

## Willene Gunn Oral History

San Francisco Conservatory of Music Library & Archives

San Francisco Conservatory of Music Library & Archives  
50 Oak Street  
San Francisco, CA 94102

Interview conducted April 7, 2016  
Tessa Updike, Interviewer

## **San Francisco Conservatory of Music Library & Archives Oral History Project**

The Conservatory's Oral History Project has the goal of seeking out and collecting memories of historical significance to the Conservatory through recorded interviews with members of the Conservatory's community, which will then be preserved, transcribed, and made available to the public.

Among the narrators will be former administrators, faculty members, trustees, alumni, and family of former Conservatory luminaries. Through this diverse group, we will explore the growth and expansion of the Conservatory, including its departments, organization, finances and curriculum. We will capture personal memories before they are lost, fill in gaps in our understanding of the Conservatory's history, and will uncover how the Conservatory helped to shape San Francisco's musical culture through the past century.

### **Willene Gunn Interview**

This interview was conducted at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music on Thursday, April 7, 2016 by Tessa Updike.

### **Tessa Updike**

Tessa Updike is the archivist for the San Francisco Conservatory of Music. Tessa holds a B.A. in visual arts and has her Masters in Library and Information Science with a concentration in Archives Management from Simmons College in Boston. Previously she has worked for the Harvard University Botany Libraries and Archives and the Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley.

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## **Willene Gunn**

Willene Gunn served as a member of the faculty of the San Francisco Conservatory of Music for 30 years, as Director of the Conservatory Opera Program. Upon her retirement in the spring of 2005 the Conservatory conferred upon her the honorary degree of Doctor of Music. Ms. Gunn taught voice at the University of California at Santa Cruz, and staged operas in workshops at the University of California at Berkeley and the University of Nevada. She directed over 90 major works by Mozart, Verdi, Puccini, Bernstein and other major composers for Nevada, Sacramento, Arizona Operas, Rogue Opera and the San Francisco Opera Center and other companies in the San Francisco Bay Area. A graduate of the San Francisco Opera Merola Program, Ms. Gunn performed extensively on the West Coast as a dramatic mezzo-soprano with the San Francisco, Portland, Seattle, Oakland and Nevada Opera companies in *Aida*, *Falstaff*, *Peter Grimes*, *The Medium*, *The Consul* and numerous others. Her symphonic repertory included Verdi's *Requiem* and Beethoven's *Ninth Symphony*. She performed in operetta, musical comedy and legitimate theater, in roles ranging from most of the mezzo-soprano roles in *Gilbert and Sullivan*, the alto leads in *The Sound of Music*, *Carousel*, and *South Pacific*, and as *Hecuba* in *The Trojan Women*. She produced and directed over 35 productions at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music, and in 2000 the Conservatory awarded her the Sarlo Award for Excellence in Teaching. While at the Conservatory, she directed over 100 scenes a year in the opera workshops.

In southern Oregon, Ms. Gunn served as Artistic Director of Rogue Opera from 2006-2009 directing the highly-acclaimed *Merry Wives of Windsor*, *The Magic Flute* and *La Bohème*. She co-created Rogue Opera's Opera in the Schools program *OperAntics!* and created, directed and produced three Opera Workshop with Voices from the Valley Opera Scenes Concerts during her tenure. Ms. Gunn has served as Artistic Director from 2010-2016 for *Brava! Opera Theater* and James Collier Young Artist Program in Ashland, Oregon, where in addition to four workshops she has directed six chamber works. Ms. Gunn's textbook, *Teaching Opera, The Role of the Opera Workshop ... With Scene Catalogue*, written in partnership with Kathryn Cathcart, was published by Leyerle Press in February, 2008.

*April 7, 2016*

**UPDIKE** If you don't mind, we'll start at the very beginning. Could you tell us a little about your early history – where you were born?

**GUNN** I was born in a small town in Montana called Kalispell. My father had died five months before I was born, and my mother was an artist who had to teach school to survive, because in addition to me I had two older brothers, and she was from then on the main support of the family. Nobody was a musician, though they said that my father had had what they called an Irish tenor voice, and some of his sisters were musical. Then just before my third birthday we moved to a little town called Eureka, Montana where my mother taught fifth grade. I always loved music – I played all kinds of instruments, I sang – but I always thought I'd be a choral conductor or something. I had never heard of opera. A wonderful actress, Jeannette Nolan McIntire, and [her husband] John McIntire had a home near there. They were very big in the movies as character actors – he was in the *Virginian* series and the *Wagon Master*. Jeanette was the Lady Macbeth in Orson Wells' movie. She heard me sing when I was a freshman in high school; I remember her standing in the band room and saying, "You're an opera singer." I didn't know what that was! So she started taking me to voice lessons two hours away when they were in town. She was a mentor ... my mother approved of my singing, but she didn't really know what we were talking about. So I went off to college to be a choral conductor at the University of Montana, and soon realized that all I heard was the alto line – I didn't hear the whole chord! At that time I was on a voice scholarship, and my teacher there, John Lester, greatly encouraged me. I had kind of a double major with theater. I discovered the theater and the music things together, so I always thought of the two disciplines as being one unit – the voice and the theater. When I graduated John found a person to pay for my studies in New York, and I went to New York and worked with Serges Kagan at Juilliard, and some other people in town.

