

ACROSS THE BOARD

A Publication of OPERA America for Opera Company Trustees

From the President and CEO of OPERA America

One of the greatest impediments to change is dismantling what has come before. COVID-19 has accomplished just that. The interruption invites us to reimagine how we do business.

Take time now to review your company's strategic plan. Are the goals still relevant? You'll read in this issue how New Orleans Opera leaned on its strategic plan to define its next chapter.

This is also a good time to review the strengths of your board. Do members understand their roles? Our new series on governance fundamentals will offer suggestions for making your board a more effective instrument for progress.

The silence in opera houses may dampen our spirits, but we have an opportunity now to prepare for success ahead.



MARC A. SCORCA

Leadership Transition

The search for a new general director is never easy. And picking the successor to a leader of more than two decades — in the midst of a national health crisis — is a challenge of its own.

Yet New Orleans Opera came out all the stronger. In July, the company announced the appointment of Clare Burovac as its new general director. Marc A. Scorca, president and CEO of OPERA America, called Ranney Mize, chair of the search committee, to learn how his board made its pick.

MARC A. SCORCA: I bet you never expected to run a search through an international pandemic. I'm sure you feel lucky, at least, that the process began before the quarantine orders. Tell me, how did you get started?

RANNEY MIZE: Our search committee consisted of the six officers plus six additional members of the board. One of the first questions we asked ourselves was: Should we spend money on a professional consultant or can we determine for ourselves who is a good candidate?

After going through the process, I can confidently say that hiring an outside consultant was essential. And that's for a couple of reasons: First, the consultant knows the opera world better than probably any board member

"We would use our strategic plan as a guide for the kind of general director we were looking for."



Ranney Mize

in any opera company. Second, they can do background checks and vetting calls with people they already know. And finally, they're experienced with the whole process — from placing the ads to obtaining reference letters.

How did you decide what you were looking for?

The search committee decided fairly early in the process that we would use our strategic plan as a guide for the kind of general director we were looking for. For example, if we were going to expand our audience and bring more value to the community, we would need to continue our chamber opera series and expand our education programs. So the search committee looked for candidates who had experience with doing lesser-known works, not just the warhorses, and doing them in venues other than the main opera house.

Robert Lyall has been the long-serving general director of the New Orleans Opera. Was it a challenge for you and

your colleagues to define who his successor would be?

Robert has been in the field for over 50 years, and he's been with the New Orleans Opera for 23. We were used to the perspective that someone with that longevity would bring, which is somewhat different from the views that our candidates brought. We had a fair amount of discussion about whether we needed a replacement for Robert — someone with that many years of experience — or whether we needed somebody with a newer vision. We ended up deciding on the newer vision. Again, it was the strategic plan that helped guide that.

I often hear from people who are aspiring to the general director position that boards only want to know whether they can fundraise, or whether they can sell tickets. What qualities was your board looking for?

Of the nine candidates we interviewed, it became apparent that we were going to have to decide on going in one of three directions. Some of continued >

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the candidates had very strong administrative credentials, including a lot of experience in fundraising and finance, but had never been on the artistic side of a company. We had others who were renowned artists, with name recognition and extensive experience performing at opera companies, but little experience in the office. And then we had a third group who were administrators of prominent opera companies, often bigger than ours. They were not yet general directors, but clearly were experienced in both the artistic production and the business of opera.

We ended up selecting our finalists from that last group, those who knew about the art and the administration. Fundraising was an important criterion, but it wasn't the only one.

I will say this: There were a lot of questions as to whether the candidates we were looking at actually had enough fundraising experience. What we ended up deciding was that it wasn't necessary that they had been a director of development, but that they had the kind of personality and style we felt would be effective in raising money in the unique cultural environment of New Orleans.

You said the search committee had about a dozen board members on it. What role did the rest of the board play in the selection process? How did you balance confidentiality and transparency?

We approached the search with full transparency about the process, while maintaining confidentiality about the candidates — until we got to the



Clare Burovac

final three. We engaged the full board in picking our consultant. We engaged them in reviewing the job description that we posted. And we engaged them in meeting the final candidates. Otherwise, we simply kept the rest of the board informed that the interview process was underway.

I worried a lot that the search committee or the board might end up in a stalemate between two candidates. There was a considerable amount of work and discussion within the committee that ended up landing us with Clare Burovac, the candidate we chose. And in the end, the board approved her by unanimous vote. I was glad that a number of board members made the time to interview Clare and the other candidates during their visits.

