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OPENING DOORS

OPERA SAN JOSÉ'S SHAWNA LUCEY
TALKS TO LISA HIRSCH

Shawna Lucey, the general director and chief executive officer of Opera San José, was deep in preparations for the company's first *Duke Bluebeard's Castle*, which opens on February 15, when I visited her in October. Opera San José is a small company located in California's Silicon Valley, with revenues of about \$5.8m annually. Their core repertory includes standard works from Mozart to Puccini. Béla Bartók's great one-act opera is a venture into comparatively new musical territory for them, though Opera San José has presented some premieres and also a fair number of recent and 20th-century operas, Jake Heggie's *Moby-Dick*, Daniel Catán's *Florencia en el Amazonas* and Britten's *The Turn of the Screw* among them. Lucey knows the company's audience well.

'Our mission is to make emotionally thrilling entertainment, while incubating opera's next great talents on stage and off stage,' Lucey told me. 'We think about the audience, too, and we know that some of our long-term patrons aren't eager to hear *Bluebeard*. But [OSJ music director] Joseph Marcheso and I love the score so much. We want to bring it to the California Theatre because we think it's going to be a bone-chilling experience to hear it in that intimate space.'

She's right about that. The California Theatre, where Opera San José performs, seats just 1,122—and it has an organ, which the score requires. Smaller American companies performing *Bluebeard* don't always have access to a venue that is so well equipped. And the theatre's size and excellent sightlines make it a superb venue for opera.

In published interviews, Lucey has been very clear that she directs from a feminist viewpoint, so I asked her how she is approaching *Bluebeard*. ‘There’s a concrete story being told between these two characters, but there is also a weird spiritual, metaphorical story being told. The opera is about destruction and ownership and Bluebeard’s relationship to Judith in that way. Bartók’s musical writing is so evocative of the space. The castle is painted so perfectly in the music. I think about Bartók’s sensory experience of being a human in his time and why that would affect the soundscape.’

Bartók composed *Bluebeard* in 1911 and revised the opera in 1912 and 1917. After that long genesis, during which time World War I was fought, it finally received its first performance in 1918. Based on a fairy tale by the 17th-century French author Charles Perrault, *Bluebeard* remains eminently timely.

‘I have three collaborators in this production. Steven Kemp is the stage designer, Caitlin Cisek is the costume designer and Michael Clark is the lighting designer. We’re going to have a concrete set on stage with the real objects that we’re talking about, but we’re leaving room for metaphoric interpretation of what the world is,’



Shawna Lucey

says Lucey. ‘For me, it’s also a meditation on humanity’s destruction of the earth. If we’re talking about the impulse to destroy, that’s there, in Bluebeard’s need to control, own and destroy these women. They are the physical body and embodiment of the female form, but they are also a metaphor for nature.’

Kemp’s stage designs for *Bluebeard* are wonderfully creepy, as befits the opera during which Judith, Bluebeard’s new wife, pressures him to open seven mysterious locked doors in his castle. In this production, the action takes place in a single, gloomy room with black walls, lit by all manner of sconces and chandeliers. It’s easy to believe that a torture chamber, an armoury and other horrors lie beyond the doors.

Lucey further comments, ‘When I talk about the metaphorical story, this will shape how I work with the singers to completely flesh out the characters. Every second of the piece is a treasure trove of tension so perfectly told musically—we will match that with the acting and reacting between our artists.’

Lucey took a circuitous path to her position with Opera San José. Born and raised in Texas, she studied Italian and theatre in college. A Chekhov devotee, she spent several years in Moscow, where she studied Russian and obtained a Master’s degree at the Boris Shchukin Theatre Institute of the Vakhtangov Theatre, working multiple jobs to support herself.

After she returned to the US, a mentor suggested that she consider directing opera since she was fluent in several languages. Her first job in opera was a technical apprenticeship at the Santa Fe Opera, where she fell in love with the art form. Her training in the Russian theatrical tradition has stood her in good stead as an opera director.

For the past 15 years she has directed operas across the US. In the last few seasons Lucey created new stagings of *Tosca* and *La traviata* for San Francisco Opera. Both replaced ageing productions and are ‘legacy productions’ intended to be freshly appealing for today’s audiences, while lasting for the next few decades or longer.

Early in the pandemic, she came to the realization that her directing career might one day take her into the management side of the business. She was living in New York City at the time and enrolled in Columbia University’s Master’s programme in nonprofit management.

The pandemic brought another major change in Lucey’s life. She and her partner at the time—they subsequently split up and he has since died—made the decision to have a child. Her daughter JJ (June James) is now three years old. Caring for her daughter has made Lucey keenly aware of the challenges that all parents, and mothers in particular, face today (especially those who have chosen the peripatetic life of an opera professional).

Her degree in non-profit management turned out to be an asset shortly after she received it, when Khori Dastoor, the general director and chief executive officer of Opera San José from 2019 to 2021, was appointed to the same positions at Houston Grand Opera. Lucey had already directed *La traviata* for Opera San José, and ‘the timing was right’ for her to apply for the newly available position. The board of trustees appointed her general director, and Lucey began her job in early 2022.