**UPDIKE** Would you like to talk a little bit about Jeannette McIntire?

**GUNN** She was wonderful. As I said Jenny was the original Lady Macbeth with Orson Welles in that old movie, and that's what she looked like when I first met her; she was very beautiful. She did numerous shows with Perry Mason and such, even in her later years had her own show called *Dirty Sally*. She and John were an interesting couple. He had been born in Montana, and he always wanted to live in the wilderness. But at the same time he looked at the television and radio industries as a business. He used to have me listen to him fight with his agent; he'd say, "You think you want to go into show business? This is what you're putting up with!" Jenny really took me under her wing; she kind of became a second momma. My own mother was a lovely lady; an extraordinary woman and a marvelous mother, but Jen gravitated towards the theatrical, as did I. I also saw somebody who was married, in the business, and had a wonderful life. They had a place in a very wild area of Montana called the Yaak, which you

practically have to pump air into – it is really isolated and extraordinarily beautiful. I'm still very close to her daughter. Jen and John kept the Yaak home, but also bought a big ranch outside of my little hometown, and that's when I came to know the family. I saw a whole life that I had never imagined – somebody in the theater making a living. She was extraordinarily important to me. She passed away a few years ago. A tremendous influence on me.

**UPDIKE** Was she your first music teacher?

**GUNN** No. Once she heard me sing she said, "You have to have voice lessons." First I went to a woman in Whitefish, Montana, whose name I cannot remember. That was just for a few months, and then I went to a woman called Mrs. Sliter in Kalispell. I studied with her for one and a half years. Meanwhile, every summer I went to music camps. My mother sent me to one at the University. To everybody's shock I got the solos with the chorus! That's when suddenly my voice shifted. It was going in that direction, but all of a sudden it shifted way up into a truly operatic sound. There I was ... stuck. I think opera singers are kind of an accident of nature. They come from very strange places. Once they have a big voice like that, there's not really much else they want to do. Once in a while one of them says, "To heck with it, I'll do something else," but most of them, if they can sing, they want to sing. They feel this pull towards singing. You can't get away from it; it's kind of like a part of the brain ... that creative part of the brain that you can't make shut up. I think you're born with that creativity, and you have to do something with it. Whether you end up making pots ... or doing something ... it always is nagging at you. Singing will dominate their lives for a very long time.

**UPDIKE** How old were you?

**GUNN** I was fifteen or sixteen when my voice all of a sudden shifted. By the time I was a sophomore in college I knew I wanted to perform. I was really stupid; I didn't know how to go about anything but I thought I knew everything. I studied with John, and did all kinds of theater ... you just kind of glom onto all of that. I'm very glad I had the technical theater work too – how to make sets and do all of those kinds of things. Somebody said once that opera was a combination of all of the arts. I wanted to be a painter too – like my mother. I painted with oils and took all kinds of art classes. Opera was a combination of all of these things, and that was one of the great appeals to me.

**UPDIKE** When you were growing up, what sort of music did you like listening to? Did you like to listen to operas?

**GUNN** There was no opera in that little town in Montana. I did choral music at school, I took all of these lessons; I would sing church solos for this and that. I sang with the Western Band in high school; I can still do the *Tennessee Waltz*. In college I sang with the jazz band

every Saturday night. Anything that was music, I wanted. I loved choral music – all of the voices going together – but once I got to the University and started hearing the operatic sound and finding the repertoire ... putting the voice and the dramatic thought together was a whole revelation. I just wanted anything that was music when I was growing up, and it didn't matter what it was. At that time in Eureka, Montana, there was nothing but Western music on the radio ... some programs from the Second World War – popular music – but otherwise that was it. I never saw an opera until I was a senior in high school. I saw *The Medium* at a summer camp at the University, and I thought, "If I can just do that once...." I don't know how many times I sang productions of *The Medium* during my professional career ... a whole bunch of them! So I did get to do it. But I remember specifically that thought ... "If I could just do that once." I think you're kind of nailed if you want to do opera; you can't help yourself. I used to say that to the students – "If there's anything else you can do, do it," because it's such a difficult thing. It's harder than straight theater in some ways, because you have to have so much musical training besides dramatic training. There's a tremendous amount of expense that goes into coaching and all of that.

**UPDIKE**      What was the first opera production that you performed in as a student?

**GUNN**          I think the very first thing I did at the University when I was a freshman or sophomore was *Riders to the Sea*, and I was Maurya. The next year I did *Amahl and The Night Visitors*. Every year I did something!

**UPDIKE**      And that was with John Lester? Do you want to talk a little about John?

**GUNN**          John was a big influence on my life. He was a big, dramatic looking man who had sung with the Paris Opera a great deal. I don't know how he ended up in Montana. He taught quite a few well-known singers over the years that sang here with the Merola and numerous other companies, such as the Met. John was demanding, but you knew where you stood. He's the one that said to me when I went back to New York ... he had gotten me a sponsor to study back there, and he said the reason was when I got kicked or knocked down, I got back up again. It wasn't just talent; you had to have this determination to keep going. He was a very flamboyant, dramatic man, and when you'd walk into the studio he'd say, [in dramatic voice] "What is your name?" And you'd have to answer in that same dramatic voice. "And what you are going to sing?" He really gave me an idea of what the world of opera should be. He didn't do the stage direction, but he did the preparation for all the operas, and nagged at us. Montana in those times had not much opera, to say the least. However, I gained performance experience by touring with the opera program – and with a singing group called the Jubileers – and toured all over the state with productions from the theater department.

**UPDIKE**      And that was in college?

**GUNN** That was in college. An awful lot of Montana is very rural, and so when you go into those places ... this was a whole new and wonderful thing for them. They had never seen or heard something like this. We'd travel all over the place. Montana is a very big state, and at that time it had 600,000 people. It was before Hawaii, Alaska or Puerto Rico were involved, so it was the third biggest state, and yet it had this mini population. Now it still only has around a million, and some of it's more sophisticated than it was. It's an interesting state – it just shows that opera singers can come from anywhere. When I was singing professionally in various opera houses the cast would come from all over the world. They didn't come from New York, or Chicago – they came from strange places. One gal came in from Europe – Karen Armstrong. We were doing *Falstaff* at Seattle Opera with Sir Geraint Evans as *Falstaff*. She came in dripping furs, and all this jewelry to sing Alice. She had a little bit of a European accent ... I was very impressed. It turned out she was from Dodson, Montana! It has 200 people, so I was from a bigger town than she was. But she was living in Europe, and married to a conductor. We used to laugh about that.

