

THE NATIONAL OPERA CENTER AMERICA

ON SOCIALLY RELEVANT WORKS: A CIVIC ACTION GROUP INTERVIEW

June 22, 2018 — Nicholas Durst, OPERA America's digital media manager, speaks with Anchorage Opera's general director, Reed Smith.

Nicholas: Today we are talking about the choices that opera leaders make in programming a season, and how the stories embedded in those works have impact on their communities. Storytelling in opera can help people understand those unlike themselves or reflect narratives with deep personal meaning. I am here with Reed Smith, general director of Anchorage Opera in Alaska. Welcome. Please share a short synopsis of *As One*.

Reed: *As One* is the story of a person in transition, ending with her finally realizing her true self.

Nicholas: Why did you chose to program *As One* during your 2018 season?

Reed: Anchorage has laws on its books laws to protect transgender individuals from discrimination; the state of Alaska does not. There was a proposition put onto the municipal ballot that would have removed these protections. We programmed this opera to provide information on what it is like to be a transgendered person.

Nicholas: What type of feedback did you receive from your board and patrons?

Reed: There was some hesitation on the part of the board, but they were generally supportive. I also interviewed with some funders to make sure that they were not offended or insecure about it and in fact, they were just the opposite. Many gave me suggestions about who I could contact in the community to help with the project.

Nicholas: Were there any community leaders who helped put the production together?

Reed: I did contact the mayor's office; we do receive some funding from the municipality. We showed the mayor's art commission a trailer for the production and was told on my way out the door that it was exactly the type of thing they wanted their funding to go for: impactful, cutting edge art. The mayor's office also came through with some extra funding to help us rent an exhibit hall adjacent to the theater where we had art exhibits from six or seven organizations in Anchorage, including some from the mayor's office, and also art exhibits from the transgender community and a photo essay done by a two spirit woman of transgender individuals in Anchorage.

Nicholas: What was the feedback received?

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- Reed: Incredibly moving and positive feedback; I am still receiving it. Last weekend at the Pride Fest, one of the individuals who spoke at our performances was approached by a parent, and the parent asked for the individual's address so that she could send a thank you note because after that experience she felt more comfortable speaking the issue with her son.
- Nicholas: Could you tell us about the attitude towards gender nonconformity in Anchorage?
- Reed: There is still a problem, and I think there will be for quite some time, but also there is civic pride that the proposition was defeated.
- Nicholas: Tell us about a story or a moment when you knew this was having an effect in your community.
- Reed: It started slowly, by speaking with a board member from Identity Alaska, the main LGBT organization in town. She became excited and allowed me to come to a board meeting and show the trailer. At that moment, a board member said, "I don't go to opera, but I will go to this one."
- Nicholas: You took a leadership role. What do you think other organizations can learn from this?
- Reed: I think that if you go into a controversial situation and you are clear about your intentions, and our intentions really were to inform the public. I said at the beginning of each performance that I wasn't there to change anyone's mind, or tell anybody how to vote...and I think with that approach people were accepting and willing to listen and learn.
- Nicholas: If you could, describe further your partners in this project and some of the activities your facilitated.
- Reed: We worked with several transgender groups and also Fair Anchorage, which was a group put together to fight Proposition One. We had artists create works for an exhibition. We had a two spirit woman do a photo essay which was not only photos of the transgender community, but also written history. We were also able to secure the services of four transgendered people to speak at the beginning of the performances to talk about their life experiences in the form of discrimination.
- Nicholas: It is clear that opera companies can facilitate partnerships to give voice to the voiceless; what advice would you give to other opera leaders who are engaging in political actions or other crises going on?

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- Reed: My approach was, first of all, not to push for action and to be more informative, but also to offer the services of the production to group interested in getting their word out. One of the first thing I say to a future partner is "I am not here for funding."
- Nicholas: What is something that you learned from OPERA America's Civic Action Group meetings that informed your strategies?
- Reed: I learned to be a good listener; to not take the stance that, "We want you to do this," but instead, "We are here with an opportunity, and is there a way you would like to take advantage of it?" To form a real partnership and to be respectful and listen to the concerns of the partner.
- Nicholas: The show itself, what can you tell us about that?
- Reed: It is a moving piece; we saw people crying. We had a Post-it wall where people could respond. Some of those messages were really great. We did an audience survey and there were quite a few messages saying, "Thank you for bringing this. I didn't know all of the things that I learned." And, "This production—the music was excellent, the singing was excellent, the acting was fantastic." There was a positive response.
- Nicholas: Where can our listeners go for more information on *As One*?
- Reed: They can visit <https://anchorageopera.org/as-one/>. We will be doing some things around the upcoming production of *An American Dream*.