Opera San José occupies a special place in the opera world. The American mezzo-soprano Irene Dalis founded the company in 1984, after a long performing career that took her to San Francisco Opera, the Metropolitan Opera, the Royal Opera, Bayreuth and other major houses. Dalis wanted to offer high-quality productions—OSJ has typically presented four operas each season—but her higher goal was to train young singers by giving them real-world operatic experience.

Opera San José has a resident company that typically includes several young singers, a director and a conductor. Each year, the singers are cast in two or more of the productions, the resident director stages a full-scale production, and the conductor generally leads the last two performances of each opera. Singers can remain resident artists for more than one season, and some have returned to sing with the company after completing their residencies.

The residency programme is highly competitive. Not only does OSJ offer top-notch training, but the artists are also salaried employees who receive healthcare coverage and housing. The company typically receives video applications from 650 to 800 singers and auditions up to 250 candidates in person before choosing the resident artists. Lucey is also developing an ongoing relationship with the Metropolitan Opera through the Met's Bank of America Fellowship for stage directors, which provides opportunities for professionals from underrepresented backgrounds. Opera San José's current resident stage director, Michelle Ainna Cuizon, who grew up in Manila, held that fellowship before her residency; she returned to the Met after directing *La Bohème* in San Jose this past November. It was her mainstage directing debut with OSJ.

Opera San José continues to be the beneficiary of Dalis's business acumen and foresight: she purchased real estate at a time when it was still economically possible to do so in Silicon Valley, which is now a crushingly expensive environment for the arts. The company owns two 24,000-square-foot buildings, which house administrative offices, rehearsal space, a costume shop and other facilities.

In addition, Opera San José owns two apartment buildings and can provide free housing to 54 artists each season. All of this is extremely unusual for a small American opera company. While there are maintenance and tax expenses associated with owning these facilities, they still provide stability for OSJ and for artists at the beginning of their careers.

Dalis died in 2014, just months after stepping down as general director of Opera San José, and the company continues to follow her model. Of Dalis, Lucey says: 'I want to honour Irene's brilliant vision for this company. We serve a very important function, both for artists and for audiences. Opera San José is friendly and welcoming. That's something our trustees are really passionate about, a welcoming environment. For someone who might feel trepidation about opera, we are *so* friendly!'

Lucey describes some of the ways the company has reached out to the Silicon Valley communities that it serves. 'Since I started in April 2022, we've offered

Shawna Lucey's production of 'La traviata' for San Francisco Opera in 2022, with (centre) Pretty Yende in the title role



supertitles in English and Spanish’—making the company more welcoming to members of the area’s large Spanish-speaking community. ‘*Florencia en el Amazonas* is in Spanish, and later this season we’ll have Héctor Armienta’s *Zorro*, which is also in Spanish.’

San Jose and surrounding cities also have large South Asian and East Asian communities. This year’s resident artists reflect the diversity of the Bay Area and include singers from Venezuela and Korea, and an Indian-American singer in addition to a director from the Philippines.

Opera San José has also initiated significant outreach to the area’s South Asian communities. The 2022 ‘Bollywood’ production of *The Marriage of Figaro*, conceived under Dastoor and directed by Brad Dalton, was set in India circa 1850, with the Almagas and other upper-class characters depicted as colonizing Brits and the servants as Indians. The class tensions, which can be obscure to American audiences in productions of the Mozart opera, could not have been clearer. The choreographer Antara Bhardwaj and her Antara Asthaayi Dance ensemble provided brilliant Indian-style dances. The production was a triumph in every way, and certainly helped expand the audience to include a larger number of South Asians.

Opera San José has an ongoing relationship with Bhardwaj, who also choreographed the company’s recent productions of Mozart’s *Magic Flute* and Gounod’s *Roméo et Juliette*. The local arts organization Mosaic America brought OSJ together with Bhardwaj and with Local Color, which supports local artists by providing studio space and organizing exhibitions, among other things. Erin Salazar, the executive director of Local Color, created OSJ’s art for the current season.

Lucey views the company as having significant responsibilities to its communities. During each season Opera San José provides employment for as many as 800 people. The company is the largest performing arts organization in the South Bay and the only one without a financial crisis and reorganization in its past. One challenge they face, though, involves philanthropy: the vast majority of Silicon Valley philanthropy is bestowed on organizations and causes outside of the geographic region—and of the remaining philanthropic dollars, only a tiny percentage goes to the arts. Expanding the audience and the donor base is a constant challenge, as it is for all American arts organizations.

What’s ahead for Shawna Lucey and Opera San José? This season, in addition to *Bluebeard*, Lucey will direct the late Michael Cavanagh’s production of *Così fan tutte* at LA Opera and her own production of *Die Fledermaus* at Opera Theatre of Saint Louis. She can’t discuss next year’s Opera San José productions, which won’t be announced until March, but she said they will be continuing the community collaborations they’ve established in recent years and creating a season that will serve artists and audiences alike.

Shawna Lucey’s production of ‘Bluebeard’s Castle’ runs at Opera San José from February 15 to March 2. www.operasj.org