**UPDIKE** That's funny. Tell me about how you got to Juilliard.

**GUNN** The way I got to Juilliard was having a sponsor that paid for my voice lessons. I didn't go to Juilliard itself, but had lessons with Serges Kagen. The president at Juilliard knew I had all this money from my sponsor, and he sent me to Serges. Serges wanted me to be a coloratura. He was a wonderful coach of German lieder, and he has written all these books on how to sing. But I disagreed. I stayed with Serges the whole time I was there, but eventually I said, "Serges, I'll coach with you, but I'm staying a dramatic mezzo, I'm not becoming a coloratura!" I studied technique with a woman named Ora Wittie, who worked with a lot of musical theater people and was really good with breath control. So that was my Juilliard thing.

**UPDIKE** What was it like living in New York?

**GUNN** I loved it in New York. Most of my friends were actors. The summer before I was at the Shakespeare Festival in Ashland as a musician. Although our main job was to stroll through the audience as a quartet.... We were on stage for little things here and there, but a lot of the staff – like the guy who ended up the head of it all, and some of my very closest friends – were involved in the theater there. We stayed very close friends for the rest of our lives – there still are some I've known for 57 years. So because many of the actors lived in New York, I had a lot of friends in New York. One actor I knew was Carroll O'Connor and his wife Nancy – I knew them from Montana, not the Shakespeare Festival. Carrol became Archie Bunker. His wife was from Montana, she was a friend of my aunt's, and Archie (or Caroll) had come to get his doctorate at the University of Montana and had directed me in *Carousel*. So when I went back to New York I lived with them for three weeks while I looked for an apartment. They lived in this funny walk-up thing (you weren't supposed to be up there, it was illegal) and then while I was

there Carroll performed in an off-Broadway production of *The Big Knife*. From that he picked up an agent, went to Los Angeles, and the rest is history! Nancy called me and said, “Carroll’s doing this strange thing – a pilot – *All in the Family*.” And then the next thing we knew, they had to have very high security and everything! He was a very liberal person, but he was playing an awful bigot. They used to get all kinds of hate mail and such.

I made my main income (to pay the rent and everything) at an Episcopal cathedral on 5th Avenue. I was a soloist, and they had an evensong and a morning service. I also worked at a temporary typist office place. I was terrible at it but no one seemed to care. It was such a fun time.

**UPDIKE** That’s wonderful.

**GUNN** It paid the rent in those days; I don’t think it would now.

**UPDIKE** And how long were you in New York?

**GUNN** I was only in New York for four months. That summer when I was up in Ashland singing and doing the Shakespeare festival, I met my husband-to-be. He came to see the plays, poor dear, and he got a wife! I only knew him a week and he was after me to come to San Francisco. I said I couldn’t, because I had this sponsor, but we stayed in constant contact. I came out a little after Christmas to visit, and we decided to get married. And here we are, 56 years later, so that worked out well.

**UPDIKE** So you moved out to California for Tom.

**GUNN** And there we stayed. So I just worked on this coast.

**UPDIKE** What year did you move here?

**GUNN** About 1960.

**UPDIKE** And what did you do when you got to San Francisco?

**GUNN** I watched television one day – three weeks after we were married – and I saw a workshop in Berkeley with Jan Popper and Lotfi Mansouri. So I went over and auditioned, and the next thing I knew I was in the workshop. With Lotfi and Jan we did the *Trittico* by Puccini. I did three roles in that, and I loved Lotfi. I loved Jan too, but Lotfi was a sweetheart, and a wonderful stage director. Then we did Bloch’s *Macbeth* right after that with Jan conducting. When I was in it, this mezzo Janis Martin (who just passed away, but who sang all over Europe



as a dramatic soprano doing a lot of Wagner) said, “You should audition for the Merola.” I said, “What’s the Merola?” She said, “Well, it’s a program at the Opera House.” She had done it the year before, so I said, “Well, what do you have to do?” She said, “You have to know six arias.” I said, “I know six arias!” It shows how stupid I was. I went in, and I got in – but I was just ignorance personified. I was the baby in the program, and so from then on I stayed on this coast, and did all kinds of opera and theater. I started to direct, and so on and so forth. I always did all kinds of things at the same time. I admired singers and students who had total focus on the direction they planned on going with their careers – Kathy Cathcart (my teaching partner here at the SFCM) and I would compare notes – we just worked. If somebody hired us for something, that’s what we did, whether it was singing or teaching or directing, we just kept going.

**UPDIKE**      Could you talk a little bit about Jan and Lotfi as people – your impressions of them?

**GUNN**      Lotfi was just a dear man. He was a tremendously creative, positive force, and a wonderful stage director. When I worked with him, he had just been at U.C.L.A., and he went from there to Berkeley, briefly, and then left for Switzerland, and that’s where all of a sudden his career started to get big-time. He was just one of those people who was totally charming, and creative, and funny. We got along extremely well, and he always was very good to me, from then on. He was somebody that never forgot you. He was in Europe and Canada, and then he came back here to head SF Opera. He was a wonderful human being. It’s a sad thing; some of these wonderful people are gone. But he really was, and I always loved everything he did – he was a great stage director and full of tremendous energy when he was directing.

**UPDIKE**      And is there anything you’d like to say about Jan Popper?

**GUNN**      Jan was also delightful; he was a wonderful conductor. I never was quite as close to the music people – I got along with them, but it was the theater aspects of opera I always gravitated toward, and those involved there. Jan was always so pleased that I stayed in opera – that I didn’t quit. I knew his wife, Beta, very well. They were dedicated, fantastic human beings; very humorous. I remember when we were doing Bloch’s *Macbeth*, it had a director from the theater department who had never done opera. That’s always a bit of a mistake, if they don’t pay attention to the music, and so every time we’d start to do the witches scene (I was one of the witches) he’d say, “No, no, no – I don’t want you to do that! I’m not sure what kind of a witch I want you to be.” So finally we kept after him, and he said, “Come to my office tomorrow and I’ll tell you what I want for these witches.” So we went over there, and he said, “I’ve been thinking about it, and what I want you to think is that you’re a golden apple hanging in the tree.” We all said, “Oh, yes.” We went back to Jan, and he said, “Oh, for Heaven’s sake! Just do the standard witch.” So that was Jan – he was very realistic. We laughed about that a great deal.

