



canadian **OPERA** company
RICHARD BRADSHAW, GENERAL DIRECTOR

(NOT SO OBVIOUS)

Careers in Opera

A selection of interviews with people involved in creating opera.

To put an opera on stage requires many different people with many different skills. These vary from singers and musicians, to wardrobe personnel and lighting technicians, conductors, coaches, finance officers, website designers and fundraisers, to name a few.

This booklet outlines some of the myriad of jobs performed by members of the Canadian Opera Company, working together to bring this complex and demanding art form to the stage and, therefore, to the public.

For more information on the Canadian Opera Company please visit our website at **www.coc.ca**

Interviews conducted in 2004 by Alison Wong
(Co-op placement, Albert Campbell High School)



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Position: Chorus Member
Name: Karen Olinyk

1) What do you love most about this career?

Being a part of a great ensemble. The chorus is fantastic because you will find that the chorus members are all very talented vocalists and we create an amazing sound. Also, being in the chorus gives me opportunities to work with some great solo singers, directors and conductors.

2) If someone were interested in becoming a member of the chorus, what would you recommend that they have in terms of skills or experience?

You should definitely have some sort of background in music or training as an opera singer. In fact, most people in the chorus have a bachelor's degree in music or a more specialized voice performance degree. Extensive experience on stage is not necessary, but is very helpful because you have to be good at thinking on your feet. Choral experience is also very important, whether you've been involved with other choruses, church choirs or amateur choirs. Being comfortable working in a large group setting really benefits the dynamics of the ensemble. Basically, if you are the kind of person who loves performing then being in an opera chorus can be a great experience.

3) How did you know you wanted to do this?

I guess I've wanted to be on stage ever since elementary school when we would do children's musicals. I remember playing an Indian chief in a school show, dressed up in my costume with hair and make-up and thinking to myself, "This is the best thing ever!" When you're on stage you get to become a whole different person and explore different places and time periods and meet different characters that you otherwise wouldn't be able to in real life. I think that's the reason performers are so drawn to it.

4) What surprised you most about this career?

I realized how much responsibility the chorus has and its importance in an opera. When you think about it: just about every opera has a chorus, and even though the audience becomes most familiar with the lead singers, many of the pivotal scenes in an opera include the chorus. I was surprised by how much an opera can be dependent on the chorus to set the tone and build the story. The amount of work involved with being in the chorus also surprised me. We spend a lot of time in rehearsal. When we're preparing for a show, the chorus rehearses Monday to Friday evenings and then on Saturday and Sunday we can work both afternoon and evenings, with one day off a week for 6 to 8 weeks straight. The good thing is, since most rehearsals are at night, many chorus members are able to have another job during the day. Aside from being in the chorus, I also work as the administrative assistant for the Music Department of the COC.

CHORUS MEMBER



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Position: Assistant Director
Name: Maer Powell

1) What do you love most about this career?

I love the fact that there are so many people involved when putting together a show; we all just sort of get in there and mess around. It's intensely collaborative but in the end it somehow all comes together.

2) If someone were interested in being an assistant director, what would you recommend they have in terms of skills or experience?

You should have an understanding of and practical experience in the theatre. You must possess both a logical and an artistic mind, as your work involves the staging of the opera paired with a knowledge of the technical requirements of the opera. Working in opera specifically, you must be able to read music and understand, if not speak, the languages of operas. This becomes especially important if you are paired with a director who doesn't come from a strong opera background. Most assistant directors are, of course, directors as well. It is tremendously important when you work as an assistant, that you understand it is about someone else's vision. You must park your personal ego at the door and facilitate the work at hand.

3) What led you to become an assistant director?

I was attracted to directing when I was a singer in an opera workshop at the University of British Columbia. I remember working with the director and thinking, "I want to do what he does." Later on, I saw a fantastic show from the Banff Centre that was being performed in Vancouver; I wrote to the director, telling him how much I appreciated his work; he actually wrote back, offering me an opportunity to be his assistant, and the rest, as they say, is history. Which leads me to another important point – if you see the work of a director and you love it, contact that person and let her/him know – you never know what may happen.

4) What has surprised you most about this career?

I guess I'm surprised by the fact that people still don't understand the importance of assistant directors in opera. In opera production, the assistant director may act as a facilitator, confidante, liaison, and do as much or as little as is required to get the production ready. Each show has different requirements, so you have to be flexible. It's a very demanding role and it's indispensable.

