

THE NATIONAL OPERA CENTER AMERICA

ON COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIPS: A CIVIC ACTION GROUP INTERVIEW

June 22, 2018 — Nicholas Durst, OPERA America's digital media manager, speaks with Michigan Opera Theatre's general director, Wayne Brown, and director of education, Andrea Scobie.

Nicholas: Throughout Detroit's economic recovery, Wayne and Andrea coordinated with numerous community organizations and demonstrated what it means for an opera company to be a convener. In May 2018, the company partnered with a range of organizations for a production of *The Summer King* in a series called Take Me out to the Opera! So Wayne, tell me about the productions' significance in the city of Detroit.

Wayne: *The Summer King* was a culmination of a yearlong effort to strengthen the ties between Michigan Opera Theatre and its community, specifically celebrating the arts, which play a very significant role in Michigan, and sports, which has an equally prominent position. We were able to create links between those two sectors.

Nicholas: Detroit is well known its sports history with the Detroit Pistons, Detroit Lions and the Detroit Tigers. Andrea, you created a series of events called Take Me out to the Opera! and specifically worked with the Detroit Tigers.

Andrea: The Tigers were a wonderful partner to us in terms of bringing out the sports aspect of everything that was going on. The way we started the program was really looking at the parallel histories of sports and arts through the African American experience. We looked at sports and arts as worlds where barriers could be broken early, due to the tremendous talent and fortitude of figures like Josh Gibson, local Detroit heroes like Ron Teasley, and artists like Marian Anderson and Florence Price who helped to bring about change and pave the way to integration in their fields.

Nicholas: When it comes to sporting events, it is essentially a performance, with thirty thousand people showing up to watch the game go on. You also have people watching TV on phones and tablets. Do you see any parallels with sports and theater, and were you able to draw on them for Take Me Out to the Opera!?

Wayne: Take Me Out to the Opera! was an acknowledgement that we would be reaching people who are used to saying, "Take Me Out to the Ball Game!" For that reason, we wanted to build upon that theatrical invite. As it turns out, Michigan Opera Theatre, which is headquartered in the Detroit Opera House, is less than two miles from Comerica Park, which is the home of the Detroit Tigers.

THE NATIONAL OPERA CENTER AMERICA

We have enjoyed, for the last two years, having members of the company participate in singing the national anthem on a regular basis. This program allowed us to take natural steps to bridge the gap between those two settings.

Nicholas: Andrea, how did you engage regional partners?

Andrea: Take Me Out to the Opera! really allowed us to work with partners who we may not have pursued partnerships with prior. We sat down at the table with partners, from the Detroit Tigers to Friends of Historic Hamtramck Stadium, which is a local historic Negro League stadium in our city, and find out what our commonalities were of principles and of goals. We worked to be mutually beneficial to our missions, our goals and all of our constituents.

Nicholas: There were a lot of moving parts working with a lot of people; what was the key to successfully engaging with a lot of partners?

Wayne: First, I should acknowledge that Take Me Out to the Opera!, which led to the performance of *The Summer King*, was a co-production with Pittsburgh Opera. We were able to benefit from the experiences that took place in performances leading up to the Pittsburgh premiere which involved the participation of the Josh Gibson Foundation. As a carryover to the Detroit experience, we also wanted to engage with the local association in Detroit between the Tigers and the historic Hamtramck Stadium. For that reason, we were able to establish that our programs would take place for the mutual benefit of the Josh Gibson Foundation as well as Hamtramck Stadium.

One of the activities we scheduled was a drawing. Contributions received from Michigan Opera Theatre were divided equally to both organizations to further their work. We believe that was an important signal in terms of engaging community partners. We were able to bring about a high recognition of the historic value [of these organizations] to our respective communities, and also made sure they were beneficiaries of the additional support generated.

Nicholas: What was the city-wide reception to Take Me Out to the Opera!?

Andrea: There was overwhelming reception in terms of numbers of participants in the more than fifty events that took place across the city leading up to *The Summer King*. Importantly, one of the things we tried to do in addition to concerts, performances and workshops was to create a space for conversation. A time for folks to talk around the past issues that *The Summer King* addresses and also relate it to what is happening today. We were gratified that were partners and community members who took part in these conversations to recognize the past and be solution-oriented to the future.

THE NATIONAL OPERA CENTER AMERICA

Nicholas: Wayne, what did you as an organization learn from this experience and what would you like to share with others?

Wayne: I think it is important that we continue to recognize in Detroit the ways in which we can engage in a more meaningful fashion those significant moments within our community which strengthen our community and which add to its vitality.

This was the first of a multiyear commitment to arts and sports. We are looking forward to doing something of similar nature in the area of boxing. There are several works that have been created that capture that attention in the boxing world. We can look forward to building on the experiences we have had to date.

Nicholas: Andrea, how important do you feel it is important to transcend opera beyond the typical on-stage stuff?

Andrea: I think it is hugely important for the art form itself. Of course, we always want to be advocating for what we do and the art we love, but this art form is about our humanity. This art form encourages us to connect and hear each other and tell stories. I think that taking this theme off the stage and into the community is a huge part of what we do and is so vitally important.

Nicholas: If anyone is looking for any further information where could they go?

Wayne: On our website <http://www.michiganopera.org>. We are anxious to share our experiences with fellow companies and those interested in the subject matter.

Nicholas: Thank you Wayne Brown and Andrea Scobie.