**UPDIKE** Could you talk a little about your experience in the Merola program?

**GUNN** The Merola was wonderful for me. In those days, it was much smaller. Matt Farruggio worked with us a lot with the staging aspects. We did one performance in Stern Grove, which I was Berta in *The Barber of Seville*. We did big scenes – I remember doing *Il Trovatore* out in some vineyard. Otto Gout was the music director, he was from Vienna and a great musician who sent me to Lili Wexburg, my last voice teacher, who totally lined up my voice. It was all just a very positive thing. I was a baby compared with some of those others who were much older. But I now realize that ... I always thought I knew as much as they did. Jimmy Schwabacher was there, he was always very involved with the Merola Program, and Kurt Herbert Adler of course, who was a very strong personality. I always got along with all those people ... to me, it just felt like what I was supposed to be doing. I felt quite comfortable with it, and then I started having children. Adler did not appreciate that. I still got along with him very well. They just had an idea of how you were supposed to live your life if you were a singer.

**UPDIKE** And how did you first hear about the Conservatory?

**GUNN** I knew it existed, but it never occurred to me to try to work there. Jan Martin did some performing there, but neither one of us thought of ourselves as teachers – we were performers at that time. And then Susan Webb became my coach, and we became very good friends. Then when I was in Portland doing a *Consul* with Menotti (that was a wonderful, depressing show) I was singing the mother, and she called me and said, “I want you to teach this Opera Workshop class with me. It won’t be any work at all; one little class.” I said, “Well, I’ll try it.” At that time the workshop had seven people in it, and we had to go out and steal them from the hallway! First was that one workshop, and then we started doing one show every year ... and then eventually Susan went back to the Met and left me with it.

**UPDIKE** Could you talk a little bit about Susan?

**GUNN** Susan was a marvelous musician. She was a very close friend and much loved. Sadly she just passed away from cancer. I saw her in New York when she was at the Met. When Susan left I stayed in contact with her. When we were working together she came out of town with me, to play auditions, and she’d often come to productions I sang in out of town. A wonderful, wonderful musician and coach, and great friend. She did conduct, but she felt more confident with the other aspects. When she went back to the Met, she went as a prompter, where you conduct but you cue everybody a half beat beforehand. That suited her, and she worked as a prompter there, and lived in an apartment close to Lincoln Center. I’d see her there, because my daughter was at Juilliard at that time. She was a wonderful human being, it was a deep loss when she passed away.

**UPDIKE** Could you describe the Conservatory when you first joined?

**GUNN** It was a much different place than it is now. It was a bunch of characters, to be honest. Milton was the president, and he kept it going just by his friends in Pacific Heights, I think, to find funding for it. There were tremendously strong characters on the faculty. It was basically a string and piano school, and as we started to build the Opera Program we worked with the voice teachers. The two departments should complement each other: a singer wants to be in a place where they love the voice teacher, but also needs a place to perform. It was great fun in many ways because there were such characters on the faculty.

**UPDIKE** Let's talk about some of the characters from that time. Do you want to start with Milton Salkind?

**GUNN** Milton was a charming man. He was a wonderful pianist. He and his wife Peggy did these piano duos that were spectacular – but he just had a gift for getting those rich people to cough up money to keep the school going. There was not this thing to be competitive with Manhattan or anything like that – it was a little music school that had some very talented people in it. It was small, and filled with all kinds of personalities, and he was happy enough with that I think. It didn't truly start to get organized with WASC and NASM and all of that until later. At least I don't in my mind remember it that way. Milton was a true character, I loved him very much. These people who build a school or theater just have to be tenacious and creative. It's like the Shakespeare Festival – I knew the man who started that, Angus Bloomer, he just wanted to do Shakespeare. Now it totally controls that whole town; there are three theaters and it's just fantastic – one of the best theater programs in the whole United States, and it's just because he wanted to do Shakespeare. I think Milton – because he wanted to teach piano – he developed this Conservatory. Well, I know somebody started it much earlier ... but Milton certainly brought it forward.

**UPDIKE** It was founded in 1917 as a piano school.

**GUNN** I certainly didn't have anything to do with it then. I'm old, but not that old. I just came on the scene when Milton was here. I knew his daughter, Karen, who was a wonderful singer, and I directed her in several things. He was a very creative man who wanted to do this, and I think it takes a certain kind of positive personality to say, "Let's try this. How about you give me money to do this?" It takes a certain psyche to do that. It was lovely while he was here – we all had a very good time!

**UPDIKE** Did you know Dorothy Steinmetz?

**GUNN** Yes, I liked Dorothy very much. She did a wonderful job with the German. She was a very powerful, organized woman, and I enjoyed her. She was always very supportive of the opera. I never had any projects with Dorothy – just chat in the teacher’s lounge and that kind of thing.

**UPDIKE** And Joan Gallegos?

**GUNN** Same with Joan. Another character with a very strong personality. She was very supportive of the opera, and came to everything. I enjoyed her. Most of those people were very strong individuals. There were none of them that kind of blended in.

**UPDIKE** David Ramadanoff?

**GUNN** I only knew him as a conductor for the opera. If I’m remembering correctly, Susan didn’t want to conduct anymore and we brought in a woman to do *Dialogues of the Carmelites* who was with a contemporary orchestra. After that David was hired and conducted the Opera for four or five years. The only time I saw him was at rehearsals.