I talk to boards about calling it a “transition committee” rather than a “search committee,” because your work isn’t done. Have you thought about when Clare arrives in New Orleans: How will you make her feel welcome in the community? How will you open doors for her? Clare comes from a different world. Portland, Oregon, is not New Orleans, Louisiana. So we have a number of plans in place. I have had several Zoom calls with her already. Dwayne Littauer, who

is our new president of the board, is meeting with her via Zoom on a weekly basis. And she's already participating in the weekly staff meetings of the company. In her current title, “general director designate,” she has hit the ground running.

When she actually gets here, I have prepared a list of about 45 or 50 people whom I think it's important for her to meet: the officer of the Division of Cultural Economy in the Mayor's Office who handles performing arts in the City of New Orleans; a member of our City Council; the head of the Downtown Development District; the executive director of the Arts Council. The list goes on and on.

I broke the list down into three categories. Those in government. Those in the performing arts. And those prominent New Orleanians in the business, corporate, and foundation communities. We have a plan for her to meet a whole bunch of people. We'll help her connect across the city.

And of course, we'll begin hosting dinner parties and receptions as soon as she gets here, if COVID-19 will allow it.

It sounds like a great plan. And of course, COVID-19 is a huge question mark. Perhaps it will be good that she can get her feet under her before she starts meeting people. Ranney, congratulations on this new chapter for your company. Thank you, Marc. The pandemic hasn't stopped us from taking Clare out to some of New Orleans's great restaurants, with careful social distancing, of course. There's a lot in store for her — and for us — in the years ahead! ■

Essentials of Opera Governance

A Two-Part Snapshot Series for Opera Company Trustees Led by Marc A. Scorca



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Board Roles and Responsibilities

October 8

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Qualities of a Good Board

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Potential Impact of COVID-19 and Social Justice Issues on Nonprofit Corporate Governance

BY SCOTT CHASE

The novel coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic and the resurgence of social justice movements are likely to have lasting repercussions on how nonprofit entities approach corporate governance. The very intense national conversations about the following issues should cause nonprofit boards of directors to expect certain traditional governance practices to change in response to the lessons and experiences gained from these issues:



1 Lines of Authority
Nonprofit boards and management traditionally work together to allocate decision making between the two parties. However, the line separating the responsibility of the board from the responsibility of management tends to blur in times of crisis. Boards and management should analyze how they worked together during the COVID-19 crisis and social justice protests to ascertain whether work is needed to avoid future crisis-related confusion.

2 Workforce Culture and Hiring Practices
Special efforts should be made to address workforce culture and to have meaningful oversight of hiring practices. Improving diversity in employment is critical, but so are practices relating to recognizing culturally significant issues and events. Board engagement in acknowledging social justice issues, regardless of the nature

of the nonprofit's mission, setting realistic goals, and insisting on management focus will need to be ongoing.

3 Focus on Risk to the Enterprise and Oversight of Business "Resiliency"
The pandemic validates the need for strong board involvement in risk identification and disaster response. There is a heightened obligation to exercise oversight of the future business "resiliency" of the nonprofit. Federal loans have helped many nonprofits during the COVID-19 crisis, but the next crisis may not have this resource to help the nonprofit "bounce back." Boards will need to monitor management's plans to recover from future catastrophes or social justice activities, not only from a financial perspective but also a "brand image" perspective.

4 Oversight of Patron Safety
The pandemic has shown the need for enhanced focus on customer safety in many lines of for-profit business, primarily retail and restaurants. Nonprofits

also have patrons/visitors whose safety must be protected. A greater board collaboration with management on the quality of patron engagement matters should result in shifts that include more awareness and increased oversight of the resources necessary for emergency preparedness, infection control, and regulatory compliance.

5 Reliability of Key Technology
Depending on the nature of the nonprofit's mission and business model, directors will want to exercise greater diligence on the acquisition and implementation of key technologies and more detailed contingency planning for the possibility of critical technology, equipment, or personnel being unavailable.

6 Employee Health and Safety
Addressing employee concerns for workplace health and safety matters is now an important element of the board's oversight of workplace culture. Employee

concerns in this regard are likely to remain a key part of business resiliency planning long after the advent of a vaccine or other treatments for the COVID-19 virus.

In short, nonprofit boards should anticipate, for the foreseeable future, an increased level of engagement with their governance responsibilities. This higher level of engagement will be necessary to assure that the nonprofit has, in fact, rebounded, and evaluated potentially broader changes to accomplishing its mission in light of "lessons learned." ■

Scott Chase is a partner at Farrow-Gillespie Heath Witter LLP. He is on the Executive Committee of The Dallas Opera's Board of Directors and chairs the Governance and Nominating Committee.

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Left: Zachary James in Des Moines Metro Opera’s *Rusalka* (photo: © Duane Tinkey)
Right: Aubrey Allcock in Opera Philadelphia’s *We Shall Not Be Moved* (photo: Dominic M. Mercier)

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