DIRECTOR



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Position: Marketing Associate, New Media

Name: Jennifer Dougall

1) What do you love most about this career?

The creative control that comes with working on the website is very gratifying. I love the fact that the things I do can be immediately put on the Internet for people to see. It's also great that the stuff I write and design is used in such a prominent way to promote the company.

2) If someone were interested in working in marketing for an arts organization, what would you recommend they have in terms of skills or experience?

That's quite hard to say because the department is responsible for so many things that a variety of skills is necessary. However, as long as you are creative you will fit in well. Working in an arts organization, you are always surrounded by an artistic atmosphere so you have to suit that and be comfortable with that. Work in marketing can be demanding, because there is overlapping with the different departments: sometimes PR (Public Relations) will work together with marketing and marketing may work with Development (Fundraising), so you have to be able to multi-task.

3) How did you know you wanted to do this?

I studied journalism and actually worked as the managing editor of a magazine before I started working here. After doing that for a while, I decided that print media wasn't the best fit for me and, in my own free time, I taught myself about the Internet and website development. When I found the posting for this job, the company had just started to "go online" and to explore the Internet as a medium for their communication with the public. They were looking for someone who was familiar with the web, but not a tech-head, someone who could grow into the new technology with them. It just felt like a natural fit.

4) What surprised you most about this career?

I found it surprising how easy it was to get into opera and appreciate it. Before working here I didn't know very much about opera – even though I had a background in the arts – but it was not difficult to learn about this art form and be comfortable writing and promoting it. There is this myth out there that opera is for the elite and it's not accessible to everyone. However, I've come to realize that that's not true and it's not "stuffy" at all.

MARKETING



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Position: Assistant Librarian
Name: Muriel Smith

1) What do you love most about this career?

Being a music librarian really allows me to be close to the production and it's wonderful to be there when the orchestra has the music, that we've put together, on their stands and starts playing. You just feel satisfaction in knowing that you were part of this bigger puzzle.

2) If someone were interested in becoming a librarian for an opera company, what would you recommend that they have in terms of skills or experience?

A broad background in music is an extremely valuable asset. You definitely have to be able to read and understand music. Training in piano or keyboards is good, but it's wonderful if you know how to play another instrument – whether it is strings, woodwinds or brass. In fact, almost all music librarians working for arts organizations are former orchestra players or have some experience playing in ensembles. Of course, in the area of opera, you must also have a good concept of languages and you really need to be knowledgeable of different versions of scores that are available as well as the history and content of the operas. You may want to take a university degree in music or even library science, since cataloguing and classification systems are an integral part of the work. Additionally, good people skills are required because you have to be able to understand and interpret the concerns of the conductor and the musicians.

3) How did you know you wanted to do this?

I never actually thought of this as a possible career. I started singing in the chorus for the COC in 1960, and from there I had taken several other jobs within the company. I co-ordinated the summer festivals, then I worked as a production assistant, which led to me being the scheduling manager, and then I became company manager for the COC school tours from 1980-1985. During all this, I was also the radio co-ordinator who handled the broadcasts of all the COC productions on CBC radio. In 1991, I actually took about a year off from work to adopt my granddaughter and then Bob Sutherland, the librarian at the time, asked me to come back and help him. After a while, Bob was offered the position of librarian at the Metropolitan Opera Company in New York, so I was left to handle things in the library by myself for several months. Wayne Vogan, who was on the music staff at the company and had some library training, joined me and we've been librarian and assistant librarian ever since!

4) What surprised you most about this career?

I was surprised by the many facets that this work has. So many details have to be observed and a piece of music really has to go through many levels of preparation before it can be performed for the public. It's difficult to anticipate all the things that can go wrong. Given that these operas have been performed hundreds of times, it's especially surprising that the scores being printed are still not correct. But after all the tedious work is done, the result is very satisfying.

MUSIC LIBRARY



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Position: Props Apprentice
Name: Matt Hemming

1) What do you love most about this career?

I've always loved making things and being creative so this job is really an outlet for all that. But also, it's great to be a part of something bigger and a piece of the magic we produce with theatre. A seemingly simple prop may require a lot of time and precision to produce, whereas an outstanding prop might be made using the simplest techniques. I love the fact that a prop does not have to be elaborate or expensive to have a real effect on the audience.

2) If someone were interested in becoming a prop builder, what would you recommend they have in terms of skills or experience?