**UPDIKE** Monroe Kanouse?

**GUNN** I coached with him. Monroe and I knew each other for centuries it seemed. First I coached some things with him when Susan left, and then I did an awful lot of directing at Sacramento Opera, and he would always be the conductor when I staged. Then when Kathy decided she didn’t want to conduct anymore, I brought Monroe in. We always got along well; he’s another one who is a wonderful musician – a wonderful pianist. A very organized conductor – with Sacramento Opera we did some big productions together, such as *Aida* and *Otello*.

**UPDIKE** Is there anything you’d like to say about Marcie Stapp?

**GUNN** Marcie I see every so often. I use her translations when I can, and she comes occasionally to Ashland. She was up there recently. She’s a gifted translator, besides being a gifted pianist. I used her translations here often, with the Opera Program, whenever I could.

**UPDIKE** Mack McCray?

**GUNN** Mack was one of those rare characters. I loved the force of nature that was Mack. He also was a gifted musician, and he was a true character, to say the least – a big, strong personality. And I think he was a wonderful teacher, because so many students came here because of Mack. He was there from the beginning of my time here, and he and I once in a while would debate over, “Whose room was this?!” There weren’t any little namby-pamby type people

on the faculty that I remember. All the disciplines complimented, and would work with each other ... perhaps some conflict, but not much.

**UPDIKE** And did you know Bonnie Hampton and Nathan Schwartz?

**GUNN** I knew Bonnie Hampton more because of my daughter, who's a string player. I saw her here, and appreciated greatly her talent. Also her husband Nathan, a delightful man, who passed away, they were both totally brilliant musicians. She taught a lot of cellists ... my daughter was in this Palo Alto Chamber Orchestra for decades, so I would see Bonnie at those performances often – more than here.

**UPDIKE** Conrad Susa?

**GUNN** Conrad I loved. Conrad was a very special human being – a very gentle person, but also one of the most interesting people to talk to. He had a very whimsical, imaginative mind, and it always was just a joy chatting with him. I worked with him a bit when we did *Transformations*, and he came to rehearsals when we were doing a scene from *Dangerous Liaisons*. But more than that, he and I wanted to teach a class together – but we could never figure out where we could put it in the curriculum. He would teach the composition part of opera, and I would be there to stress what they needed in the music for that dramatic thought. I still think that would have been interesting. The orchestra in opera needs to trigger the dramatic thought. He and I used to talk about it, and we were going to use classic plays, like Tennessee Williams, and give them little scenes from them, and have each one compose it in their own way, and then go back and work with it. Unfortunately it didn't happen.

**UPDIKE** Paul Hersh?

**GUNN** He certainly was a powerful, original human being too, and brought in students from all over the place for both piano and strings.

**UPDIKE** And is there anything that you'd like to say about Ruby Pleasure?

**GUNN** I love Ruby. Ruby's just such a part of the earth – a complete, wonderful human being. A good teacher and a good singer. Not a single thing is a façade – Ruby is Ruby – you know who you're talking to. She and Colleen Katzowitz, when they worked in the student services office together, it was always such a joy. Katzowitz was also quite a remarkable character.

**UPDIKE** And Julie Karres?

**GUNN** She and Mack McCray used to have a whole act going. She would be just screaming at Mack, and then she would answer the switchboard in this lovely voice saying “Conservatory of Music”. Every year Julie said to me, “Willene – I want to be in the opera.” So when I did *Threepenny Opera*, I said, “I’ve a got a role for you, Julie.” It was the old whore. Boy, she got herself fixed up. She had one line in the opening scene where Mack the Knife’s going around killing a few people. It’s a pantomime, a street scene, and the whores are strolling around. Her one line was supposed to be, “Hey! There goes Mack the Knife!” And she got all alarmed in the first performance, and said, “Hey! There goes Jack the Knife!” I remember Bonnie Koestner in the pit just falling over laughing. Julie was a delightful human being.

**UPDIKE** Hermann le Roux?

**GUNN** I still see Hermann from time to time as he lives in Grant’s Pass near where we are by Ashland. We worked together to help build the Voice Department and the Opera Program together. That worked very well. He now is ill with Parkinson’s, but he is still hanging in.

**UPDIKE** Colin Murdoch?

**GUNN** I loved Colin. It was sort of a miracle when Colin appeared. He came in as dean, and a new energy came into the school. Colin started to organize committees, and all of a sudden we were getting into WASC and NASM. With Colin, the Conservatory started to grow up. And then when he went from being dean (he was tremendously influential as a dean) and became president, I think it moved us up another couple of notches. I liked Colin, we were very good friends and he would always stand up for me when I needed it. He did amazing things here. People started to think, “Gee, we have something really good here.” All of a sudden the tuition went up, and everything got much more organized. That was very good, and I think the Conservatory owes him a great deal, as he had so much with bringing it to its present stature.

**UPDIKE** Let’s go back to 1975.

**GUNN** Oh, lord!

**UPDIKE** Could you talk a little bit about what you were walking into? What sort of program they had for opera at that time?

**GUNN** Not much.

**UPDIKE** You said that there were opera scenes, but they weren’t performing ...

**GUNN** When Susan and I started this; there was Opera Workshop first. I started doing games and stage work, in addition to staging the scenes. Then we added a class called Stage Basics for people who didn't know anything. So all of a sudden I was teaching two classes. But we would still have to go out into the hall and say, "Wouldn't you like to take Opera Workshop?"

**UPDIKE** Were these all for vocal students?

**GUNN** Yes, they were all voice students. Many were working with Léopold Simoneau; he kind of had the stars. The voice program was still pretty small. Susan and I started this little class, and I had developed some games that we started to use so it wasn't just learning scenes, and then we would do little scene recitals. We just did them during class time the first few times.

