

OPERA

Opera Mgr. James Toland on Selling "Small Town" Opera

James Toland has loved opera since he was four years old. He remembers persuading his mother to play Verdi's *Rigoletto* over and over again on their record player at home—and he's been hooked ever since. Now, as manager of the Eugene Opera Company, it is his job to interest others in the world of opera, and to dispell the many "preconceived assumptions" about opera in general, and about small town opera in particular.

Following are some excerpts from a recent interview with Mr. Toland, conducted by WH editor Sonja Ungemach.

SU: Let's start with a little history. How old is Eugene Opera?

JT: This is our ninth year. This fall we'll open our 10th anniversary season—something we're very excited about—a decade of opera in Eugene.

It was started by a group of people who wanted to sing and have an opera company, to produce opera. It was met with great skepticism. Phillip Bayles, the founder and for many years the artistic director, led it through those early years. In 1980, the Board of Directors decided they wanted a "professional" opera company to move into the Hult Center.

SU: How did you become involved with Eugene Opera?

JT: They hired me. I came up here in August, 1981, the year before the Hult Center opened. I was with Houston Grand Opera, Texas Opera Theatre.

SU: What interested you in coming to Eugene?

JT: I always wanted to live in the Northwest. I love the fog, rain, the grey skies, the multiple shades of grey. Secondly, I was astonished at the Hult Center. It's bigger than the Jones Hall in Houston. It's more technically capable than most halls I've ever been in—and I toured opera all over the U.S. for a year—and this is the finest facility I've ever seen. Thirdly, the incongruity of having that kind of facility in a small town tested my own preconceived ideas about professional performing arts. A lot of people say, "Why is there an opera company in a small town?" and I have learned to say, "Why not?" It represents something people want. There's this bias that says opera should only be in large metropolitan areas.

SU: Isn't that related to the bias that says that opera is only for the wealthy, the high brow, or whatever?

JT: Opera is, perhaps more than any other art form, associated with all these stereotypes—fat women with horns and breast-plates singing, fat women in the audience with diamonds and minks, snooty aloof audiences, expensive boring entertainment, people who shriek on stage. . . . If opera doesn't exist in a community, it's no wonder those stereotypes are there.

SU: Did you choose to stage opera in English to help make it more accessible, more appealing, to the general public?

JT: Absolutely. When the audience and a performer share a common language, then that's the one to use. . . . We are the only country in the world that traditionally produces opera in its original language. If the point of what we're doing is to involve people, why create barriers?

SU: On the reverse side of that—a friend of mine, who has known and loved opera since she was a child, was disappointed when hearing it in English to find that much of the dialogue was pretty mundane stuff.

JT: Yes. It can be. It's like a work of art. If you have a bowl of fruit, that's a pretty mundane subject matter for a picture. But what the artist brings to it in terms of their perception is what generates the excitement.

SU: Is the Eugene community sufficiently supporting the Opera?

JT: Yes, but it's a standard pattern with all the arts that in order to make it accessible to the general public, you cannot charge enough for a ticket that would make it pay its way. If you did that, our tickets would cost \$80, \$90, \$100 apiece. So we charge a modest price and seek money elsewhere—contributions, grants, etc. from people, corporations who have the resources to re-invest in a community to make these things possible.

Moving into the Hult Center took our budget from \$60-70,000 as a company up into the range of \$350,000, so our growth rate has been about 600% over a very short term. Our expenses have exceeded our income for three years now, but to a lesser and lesser degree each year, so that we believe that by '85-'86, our tenth year, we'll be able to operate at a surplus.

It's such a long process—getting people to come to opera is so . . . it's such a wrestling match . . . when they're sure they're going to hate it. One by blessed one you go from person to person, sort of twisting their arms and nagging and cajoling, just to get them into the theatre . . . and more often than not we find that the people who are new to it are surprisingly positive. Then there's the other crowd, the people who love opera but who go to San Francisco opera or Portland opera. . . . Some people think we're country bumpkins, that we can't produce opera, that local art isn't any good . . . and gradually some of these people have changed their minds, too.

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SU: You've gotten a number of grants from Merrill Lynch.

JT: We have a program with them for three years—last year, this year and next year they'll be sponsoring a production.

We don't have headquarters of national corporations here in Eugene, so it's a little harder to get them to listen to us. We don't have the credibility that opera companies in larger communities have.

SU: Are there any local companies putting money your way?

JT: Our income from business has increased a great deal, but so far there's not been a corporation like Merrill Lynch to help us, but I'm working on one right now which is local.

SU: Has our slowed-down economy had an effect on ticket sales? People have less money, it seems, to spend on things like opera, theatre, etc.

JT: We do work with the prevailing economy. We have tickets that are \$5 apiece; we have student and senior rushes for half price on the day of the show; through credit unions people can buy tickets for *Pirates of Penzance* for 50 percent off; Kaufmann shoppers right now can get a 20 percent discount; we bring high school kids in. . . .

SU: What can we expect from *Pirates of Penzance*, your upcoming program?

JT: It's an operetta, written originally in English by two Englishmen (Gilbert and Sullivan), who were direct predecessors of musical comedy. There's lots of dialogue, very funny; it satirizes the upper class in Great Britain in the early 1900's. The music is some of Sullivan's best. It's whacky, zany and it's short—about two and a half hours. It would be great for kids, too.

We've rented the set from Ft. Worth Opera. Lynn Bowers, our resident costume genius, is building the costumes. . . . Visually it should be pretty spectacular.

SU: Would you like to add anything else?

JT: We're really excited about our tenth year coming up. It's *Madame Butterfly*, *Hansel and Gretel*, *Carmen* and *Don Giovanni*—we're selling season tickets for that—but we're already planning our eleventh year, too. So it's an exciting time for us.

Pirates of Penzance will be performed Friday and Saturday, March 29 and 30, at 8 pm, and Sunday, March 31, at 2:30 pm, in the Hult Center's Silva Concert Hall.

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