ON COMMUNITY CONTEXT: A CIVIC ACTION GROUP INTERVIEW

January 24, 2018 — Leah Barto, correspondent for OPERA America, speaks with Ned Canty, general director of Opera Memphis.

Leah: We are talking about context today and knowing your community. This is inspired by OPERA America’s Civic Action Group in which we are asking questions like, “What does it look like for opera companies to take a role in deeply understanding those histories [of a place]?”

Ned, I have heard you speak so knowledgeably about Memphis. What are some of the characteristics you’ve learned about Memphis that directly impact the decisions you make about Opera Memphis?

Ned: One of the interesting things about Memphis is that when you look at the national data about how people think about Memphis, it is overwhelmingly positive. People are either positive or neutral, but curious. But when you look at how Memphians think of Memphis, it is almost flipped. We are very tough on our city. When you ask how people feel about their neighborhood, it is flipped again. People love their neighborhood; the problem is the rest of the city, wherever it may be. And it goes across demographics, people have this real sense of place.

I think the main thing is trying to learn what the community’s self-narrative is and then trying to gain some historical perspective on it. Try to hear how they think about their community. And then try to think of how outside people think of the neighborhood, and use that to come up with the line of discovery. It gives you the tools you need when you start talking to them, particularly about generational changes and things like gentrification, where you are talking sometimes to people who are new to a neighborhood, and sometimes to people who have been there for generations. It requires making sure that you understand the multitude of narratives within the neighborhood to make sure you are exploring the area between them.

I will also say with the neighborhoods, everyone has a story. There are more stories than you could ever possibly make into operas. It becomes sort of a double-edged sword. When we did Ghosts of Crosstown, we interviewed a lot of people and the composers chose story ideas. Inevitably because there were so many people invested, there were people who felt their stories weren’t being told. That is something that you need to be transparent about from the beginning. For instance, “the story of a neighborhood” is something you may have heard me say in the past; but now I would say “a story of a neighborhood.”
Leah: In understanding the context of a community, there are certain facts you can learn about. Where do you go to learn about shifts in demographics and changes that may impact the company?

Ned: The library is one great resource. There are also a number of terrific local historians. That’s the nice thing about living in a small city; if you want to talk to the guy who wrote *This Day in Memphis*, with one phone call you can be in touch with him. There is also a lot of oral history, so do try to go direct to the source.

We are working right now on The McCleave Project inspired by Florence Cole Talbert-McCleave, an African American soprano who was prominent in Memphis for many years. Because Memphis is still a small enough city, there are people alive who knew her, and they are helping us get in touch with other people. We are doing a lot of legwork trying to learn not only what the newspapers said was important about her sixty years ago, but what do the people who she taught music or voice to think of her impact.

Leah: Not only are you a producer, but in this sense you are a historian, or a biographer/ethnographer.

Another point we have talked about is being of the city, not above the city. What does that mean to you and Opera Memphis?

Ned: The challenge at Opera Memphis is that opera was brought to Memphis specifically because it was not of Memphis; it was foreign, it was fancy, it was coastal. It was brought specifically for those reasons. So trying to turn that around and figure out what is the Memphis part, especially in a city like Memphis, which is birthplace of blues, the home of rock ‘n roll, Memphis soul, where we have all of these musical traditions. Trying to make a case of how opera connects all of these musical traditions is tricky. I think it is about making sure that when you are looking at a piece like *La traviata*, it is relevant.

Recently with *La traviata*, we cast an African American soprano as Violetta. We had a situation where a black woman has a bunch of white men fighting about who had ownership of her body, which is an incredibly relevant thing in Memphis, and it always has been. It wasn’t uncommon for a young rich boy to become infatuated with a working woman on Beale Street.
So it’s about trying to make sure that we are addressing these issues within practice of our masterworks or the older pieces, and also it’s about being open. It is about offering our tools, assets and resources, some of which cost money, some of which we can give freely. It is about making sure that when there is an opportunity to help someone using the tools that we have, that we do.