**UPDIKE** What were the games?

**GUNN** Theater games especially for singers. To get the singers out of themselves: to get them thinking as an individual, not just from the waist up. To be creative and relaxed, and to have fun and move; to use their bodies and think creatively. Stage Basics was for the inexperienced ones ... a lot of them didn't know stage right and stage left, so it was an introduction to the stage for them. We did scenes in that class, but spoken ones, scenes I took from plays that operas are based on ... *Beaumarchais*, and such. In the first or second year we got the orchestra involved with the Opera Program and we did *The Night Bell* ... just a little one-act. I don't know whether we did those during school time, or we actually put those on at night. Probably at night as the orchestra was involved. As it went trotting along, the productions got bigger. We did unusual one-acts for a while, and then I think when Kathy Cathcart came on board we decided to do more mainstream repertoire. We had no chorus so we had to reduce it to a quartet or double quartet. We wanted the singer to learn a more standard repertoire – not just all these little unusual things. Somewhere along in there we started getting too many students, so then we had two Opera Workshops. And then we had two Opera Workshops, the Stage Basics, and a Beginning Opera Workshop! And then we had the Opera Theater! The Directing class – it kept growing. Art Song as Theater was one of the last ones – I thought that was an interesting approach for the young singers. In the early years the technical end was just very rudimentary. We had six lights in the hall – there was no theatrical lighting.

**UPDIKE** This was in Hellman Hall?

**GUNN** We did everything in Hellman Hall for the longest time. I griped and griped, and eventually we got some theatrical lighting. But Lolly Lewis used to be up there with the six lights, and I'd get my niece's husband, who worked in lights, to come in and help me out. But we only had so many dimmers. The lights were turned on so you could see the stage, but that was

about it. It was an interesting experience for people on the staff when I would go in and say I needed a budget. “For what?” But they slowly got used to it. In the beginning it was a baby operation – though I had good voices. Ed Cohn was very good, and Nikki Hartliep. There weren’t many of them, but they were very good. Most of them are on Facebook with me – some of them are grandparents! Whoa!

**UPDIKE**      Could you talk a little bit about things like set design and costumes?

**GUNN**      That was a growing proposition. In the very early years when I did things like *Angelica*, I knew someone (Walter) at the Opera House who was in the costume shop. He would give me things for little money, which was lovely! This continued for a number of years. Finally a new person took over the costume shop, and this was unfortunate. Then I had to start going through San Francisco State, and I had a costumer who worked out of a strange costume house in San Francisco. Very slowly it evolved until I had a crew. And makeup people – the same thing. Wigs I would get from the Opera House in the beginning. I kept up with that, because I thought it was very important that they look right. The sets were another question. I don’t remember where the first ones were from, but I don’t think they were much of anything. I did *Turn of the Screw* with nothing – just a box with a light underneath it to light Quint and some furniture. That’s when I was up to six lights.

I had somebody from San Francisco State designing *Elixir of Love*, but he disappeared! He was kind of a nutcase. He made some designs, but he didn’t know how to build them into a set, so he disappeared. Then miraculously upon my horizon came this man Larry Bloom, who was down at Cowell Theater. He saved my neck with *Elixir*, and from then on he would always design my sets. I got so I eventually had a very strong technical staff. That makes life much easier – you have to have that if you’re going to do opera. But it took a while to get there. In the beginning, I was painting the sets. I was painting furniture, I was building props and borrowing from San Francisco State. When I think back on it, it’s quite amazing. I’d have the students painting sets. It wasn’t really how I wanted to do it, but in the beginning it was all on my shoulders. I’m terrible with costumes; I can’t sew at all, so Walter saved my life with the Opera House! I can do theatrical makeup, but I think I brought in people for that from the beginning. This is where the budget came in, you see – the very slowly growing budget.

Once I got the new light board in, it had 46 dimmers, this was lovely. And then it got that it was so crowded for the hall that I was taking up too much time in the hall rehearsing and getting the sets together. It still was basically a concert hall. I had a cyclorama and different masking to make it look like a theater. The light directions – the focus and angle – were still like a concert hall; not like an opera. Everybody was after that hall, and eventually Colin was up for me moving down to the Cowell – a theater at Fort Mason, in order to get the Opera Theater out of Hellman. He was willing to pay for it, so that’s what we did. I looked at other theaters, like the



one on Mission, but it's all union and extremely expensive, so I couldn't afford it. But the Cowell worked out very nicely, it was the right size for young voices. The Opera Theater Program was a constantly evolving, growing thing.

**UPDIKE** Absolutely – you said when you started, you had to go out and talk to students....

**GUNN** We had to trap people! Besides painting the sets and doing all this. I probably did do the makeup in the beginning. And props – I remember designing props. It really was a homegrown operation, and it was more than I'd anticipated in many ways, as far as that, because it was a piano/strings school, and there's no getting around that opera costs a little bit.

**UPDIKE** But as the years went on....

**GUNN** They saw that it brought in students. Voice students will not go someplace if they don't have a chance to perform. I always felt very strongly about that – you have to have them perform, you cannot learn to perform from a book. Their nervous system has to be on the stage, learning how to think into a character and how to work into a character physically. How to channel their energy and focus and think beyond their nervous system. You can't do that without doing it!

**UPDIKE** And what were your audiences like in your early years?

**GUNN** In the beginning I think we just did them during class time, and then it got so we had pretty good houses. If you do *Threepenny Opera*, you can sell it out. It would depend on what you were doing, but we always had decent houses and sometimes they sold out, and that was all very jolly. But I didn't look at it quite that way. I looked at it as giving the particular students something to do that they could use afterwards, and that they could take with them all their lives. And I think it worked out – an awful lot of them are in the business still! Poor dears.

**UPDIKE** Do you have any stories of early memorable performances? Or with students?

**GUNN** When I look back on that, there are an awful lot of things running together. All of them had something going for them. It was always gratifying seeing the students who came in not knowing anything be able to create something. *Il Campanello* was the first one, and that was with Ed Cohn and Wendy Hoggatt, who's at Stanford now. I did *Albert Herring* twice, that's a good opera for a school. *Threepenny Opera* certainly did sell. *The Trial of Mary Lincoln* was very interesting, and Pasatieri was very interested in it.