Well, I think going to university for theatre production really helped me. There was only so much that could be learned about props specifically, but it helped me to understand how companies work and how things are run in the grander scheme of things. Of course, you, need to be able to work with other people. In a production, you're working to serve the vision of the director or designer, so you have to be able to interpret that and build through that. Also, a lot of times you're not just making things you're also fixing things from productions that were produced ten years ago, with different tools, in another country, so you really have to be adaptable. In terms of skills or experience, you have to be a "jack of all trades."

3) How did you know you wanted to do this?

I started designing and building sets and props in high school and I've just kept with it because I love how creative it allows me to be. I've really just found it to be a great outlet for my artistic desires.

4) What surprised you most about this career?

I don't think there have been any grand discoveries since I started doing this but I have realized that every day there's a little bit more that I learn about doing the craft. There are always moments where I think, "Oh, I never thought of making that with this" or "So that's how you make that work." So I think it's nice that there are all these little experiences of learning the "tricks" of the trade.

PROPS



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Careers in Opera

Position: Director of Public Relations
Name: Claudine Domingue

1) What do you love most about this career?

Working in public relations can be quite rewarding because you are constantly using your creativity and imagination to promote something. The whole idea is to connect with the public in as many ways as possible and from time to time you're able to use really different angles to do that. For example, in *Rigoletto* (2004), we had a soprano with us, Laura Claycomb, who brings her dog Tullio with her everywhere – all around the world, backstage, in rehearsals, literally everywhere. I thought it might be a good story, so we worked hard to find an outlet for it and finally the *National Post* picked it up and ran a photo of Laura and Tullio in her dressing room. It was an extra plug for *Rigoletto*, but with a twist. That was just one way of promoting the company without focusing strictly on the operas. Laura will be back with us this season, so I'm hoping we can find another outlet for a Tullio story!

2) If someone were thinking about working in public relations for an arts organization, what would you recommend that they have in terms of skill or experience?

Besides the obvious – good writing skills, great organizational abilities, and a basic knowledge of the kind of art form you are promoting – you need an understanding of the artistic environment around you. My advice is to volunteer at different organizations; visit museums, go to theatre, poetry readings, fundraisers, know what's happening around you. Otherwise, you're in a vacuum and you can't talk about how your event fits into the bigger picture of events in the city or around the country, or with a large company like ours, around the world. That knowledge also helps you plan ahead and anticipate potential publicity opportunities. As far as education is concerned, a university degree or the equivalent, in English or a related field is extremely desirable to an employer.

3) How did you decide that you wanted to do this?

Before I got into public relations, I worked as a stage manager, so my work background was mostly in theatre. After a few years I started working part-time for a publicity company and from there I started to freelance as a publicist and worked in film, television and theatre. I was looking for something a little more stable when I came across a job description for a publicist at the COC. Besides my work background, I studied the cello for many years and had a good knowledge of classical music and opera, so I figured it would be a great opportunity.

4) What surprised you most about this job?

I was happily surprised at how large the opera company is, and by that I mean that there are so many potential vehicles for publicity and interviews. Beyond the designers, singers, conductors, directors, staff, etc. who come from all over the world and Canada, we do so many education and outreach activities that there is no shortage of angles and opportunities. The downside to the company's size is that the logistics of setting up an interview can be daunting. Most of the time, it takes longer to set the interview up than the interview itself! But frankly, that's a minor inconvenience given the amount of talent available.

PUBLIC RELATIONS



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Position: Manager, Special Events
Name: Tamara Kolber

1) What do you love most about this career?

My responsibilities revolve around fundraising through special events such as the Opera Golf Classic and annual Fine Wine Auction. The best part of my job would have to be working in the different teams that put these events together. I get to meet really interesting people and learn from them. The volunteers share their innovative ideas and experience in fundraising events.

2) If someone were interested in special events management, what would you recommend they have in terms of skills or experience?

If you are interested in special events as a career, you definitely need to have experience planning events, and helping out with all the small details too. I suggest volunteering as much as you can on as wide a variety of events as possible. Putting events together is largely about logistics and paying attention to the details. Working in fundraising events, you really need to have new and original ideas to draw people to your organization. You have to develop strong leadership skills as well as your people skills. It's also important to learn how to be accommodating to different personalities.

3) How did you know you wanted to do this?

