The Face of the Company?
The Production Department, of Course

By Megan Young

Posting a video interview with your 'Tosca du jour' to your company's blog is a fine tactic to engage and inspire operagoers. But your star soprano is not the only one who has interesting, insightful and entertaining anecdotes to share about your company, your production or opera in a broader sense. For some enterprising companies, this is where the production department comes in. Production staff members can have the dedication, excitement and knowledge to be ambassadors for your operation, and giving the public a glimpse of what goes on behind the scenes may even help the bottom line.

This season, for example, Los Angeles Opera has gotten some great PR with a thoughtfully produced video featuring their 2011-2012 productions of Cosi fan tutte and Eugene Onegin. The productions themselves take a back seat to the star of the film — the repertory changeover from one production to the other. This short video offers nearly instant perspective-broadening to patrons. The winches, line sets and loading docks may be routine to insiders, but to most they are elements of a foreign landscape. Companies across the continent are undertaking effective, refreshing PR and development initiatives like this one.

THE TEAM MATTERS
The Glimmerglass Festival has an increasing online presence, but one of the festival's most potent fund development tools is a series of backstage tours. "When you're on campus, says Director of Institutional Advancement Joan Desens, "you can
spend the better part of the day taking it all in: the grounds, the art, a Q&A with artists immediately following a performance, a program with our Young Artists. In working with donors and those who express interest in supporting the company, we want to take that experience one step further. What has been a pivotal aspect of our patron engagement strategy is our ability to go behind the scenes with Director of Production Abby Rodd and A/V Coordinator Joel Morain — two very smart and engaging people whose personal and professional lives intertwine. Abby, specifically, has 20 years experience at Glimmerglass. Together, they are able to express understanding, passion and detail for this particular operation.”

Desens elaborates: “Abby first started as an intern and grew up with the company. Joel loves his role in bringing a production to life and telling people how the art is made, and it’s very clear to tourists that he loves what he does. Abby is a primary mentor for the 30+ interns that her department engages each summer. As a result, she’s become an excellent teacher. When she similarly interacts with donors and prospective donors, they feel it and they appreciate it. Having two people who love teaching, in addition to being able to express facts, is what makes these patron engagement tours so successful. The development department now identifies and invites prospective patrons on company-hosted tour and lunch packages every Sunday, Monday and Tuesday throughout the season. These are in addition to the free tours available to the general public, and are more in-depth.”

THE FORMULA MATTERS
“It is not only important to take donors behind the scenes, but it is also important to sit down and talk with them over lunch afterward,” Desens remarks. “Abby and Joel join us to continue the conversation.” And the formula seems to work. “Many people we take on the tour donate very soon after. Sometimes we receive a check two days later; and it is typically $1,000. Last year, one individual was taken on a tour. He then wrote a lovely letter asking that we make sure we thank Abby and Joel, and increased his annual gift to $10,000. This year he asked if he could bring his entire family on a tour; and he subsequently upped his giving to $15,000. We had another gentleman, a retired doctor, who decided upon a six-figure bequest to Glimmerglass as a result of this engagement. His letter said that not only did he enjoy everything, but that he wished to extend his gratitude to Joel and Abby.”

“Bringing donors and prospects on backstage tours is not unique to Glimmerglass. Success — anywhere — is based on how well company representatives communicate the work, the spirit and joy of the creative operation. I believe it really does matter who is involved. Joel and Abby are unique; I have had the pleasure of working with production staff at other companies who also excel at teaching. If you have the right staff members, you can succeed.”

COMMUNICATION MATTERS
“You have to be able to control what’s going on in your department,” says Seattle Opera Director of Production Vincent A. Feraudo, “but in this new
world, we can't think [of PR and development projects] as 'not part of our real jobs.' Partnering as much as is reasonable is good. I personally want the magic and mystery to remain in opera productions, but there seems to be a real appetite among patrons for backstage glimpses. You have to be protective of your staff and their time, but really it's all part of the gig at this point."

Seattle Opera has taken the Valkyrie by the horns, with over 100 videos at www.youtube.com/SeattleOpera ranging from director interviews to production previews to a recent video duo on how to apply stage makeup. Feraudo's colleague, Technical and Facilities Director Robert D. Schaub, is in favor of this uptick: "You’re in it. You've got to do it. It's for the well-being of the organization."

In the spring of 2011, Seattle Opera created one of its most revealing videos yet — a Magic Flute chorus quick change in real time. "In our spring production," Feraudo says, "we had a quick change that involved a number of crews and chorus... changing makeup, costumes. We thought PR might be interested in it, so we sussed it out." But before the cameras rolled, a lot of prep work was covered and details decided upon. "We asked permission from the chorus because they were going down to their skivvies," continues Feraudo. "We also asked our costume, hair and makeup crews. And we asked to have a final edit of the video in the end."