**UPDIKE** He was the composer?

**GUNN** Yes, he wanted me to do others of his, and he was working with television then. I did that because I'd seen it on television and I had this mezzo who was a little older, and was very good as Mary Lincoln. She went back to the Met soon after leaving school.

**UPDIKE** I read that that was the first time the composer had approved a live, staged performance of it.

**GUNN** He was a sweet, dear man, and the librettist used to talk to me too – we'd have long conversations. We did it with a very interesting set – her costume changed as she aged – but there were no breaks in it, and the set had different levels. How did we build that set? I didn't build that one! But it turned out to be a very effective production, basically because that woman had the right voice for it and could carry it off – she was a little bit older. She was a pitiful character, Mary Lincoln – she had a hard life! He was very nice, Pasatieri, and he wanted me to do a Chekhov piece – *The Three Sisters* – next, but having just done one of his works, I couldn't turn around and immediately do another ... and always it depended on what voices I had.

*A Midsummer Night's Dream* was beautiful. It was a beautiful opera, and it fit the stage and the cast that I had. Actually, Heather [Mathews] was Puck! It's an action role, and a dancer's role. She was also in *Transformations*, and *Marriage of Figaro* and multitudinous scenes.

[Robert] Ward came out for the performance of *The Crucible*. He was lovely. He set that powerful play extremely well. *The Coronation of Poppea* was very interesting, because it was Baroque. I just did a Baroque opera, *Orfeo* by Gluck, but the Monteverdi was much different. In some ways the characters are more easy to build, the way it's structured. I really had to think about it with the *Orfeo*. And *Cendrillon* I loved.

**UPDIKE** When Ward came out, did he sit in on any of the rehearsals?

**GUNN** He did, he came into the theater and he loved it! He'd be backstage listening. He's a very nice man – he's still composing. I think he's written something new that somebody just did. That's good – he's in his 80s.

**UPDIKE** Could you talk about the performance of *Transformations* in 1993?

**GUNN** That was a fascinating show, because Anne Sexton was a very troubled woman, but a fascinating one. I did an awful lot of research on her. A little bit depressing, and yet her poetry ... she was somebody who was never trained, and yet she started to write poetry, and she ended up getting a Pulitzer Prize for it. I can see how she and Conrad would get along – they were both extremely creative. First, they were going to do five performances of it and that was it – she didn't want any more. And then when she saw it as an opera with Conrad's music, she

thought it was a wonderful thing and was enthusiastic about other companies performing it. So we did it. I had a very talented cast. It was just a few boxes on stage with a lot of projections. The poetry is based on fairy tales. Some of it funny, but they are Grimm's fairy tales, and some of it is very grim. And a lot of sensuality, homosexuality and lesbianism, I believe because she thought her aunt had abused her. She went through all of this psychotherapy, and you weren't sure whether it was true, or whether she had made it up in her imagination. So in some of the fairy tales she put her anger and a rather whimsical and vicious side – like in *Hansel and Gretel* – very funny, but a little vicious. But the words are where it's all based. There are certain places in *Rapunzel* where there is some really beautiful music – lyric – and an awful lot of semi-recitative, to tell her poetry. The music is jazzy in some places, many different colors, but it fits the text. I'm thinking about doing it again, because it was such a fascinating thing to work on. You have eight singers, and the set was nine boxes. The boxes moved around from being towers, to beds, and walls, and this kind of thing. I had everybody in sweat outfits, and I didn't have to worry about wigs, because everybody plays so many different parts. And Conrad came in to watch the rehearsals – not all the time, because they made him nervous!

**UPDIKE** Was he involved at all with the staging, or anything like that?

**GUNN** Not with the staging. He sat back, and listened to the orchestra, to see what was going on with that. He was basically thinking from the musical end. And if Sexton had been there, she would have been thinking about the words – but neither one of them would necessarily be thinking about staging. It could be staged a thousand different ways, I think. It was a fascinating work, and I had full houses for that. My mentor, Jenny, came up from L.A. for all of the performances and was fascinated.

**UPDIKE** That's great. Do you have any favorite stories of students, or student life over the years?

**GUNN** I was involved with the students, and I'd go to their parties every once in a while. I always loved the students – they were all young, creative personalities. Different kinds of personalities, and different kinds of voices. Somebody would come in with a great big voice, and you'd think, "This is a major talent," and they'd never get any better. Somebody else would come in and have things wrong with them – musicianship, or language ... but by the time they left (improved, I hope)... Elza van den Heever was a special case. I saw her talent as a freshman, being able to put her voice and the dramatic word into one single focus. It was all one flow of energy, and that's something you can try to teach, but if they are born with the gift you kind of unlock it. She just had it – it was there immediately. She needed vocal and language work, and got a broad foundation of it here, and now she's singing all over Europe and at the Met. I enjoyed all of them, we used to have great fun in the theater games! One girl, Emily Breedlove, was wonderful in improv – that's what she really specializes in in Austin, Texas –

using improv. It's interesting where their lives end up. I stay in touch with an awful lot of them, but even those that I don't stay in touch with – they all were great fun, and very gratifying. I'm very glad, as I get older, that this is the work I got to do. I loved performance, I loved being an opera singer, and directing, but the teaching aspect in the end was the most satisfying. You really felt that you achieved something, or built something. It's like raising a child, I suppose. I was very glad it just came upon me out of the blue – I never would have thought of it! I was just going to perform.

**UPDIKE** You came to San Francisco around 1960. Is there anything you'd like to say about how the musical culture of this area has changed since then?