I knew I wanted to work in special events because I enjoyed all of my volunteer experience on events such as the *CIBC Run for the Cure* and working with groups like the Toronto International Film Festival. When I found out I could make a living doing this, I was thrilled. I am happy to be working in the arts because I grew up in a family that supports the arts; my mom was a ballet dancer, my dad is a photographer and we have always attended theatre. I learned from an early age and feel very strongly that the arts hold an important place in society.

4) What surprised you most about this career?

There's not much about working in special events that surprises me anymore. However, when I started volunteering and working on events, I suppose I was surprised by a few things. Primarily, the number of small details that go into making an event successful will keep me up at night for weeks before an event – from having the right volunteers at check in, making sure signage is accurate, making sure all involved parties (venue, caterer, staff, volunteers) are all “in the know”, ensuring the sponsors deliver the product to the right place and wondering whether I've reminded the emcee enough times about date/time/place. Perhaps the one thing that does still surprise me is that when people hear I work in special events for the Canadian Opera Company, they immediately have the impression that the job is glamorous and loads of fun. And yes, while my job does have some perks, it is still a job with as many stresses and frustrations as anything else you could choose to do. There is the odd glass of champagne, but trust me, it's not every day!

SPECIAL EVENTS



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Position: Manager of Corporate Sponsorship
Name: Michelle Navarro

1) What do you love most about this career?

Seeing the numbers go up is always a good feeling when you're working in fundraising. Knowing that your efforts have been successful and you were able to gain that much more funding for the company, so that the company can expand and continue to present such innovative and adventurous work. You asked whether there is a creative aspect to the job – certainly when creating customized sponsorship proposals for specific companies and when we pair what we could offer our sponsors with what would benefit them, a lot of creativity is involved.

2) If someone were interested in working in corporate fundraising, what would you recommend they have in terms of skills or experience?

You have to know the basics and understand how fundraising works. There are fundraising programs and arts administration programs that you can take now for your post-secondary education but a lot of people just get into it through their own involvement with different arts organizations. Great communication skills are especially important because you have to listen to the needs of the donor. Someone told me that a good fundraiser is a good listener and I agree with that because it's important when you are in a sales meeting to not be the one who's always talking – to listen to what your donor is looking for in the sponsorship. Once you understand that, you have to have the sales abilities to show the donor what the advantages are to supporting the company.

3) How did you know you wanted to do this?

When I graduated from university, I worked in the advertising department selling ads and sponsorship for the campus radio and newspaper. I was always interested in marketing and advertising and the way they supported the operations of the radio and newspaper was through selling ad space. So when the opportunity came up to work for the COC I found a lot of similarities between this job and the job I had on campus and so I was determined that I could do this.

4) What surprised you most about this career?

Nothing has really "surprised" me about this position, but I'd have to say that it was a nice change to come to a large organization from a smaller one. It's refreshing to work at an organization that has great leadership and in an environment where you can learn a lot – in the first six months working here it felt like I went through an intensive two-year training course on fundraising!

SPONSORSHIP



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Position: Technical Director
Name: Julian Sleath

1) What do you love most about this career?

As technical director I oversee, essentially, all the technical activities involved with the productions such as: scenery, props, wigs and make-up, lighting and sound, etc. So I think what's most enjoyable is working with the directors and designers to achieve their ideas in terms of what they want out of those aspects of the opera. You also have to work through the logistics of bringing hundreds, sometimes thousands, of items as well as a heap of people together. I love the challenge in that.

2) If someone were interested in becoming a technical director, what would you recommend they have in terms of skills or experience?

During the time when I began working in theatre, people got into it by just doing it and that's exactly what I did – I just started doing it. Now, you don't really have much of an option but to study theatre and get your degree in a production program or something of the sort. So I do recommend that, but what you really need is plain common sense. It's important to have the ability to think through problems and work around them when they arise.

3) How did you know you wanted to do this?

My degree is actually in forestry and ecological science but in school I was interested in theatre so I joined the drama club. I realized shortly afterward that I didn't want to be an actor and became more involved with doing the lighting and sound for the shows. I also went to university in Edinburgh, which is famous for the Edinburgh International Festival (a festival of theatre, opera and music). The typical summer jobs for students weren't really in the bars or anything like that but working for the main festival or for one of the fringe theatre companies. I started out as a production manager for the Fringe Festival.

4) What surprised you most about this career?