Schaub adds: "If you make the choice to create a video and show someone in a bad light — it could be one of your stagehands or an important designer or singer — if you make them look like a fool, then you've just taken steps back in your program. Video editors can do great work, but some may not necessarily know what is sensitive and what is not. I want to be involved in the final edit, not just to protect myself but the organization as well. And I want someone's first view of me to be a positive one. If I've been clipped or edited in a way that's not becoming, it's not good." To pull off a project like this, he says, "it requires communication and a clear timeline."

Kevin Ramach, production director at Minnesota Opera, agrees with Schaub's assessment. "It's important that we let everybody on staff know what's going on with promotional projects. If we know about it, we can plan for it. We work in very high stress jobs and we shouldn't be giving anyone more stress. People need as much advance warning as we can give them. The media often works on very tight timelines, so the more we can do as a company to give advance warning, the better. More information is better than too little."

Minnesota Opera is taking measures to ensure staff members are covered the same way artists are in terms of A/V projects. "We are in the process," Ramach shares, "of putting language relating to video releases in our employee handbook. As part of signing off on their annual acknowledgment of the handbook, they also now sign a video release."

Douglas J. Cuomo, composer; Jonathan Stinson, CCM student playing Father Flynn; Robin Guarino, director; John Patrick Shanley, librettist; Gary Thor Wedow, conductor; Marcus Krichle, co-artistic director of the program; Julia Reichert, documentary filmmaker; Steven Bognar, documentary filmmaker; and the cast in the background of CCM's workshop of Cuomo's Doubt. Photo by Philip Groshong.
"Currently," Ramach goes on, "Comcast is a sponsor of our pre-opera talks. As part of that sponsorship, they do a preview video where they talk to people on staff, directors and designers, in addition to filming the meet-and-greet when we start a new production. These videos are available on our website and our YouTube channel, and Comcast has been putting it on the on-demand cable TV service in the local information section. At this point, our videos are basically limited to these interviews and conversations. I think if we did something like the Seattle quick change video, we would think about our releases in a different way."

**ATTITUDE MATTERS**

"You have to remember that we are all going for the same goal," says stage director and Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music (CCM) Opera Chair Robin Guarino. "I'm really proactive about reaching out to PR. You get wiser about it as you get older. In Cincinnati right now, we have the PR departments from CCM and Cincinnati Opera dealing with Opera Fusion: New Works. We work with them really hard to make sure they have what they need from us to do their job. I also get on the phone with journalists myself and let them know who they should be talking to. All over the country, we are in danger of losing our local newspapers and the journalists who promote our work. I work with the PR departments, and I also cultivate my own relationships with journalists. I have lunch dates with them!"

*Opera Fusion: New Works*, a collaboration with Cincinnati Opera, is Guarino's newest creative adventure. "The award-winning documentary film team of Julia Reichert and Steve Bognar are following the current project," says Guarino, who notes that timing issues required that they audition and cast artists without giving away the surprise of what they would be working on. "The crew filmed the first rehearsal where we announced to the artists who were cast what the project was," says Guarino. "It was an exciting moment.*Opera Fusion's* first residency project will be *Doubt*, a new American opera composed by Douglas J. Cuomo with a libretto by playwright John Patrick Shanley, to be premiered at Minnesota Opera in 2013.

"Some film crews can be very in-your-face, but this team is great. They are going for the best shot and the story, but they're sensitive in their practice. It's like having a reality film crew — sometimes it's good, sometimes it's not. The next step for us is a schedule. Of course they want to be there ALL the time. You don't want the film crew not to get the good material, but a rehearsal really goes down the tubes fast when the artists start acting for the camera. It can become a different thing entirely. The singers and the creative team should feel comfortable to experiment and discover the piece. The film crew is there to make a film. We're here to experiment. Like all good collaborators, we have to learn how to live together!"

"One of the companies that's great at this is Seattle Opera," adds Guarino. "When I direct there, the first week I'm there they tell me all of the PR projects they plan to do. We put them on the calendar and it's great! Plus, they're incredibly gracious about it."

For all of these companies, graciousness, preparation and communication are key to planning and executing joint projects. "We do these backstage videos," says Seattle's Feraudo, "or our stage manager will give a lecture. It is extra work for our production staff, and I really appreciate that they're doing it. Every company needs to think like this. Whether you're a technician or a designer, it's your responsibility to make the company the best it can be. Donors often don't know the complexity of what goes on, and it's great to see that shift in their understanding. When you show backstage work, there can be a real paradigm shift for patrons, from "What the heck did you spend half a million dollars on?" to "How the heck did you do all that for only half a million?""