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ON CREATING BELONGING: A CIVIC ACTION GROUP INTERVIEW

January 24, 2018 — Leah Barto, correspondent for OPERA America, speaks with Anh Le, assistant director of marketing at Opera Theatre of Saint Louis.

Leah: We're here to talk about creating belonging. Today our topic of belonging is inspired by Roberto Bedoya. He writes and speaks about the pronoun "we." Opera Theatre of Saint Louis has a longstanding tradition of fostering belonging, from its outdoor tent atmosphere and productions in English, to new practices that foster mutual understanding across communities in St. Louis. Anh, tell me about this idea of opera company as convener. How does your company grow into this role? What mindsets or capacities might be needed on staff to do that?

Anh Le: Opera Theatre of Saint Louis has always been a company focused on serving the needs of its local community and population ever since it was founded in 1976. That being said though, I think our work as a convener really began more recently in 2011 when it staged *The Death of Klinghoffer* by John Adams which, as you know, is a tricky piece with many complex issues at its roots. And, in other productions, has often been a cause for protest and controversy in the media and in the general population, beyond the opera-going public.

It was very important to our management that we get early buy-in and consensus from the local Jewish population and from the local Muslim population to make sure we were accurately representing both groups as fairly as possible, while also being true to Adams' composition. So before we staged that particular opera, we began to reach out to local Jewish and Muslim groups to say, "We know that we are not experts in your cultures and your religions, and we know you have strong feelings about the true facts behind the creation of this opera. Can you help us? Can you advise us on how to approach this in a way that will be respectful and fair?"

We were fortunate that we found allies on both sides who said, "We think it is an important piece of work and an important story to tell, and we want to be involved." That was the beginning of a multiyear history of convening; since *The Death of Klinghoffer*, which I should say went quite well, we have also done a series of world premieres on difficult subjects, from the true story of Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, two lesbians living in Paris during World War II, to an adaptation of Salman Rushdie's *Shalimar the Clown*.

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We have used these productions as opportunities again to convene in our communities and to build local understanding of issues. Every time we do these works, it is important we get experts on board, and that we are very authentic about who we invite to speak on panels or before or after operas about the meaning they have to different communities.

Leah: That is wonderful, and such a great example of creating belonging by programming works on the stage. I've visited Opera Theatre of Saint Louis in the summertime, and from the first moment you step on the ground, you see that big tent and all of the people gathering. You really embody the sense that community is a verb, not a noun. What are some other examples of Opera Theatre's approach to creating community?

Anh Le: St. Louis is a unique community; it is a big city with a small town mentality. Creating community is something that comes naturally to people from St. Louis. It is very important to them, to have that sense of connection. We do multiple things during our off season. We are constantly bringing artists to St. Louis during our off season to try to reach out to different parts of our community; we do everything from going into schools and senior homes and churches, the way that many other companies do, to presenting opera in new and fun ways. For example, a popular series we do is called Opera Tastings, which is a culinary concert. For \$20 to \$25, you get a one-and-a-half-hour concert which is also paired with food and drink; each item is paired specifically to each aria. With these approaches, we break down the preconceptions of what opera is. We bring it into different neighborhoods. We will choose venues and programming based on what communities we are reaching out to. We are trying to present things that are of interest and value.

Leah: How can we make sure that people feel welcome in our opera house or even in their own row; what does Opera Theatre of Saint Louis do to foster a sense of belonging, especially for newcomers to the opera?

Anh Le: That is a tricky thing for any opera company. In some ways, we have an easier time because our setting is more informal. That said, sometimes the informal setting makes it more difficult for newcomers; we do have the pre-show picnics in the gardens in the tents, but for those who have never attended, they don't know about that. There is an education component involved in trying to let people know before they arrive that this is an option that there are welcome to partake of. I've heard someone say, "I felt that I was interrupting a wedding reception." So sometimes it does provide its own challenge.

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I think the beauty of the Opera Theatre of Saint Louis experience is that there is no VIP experience. Everyone picnics in the same garden, everyone sits in the same theater and all the seats have perfect sightlines; and yes, there are more expensive tickets than others, but there are no divisions of boxes, so it's a very egalitarian experience. Everyone mingles in one tent in the garden and you don't need to be a donor to meet the star of the show. We are keeping it that way deliberately.

We are very focused on making sure that everyone feels welcome. So a lot of what we do for newcomers is about education; letting them know what their options are, explaining how the night is going to work, and when they get there, having the best front of house experience possible. We have highly trained ushers or garden attendants. We try to make being a newcomer not a scary thing.

Leah: I think that is very wonderful and distinctive in the field that you're not creating exclusive experiences for your VIPs, but everyone feels like they are having an exclusive experience together. I have also heard you speak about the customer experience; what are some of the other aspects of the customer experience design?

Anh Le: The front of hour training is important so that all staff feels equipped to answer questions and handle any situations. One of the other unique things about the outdoor picnicking setup is that people can approach the theater from four or five different directions. They are not walking into one opera house lobby; they are walking up from different streets, from different parking lots, so signage is a big part of that. It is important to make sure that people feel they are well-directed. We make sure that the picnic tables are spread across the entire garden so they can come in from any access point and be near to the seating. We think a lot about the way that our attendants communicate that a pre-show talk is about to start, so that everything is as friendly and informative as possible. Hopefully that carries over to the experience in the theater so that by the time they get in their seat, even if they have never been before, they are already feeling relaxed and welcomed so the show is a less intimidating experience than it might otherwise be.

Leah: I am here with Anh Le of Opera Theatre of Saint Louis, and thank you so much for talking with us about your approach to creating belonging.

Anh Le: Thank you for having me.