals, the resources seem too finite and the quirks and annoying habits of the other folks on the team start cracking through each person’s veneer. Company parties and a couple of days off are best built into the schedule just prior to this point in the production calendar.

TIP 7

I have generally observed that only the singers are able to maintain emotional balance during a production, while the rest of the production team must wrestle with pent-up dramatic feelings combined with scheduling stress, which provides innumerable opportunities for disaster. If a casting agent has misread or ignored important “red flags,” a highly talented individual may derail an entire production with a tantrum that brings the show to a standstill. Thus, the “star-bucks” contingency proves valuable once again as a salve when the Diva Factor strikes. One-on-one listening (in my case, most often at the local Starbucks café) between the Production Manager, Artistic Director and/or General Director of a company with the production artist diva-of-the-day, has always done more to keep the keel on track for smooth sailing than any other method. Team members usually have highly valid concerns, perfectly acceptable reasons, and important observations or grievances, not all of which can often be addressed within the constraints of the production timeline and resource allocations. But understanding the source of the Diva Factor and applying effective “star-bucks”, can make the affected team member feel more like a bright star within the production’s constellation, to aid in the continuation of their commitment to the outcome.

Casting People Versus Managing Roles

Oftentimes, a casting agent has spent years building a trustful relationship with a high-level artist. Much “starbucks” has been consumed. After such an investment of time and trust, casting becomes less difficult. An artist who feels safe to create and who is supported logistically is going to be easy to work with and is going to do what is necessary for the company’s production to succeed. In this way, a casting agent can have a huge effect on the outcome of a production’s success simply by casting *people* versus filling *roles*. An artist might not be the perfect fit for a particular role, but as the perfect fit for the company, they are already the perfect *person* for the production. Choosing to support the artist, rather than adhering to strict idea of the role can often serve to provide a better outcome for the casting agent, the production, the company and the impact on the community.

In several cases, I have had to forgo the dream casting opportunity of the perfect artist(s) in a particular role because that person combined with another artist would create an unsustainable situation. One of my most admired colleagues, an hilarious character tenor with the highest-level credentials, would have been the perfect artist for the role of Bardolfo in my 2014 production of *Falstaff*. Additionally, a close friend and bass singer would have excelled in the role of Pistola in the same opera. One being rather short and pasty in stature and the other being tall and swarthy, these two men would have stolen every single scene in which they could have comically (and beautifully) sung together, playing off of each other in a symbiotic and very exciting casting duo. Both men are exceptional singers, actors and colleagues. Sadly, this perfect combination was not able to be had, as each singer is committed to a separate religion and culture on opposite sides of a huge political, warring divide. Each man’s ideological stance offended the other. While religion and cultural background should have no bearing on an artist’s

ability to perform, in this case, both of these lovely singers expressed that they would not be comfortable working with the other in such an intimate situation as an opera production, due to the current political climate at that time between these two cultural factions and to which each man felt strongly aligned.

In another missed opportunity two very good friends of mine, a tenor and a bass (again!) who were both singing internationally and at the Met, had previously enjoyed a close friendship but had recently experienced a falling out. Both gentlemen were cast in lead roles in one of my upcoming productions, however one of the singers no longer felt emotionally able to participate in the show if their former friend was going to be present on stage. He did not feel able to trust the other artist onstage with the required vulnerability stage work demands and withdrew from the opera at the last minute which impacted the entire production. While their falling out was not my doing, nor was my ignorance of the event my fault, it became my problem and the production's problem rather quickly.

Thus, casting must thoughtfully and empathetically consider the distinctive *persons* involved, in addition to all the other factors involved in making casting decisions, for the good of the relationships unique to each artist, each company, and each casting agent's network of performers built over many years. Effective casting is not only business deliberate and vocally technical, but it requires deep caring for individuals off the stage as well.

The Future of Opera is in the Hands of the Casting Agent

There are innumerable aspects to the art of opera, for which just a short list includes the personnel (the artist, the teacher, the coach, the company, the audience, the composer, the conductor, the orchestra, the librettist, the stage crew, the stage director, the stage manager, etc.,)

the venue (its seating, technical lighting capabilities, parking, wing space, pit configuration, proscenium, curtains, green room and dressing room locations, etc.) the technology (the supertitles, the lifts, load-in/out egress, security access, etc.) the administrative support (the marketing, the housing and transportation assistance, the fundraising, the volunteer coordination, financial and legal oversight, music preparation and dissemination, etc.) as well as so many other facets (advocacy, education and training, costuming, etc.) Hundreds of people and hundreds of years of artistic development exist to support the genre. To claim that the future of opera lies solely in the hands of the casting agent may seem a bit histrionic. Indeed, for anyone who has been involved in an opera production, it should be clear that the amount of work that happens “behind the scenes” to create a successful audience experience is extensive and detailed. But even participants in the production itself may be unaware of the essential role of the casting agent, long before production begins, in the ultimate success or failure of the performers’ efforts on the stage, nor as well, the casting agent’s overall impact on the advancement and development of the art form as a whole.

This document has revealed some of the intricacies and foundational aspects of the essential role of the casting agent not only on the viability of an individual show, but on the art form of opera as a whole since its inception in Italy in the early 17th century, to the present day. Leading opera into the future, the casting agent must continue to break new ground in toppling assumptions about the art form by heralding new ideas from beyond the stage. It is not enough to simply re-invent a production’s setting or update costuming. The casting agent can bring both modernity to personnel on and off the stage, as well as preserve the essential sacredness of the art form in the vocal choices presented, and in this way simultaneously support the foundation of opera while moving forward the pressing cultural issues of artistic expression in the most long-

lived and successful multi-media communication form that humanity has ever created. Long
Live Opera!

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