**GUNN** I think there's a lot more opera. There was an article in the New York Times and in the New Yorker recently saying how the small houses are starting to dominate, because the big houses are so terribly expensive. They can always do these big works, but as far as building an audience for opera, the smaller houses that are doing experimental things, or reduced versions, are really where it's at. Even San Francisco Opera now has a small theater, and the Met is developing the same thing. When I started out here, there was a group called the Talent Bank, there was the Opera House and Merola. Berkeley was where Jan was there for a while, and West Bay Opera existed, but there wasn't much otherwise. As regional houses started to expand, they started to show up all over the country. Then from the regional houses (which usually did the standard stuff – but you had a place to work) now that's shifting again with all of these little companies showing up. Little experimental companies where people get to sing ... you can't make a living at it, but it's hard to make a living as a singer, period – just as a singer. People attend a performance at a small experimental company, and they're introduced to opera in a way that is not them going to hear it in a foreign language on a great big stage. I think that times are changing, and the singers in some ways have more varied opportunities. In the old days, it was Chicago and San Francisco and the Met – there were a few houses in-between there, but there weren't that many in the early years.

**UPDIKE** Would you like to talk a little bit about Brava Opera? How it started?

**GUNN** Brava Opera started basically because I left Rogue Opera in Medford, Oregon, which I got involved with to my surprise (I was supposed to be retired). It basically did the standards. I had done an awful lot of the standards – the top ten operas – many times, so it was interesting but I was more interested in doing something with an emphasis specifically on the combination of music and theater. Jim [Collier], who lives in the Rogue Valley, bless his heart, has a whole bunch of money that he puts into the arts. He puts it into the symphony, and chamber music, and the Shakespeare Festival – all these different things – and he loves us, which is wonderful. He encouraged us to start something viable. He wanted me and this other gal, Lorrie Hall, to put something together. So we started with a workshop, and then a national

contest for singers. We're in the fifth year of that, and along in there we started doing chamber works that were not done as often in standard repertoire in this little house that has Jim's name on it called Camelot Theater. That has been very interesting. We bring in professionals, and have auditions through Yap Tracker. Those have been interesting shows to direct, because they're a little off the wall – even if I do something that's naturally off the wall I try to do it more off the wall. That has turned out to be very well received in the community, and now we're moving into a bigger space. I hope that it works.

I was going to do *Transformations* next year, but I thought that maybe in that bigger space it's too distant for the audience. The new theater has wonderful acoustics, but *Transformations* needs you to be more intimate with what's going on. So I thought *Don Pasquale* would be interesting; it has a small cast, and will show our audience that we can do something more traditional. If I do *Pasquale*, I'll do it in modern dress and see how it is received. It's a bigger house, so we have to get more people to come in. After that, I think I'll mix it up, and I'll stay artistic director for as long as I can. I'd like to do a little more traditional works, and then something not. Mix it up. I'd love to do *Albert Herring* again, but I just can't afford it. There are just too many people – you have to have all twelve orchestra people, no reduction, and they have to be really good. I have a wonderful conductor and some really good musicians for the pit, but I still have to consider that pit, as to what I'm going to put in it. I know Jim wants Brava to last, and we will keep the contest with his name on it – he's leaving us money to keep that going. Last year I brought in Ann Baltz to do the workshop, and she brought in other singers from other places. This next year Deborah Voight is coming up, and she'll do the master class. You need to do a master class type thing with the community in order to get grants. Jim is the financial base of the organization, but we have all kinds of grants and other backers. I am getting a little weary, but fortunately we have a little group of stage directors that I think are very good – Michael Mohammed and Heather Mathews and Milissa Carey, and there are other ones back east, and in Australia. I cannot do this forever, and I like passing things on.

**UPDIKE** That's wonderful.

**GUNN** It has to be that way – it should be that way – if you want to keep it going. And I feel very strongly about keeping the art form going. It's one that has an awful lot of challenges because it's so expensive if you do the big works. It is a very complicated art form.

**UPDIKE** Do you have any advice for music students, or young musicians who are going out into the world?

**GUNN** They just have to have a stiff upper lip. It's a very gratifying field, and they only go into it because they can't help themselves. But at the same time, they think they're going someplace and might not end up there at all. But that someplace else may be a wonderful thing

too, it's how they approach it. Like my daughter, who's a string player and was in Germany with Musica Antiqua Koln for six years. At Juilliard, where she got her Masters, she played the standard repertoire. Then she was in Germany for years playing with chamber orchestras and she got bored and decided she was going to come back to the United States and go to law school. Before leaving Germany then she decided to have a lesson in Baroque music, and that's where she found what she loved. So now she teaches strings and chamber music at two different schools, she is a principal player for Portland Baroque – which is a wonderful Baroque orchestra. She has private students, and she plays gigs all over. She has to hop around to make a living, and it's tough. I had it a little easier because my husband was a supporter of the arts, as they say. It's hard on your own. If instrumentalists get in a big orchestra, it's a stable job. But she didn't want to do that, she wanted to do Baroque music.

You kind of have to do what your heart tells you, and stick with it. A lot of the students I had are working in something else, but they still do music. Some of them are making their living totally in music, some are running opera programs, some are heads of opera companies, some teach voice in all kinds of different places. Some perform locally, some all over the world. I do think that music, in however it ends up, is a wonderful thing to have in your life. Without it, it would have been kind of a barren place. So even though they may all think they're going to sing at the Met, and all the string players think they're going to be at the New York Philharmonic – if they don't end up there, they still end up someplace. It's interesting. Life is full of surprises.

**UPDIKE** Is there anything else?

**GUNN** I loved my time here. When I look back I am very surprised that I ended up here as I had never really thought of teaching when I was young. But when here, I just kind of fumbled my way along, and we just started building and growing the program. Everything was based on the students. Whatever students I had, I tried to find something that suited their voices, strengthened their strengths and improved their weaknesses in both the workshops and the productions. I felt quite blessed to be doing that with my life.

**UPDIKE** Thank you so much, Willene.