An example would be with Latino Memphis. It is a great and growing organization. They have an annual lunch and during that time, were having a pretty serious discussion about ICE [U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement]. There were some immigration raids that had just happened in Memphis, and Mauricio, who runs the organization, felt they needed some levity. They asked us if we could write a little something, so we wrote a pastiche opera (new words to old opera tunes) about El Centro, one resource they have which helps kids navigate the college application process. We wrote it and they put it in the middle. We were able to use our tools to make their event more effective and allow them to pursue their goals. So to me that is what it means to be of a city, which is helping other stakeholders in the city.

Leah: To me, Opera Memphis’ work of being of the city also encompasses 30 Days of Opera. What has been the trajectory of this program?

Ned: So 30 Days just finished its sixth year. It is a series of free performances across the city in the month of September. They range from pop ups at libraries to full concerts for thousands at the Levitt Shell. It’s a program that has grown a lot. We started it at first thinking of it as a way to get people interested in opera, with the goal to make it seem less foreign, more approachable and to get people in the door to see a fully produced opera.

What has changed over the past couple of years is that we have started trying much harder to assign a value to someone who hears just one aria, and that might be all the opera they get that week or year. What is the value of that? Sometimes those experiences are the most powerful or valuable, and when you are talking about making the city a better place to live, then having singers show up at the dog walk and sing Rossini’s Cat Duet, it is not the same as seeing La traviata, but, it is about using the tools at our disposal to make peoples' lives better.

The past two years we have done full operas as part of 30 Days. Last year we did The Barber of Seville. This year we did a tour of The Telephone to multiple African American venues as part of a listening tour to learn how to better serve individual communities within the city. We did the performance because we wanted a common talking point.
I think as we look forward, what I would like to see is that the first show of our season is a free, fully-produced opera, which would be the pinnacle of 30 Days. It would allow anybody who is interested in having that experience to have that experience for free. That shift between five dollars and free in terms of attendance can be a pretty potent one.

Leah: It’s amazing to hear about the shift from building awareness of the company to creative placemaking. I’d like to hear more about The McCleave Project.

Ned: It is a series of initiatives, the first being the listening tour, which is ongoing. It is us trying to discard our preconceived notion of what we should do in certain neighborhoods. To go in and try to have a conversation and listen to what they think and how we can do better. We try to be very good guests; we bring hostess gifts, we bring food. We learned a lot from the first iteration of that in eight locations. We learned we want to do more of it. We learned that this neighborhood patchwork of Memphis is very real; people in one community may feel very differently about the arts or the role of arts than people three or four blocks over because there is some historical divide that may have disappeared years ago, but lent itself to the makeup of these communities. Trying to understand those [divides] and then find those areas of common ground. We can’t provide everything that everyone wants to see from us, resource-wise, but we are trying to identify areas of overlap, the sort of common themes... How do we find commonalities that allow us to serve some of these neighborhoods? One of the common themes is building bridges across some of these old mental barriers. How can we be a part of that?

One our great partners is an organization called BRIDGES because of that idea of building bridges across neighborhoods that might be two blocks across from each other, but be very different in terms of outlook and makeup.

The next part of The McCleave Project is going to be a symposium on race and opera, both from an academic standpoint on the history of black opera in Memphis and America, and from a modern standpoint, such as how do we approach productions like Madame Butterfly and Porgy and Bess today from an industry standpoint.

And then the main part of this which we have been working on for over a year now is The McCleave Fellowships, fellowships for directors, coach accompanists and singers of color. The idea being that we, as a company, can be a part of the pipeline solution in terms of giving early experiences to singers.
I am especially personally committed to the idea of finding and nurturing and giving opportunities for conductors and directors of color because that is the way that stories are being told. We are shortly going to announce our first fellow, he is a director, he is local [Dennis Whitehead Darling, announced May 31, 2018]. He will be with us for two years, working on directing and other projects, and we are very excited.

Leah: Thank you for this great demonstration of listening and working together to understand your community more deeply.

Ned: Thank you.