I think once any technical director graduates to the world of opera, they come to realize what a great challenge this art form is. There are so many things that need to happen, so many people that need to be involved, and so many details that may seem miniscule but, if they are overlooked, can cause everything to just fall to pieces.

TECHNICAL



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Careers in Opera

Position: Vocal Coach
Name: Kinza Tyrrell

1) What do you love most about this career?

As a vocal coach, I am involved with a production in a large variety of ways. In rehearsal, I act as the rehearsal pianist. Essentially, that means I play the part of the orchestra so that the singers can hear their cues and practise with accompaniment before the actual orchestra is added. Sometimes I also do “assistant-conducting,” where I step in to conduct the ensemble, and “cue-singing,” where I sing other people’s parts so that the singer I’m working with has someone to interact with. There are also one-on-one coaching sessions with singers where I get to work with them on correct rhythm, notes, language and even characterization. In the final stages, I see the whole opera put together and act as the “ears” in the audience checking for balance, volume, and clarity. I love the fact that there are so many components to being a vocal coach and that I get to do all these things.

2) If someone were interested in becoming a coach, what would you recommend they have in terms of skills or experience?

First and foremost, you must have good piano training and therefore, a good technique. Study your instrument well and gain experience playing for, and with, others. Working with other musicians and singers is important because you have to learn to adjust to their musical ideas. The outcome may be different from what you had initially imagined but input from everyone in a group gives the final product more eminence. Sometimes young players are so focused on working alone, in rehearsal and performance, that they miss out on the benefits of working in an ensemble. Also, when playing for a company there is always a lot of music to learn in very little time, so you most definitely have to be a good sight-reader. I also recommend, if your school offers the courses, that you study languages. It is easier to start when you’re young and if you find that you really enjoy it then coaching could be a good potential career.

3) How did you know you wanted to do this?

Well, I started out as a solo pianist. I grew up in a church where I played a lot and did a lot of sight-reading. I also played for a ballet school, which really helped me to become a precise player in terms of rhythm and musical accuracy. While taking my bachelor’s degree in solo piano performance, I accompanied string players and singers for a source of income. I discovered that I really liked playing in an ensemble. After a while, I found that I especially enjoyed working with singers because I was also dealing with storylines, characters and different languages. Then when I decided to get my master’s degree, the university was offering a program that combined solo piano, chamber music and vocal accompaniment – so I went for it!

4) What surprised you most about this career?

You really have to be doing this because you love it. And I say that because I was surprised by how inconsistent and varied the income can be. I may be doing the exact same job with two different companies, and I could be paid from the lower end of the pay scale with one and the peak of the pay scale with the other. What’s even more surprising is that I meet people who are often so passionate about what they do, that they do not care about this difference.

VOCAL COACH



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(NOT SO OBVIOUS)
Careers in Opera

Position: Lead Hand – Wig and Make-up Department
Name: Cori Ferguson

1) What do you love most about this career?

The creativity of working in wigs and make-up is probably the best part of this job. You can get messy and have fun and at the same time you are creating artwork that's essential to the entire picture on stage. As a wig and make-up artist you're working on the singers' head and face, which is a really sensitive area in terms of physical appearance. I love the fact that a large part of what we do really help the singers get into character. I also like bonding with the singers, helping them focus backstage, stay calm before a show and making sure that they are well taken care of.

2) If someone were interested in becoming a wig or make-up artist, what would you recommend they have in terms of skills or experience?

In terms of your personality, you have to be a patient and quiet person with good, good, good people skills. Of course, you would need your hairdressing license and you definitely need to study theatre make-up. I also recommend doing volunteer work with community theatre companies when you first start out. It's a good way to get some hands-on experience and it will really help you towards a professional career.

3) How did you know you wanted to do this?

I've always, always wanted to do this. I actually studied childcare before starting this and found that I didn't enjoy it at all. I remember sitting in my counsellor's office and seeing a pamphlet on careers in *Aesthetics and Beauty* and thinking, "That's it, I know what I want to do." After that I got my hairdressing license and worked at a salon for awhile. Then my friend, who was a prop maker, said the theatre company she was working for needed help in their wigs department. I started working for them, and I haven't worked in a salon since.

4) What surprised you most about this career?

I guess I was surprised by how much fun it can be. This job really isn't a job but more of a lifestyle. When we're in production, I can be tired, sweaty, hot, and dirty, with 400 things to do, but it's still enjoyable. And until closing night, there's nothing you can think about but the show.

WIGS & MAKE-UP