



Festival Opera's Executive Director to Retire Next Month

Festival Opera's Executive Director Helen Sheaff has announced her retirement, effective December 1, after nearly two decades with the Walnut Creek-based company.

Since joining the company in 1991, Sheaff has played a pivotal role in building the non-profit organization into the third-largest opera company in the Bay Area. Her shared vision of Michael Morgan's artistic direction has also helped Festival Opera gain national recognition for adventurous programming and as a showcase for young, emerging artists in principal roles. Among the former have been highly-stylized productions of the West Coast premiere of Ned Rorem's *Our Town* in 2007, Britten's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in 2008, and *Faust* in 2009.

Commenting on Sheaff's many contributions over the years, Morgan says: "Helen has made a difference in so many ways. She has this amazing ability to balance the sometimes-competing interests of a board, the artists, and the opera-going public, which has seen Festival Opera through a period of great artistic growth. She was never content to do the same repertory all the time. At the same time, she had such a clear vision of what a small opera company can do. She's literally done everything for this company but sing."

Born and raised in London, Sheaff grew up accompanying her father to the opera, concerts and theatre. Following college, she settled in New York before moving to the Bay Area in 1969, where she also raised her three daughters.

In 1991, she joined Festival Opera as a part-time office employee shortly after they had mounted their first production. She still remembers her first assignment: to assemble a desk someone had given cofounder and conductor Jim Sullivan. "It was almost as big as his office," she says with a laugh. "Fortunately, one of my brothers was visiting California, and we managed to push and pull it together."

One of her fondest memories, she says, was the time they needed a last minute replacement for a tenor. The agency sent them "a picture of a very preppy-looking kid. So he shows up, all in black leather on a bright red Yamaha motorcycle with spiky hair. He was just gorgeous, 6 foot four and blond. His name was David Miller and he now tours the world as part of El Divo!"

What will she miss the most? “Working with Michael has been a delight, because he has a great temperament. I think the excitement of pulling together these artists, and just being involved in finding the right people, sitting through the production meetings, and going to all the rehearsals. I just love that part of it. Once we are in rehearsal the real fun begins. At the first musical rehearsal we find out if we’ve gathered together artists who will make magic together. If you’ve accomplished that, then the rest is easy!”

Her reason for retiring now? “I want to spend more time with my seven grandchildren and travel. Because our season takes place in July and August, I’m working from 9:00 in the morning to around midnight when they’re out of school for the summer. “Plus, this is an energy-consuming job. To stay on another season meant putting together the 20th anniversary celebration. I’d rather be in the audience for this one!” she says with a laugh.

“Helen has done a fantastic job,” says Ted Weis, Festival Opera’s co-founder, who hired her in 1991. “Helen had no background in this field, but used common sense and intelligence and put up with one board of directors after another who had less knowledge and less incentive – yet managed to manage them as well as run the company.”

Adds Jim Bell, the current chair of Festival Opera: “On behalf of the Festival Opera Board of Directors and the Festival Opera community, we extend our profound gratitude to Helen for the 19 years she devoted to the performing excellence that distinguishes Festival Opera. Everyone close to the company knows that Helen is the one who held it all together and brought us to our 20th anniversary.

“I am deeply moved that Helen will transition from the executive director role to a leadership role with the capital campaign we are launching in 2011. Helen's intimate relationship with the Festival Opera community will be crucial to the success of our campaign just as her devotion to the company has kept us alive to plan for 2011 and beyond. Three cheers for Helen!”

While a search is conducted for Sheaff’s replacement, veteran arts administrator Joan Lounsbery has agreed to serve as interim executive director for three months, beginning in early December. The UCLA graduate with a degree in music history has over four decades of top management experience – including as the executive director at the Santa Rosa Symphony, Napa Valley’s Music in the Vineyards summer chamber music festival, and Milwaukee’s Artist Series at the Pabst and the Skylight Opera Theatre. She has also served as managing director of the Northern California Opera Consortium, a member of the national board for Opera America, and advisor to the National Endowment for the Arts.

* * *

MEDIA CONTACTS:

Lyla Foggia

Foggia Public Relations LLC

(503) 622-0232

lyla@foggiapr.com