

Participants gathering at OPERA America's June conference in St Louis in the shadow of the Gateway Arch were impressed by the many volunteers eager to help. Volunteers stood at elevators and in the hotel lobby holding directional signs to guide participants to buses and off-site receptions. They approached people whose puzzlement reflected on their foreheads, and offered help. They ran errands, ushered, and, of course, registered visitors.

These volunteers were members of the Opera Theatre of St. Louis Guild (OTSL)- a corps of about 300 regular volunteers. The company thrives from more than 12,000 volunteer hours a year, said Michelle Myers, OTSL associate director for Strategy & Organizational Development. Depending on the number of supernumeraries required in the festival's four annual productions, volunteers have saved the company between, 8.4 and 6.3 full-time salaries in each of the past three years.

Each evening when attendees arrive in the leafy suburb of Webster Groves to attend productions, they notice eager volunteers helping the audience. Beyond the glamorous but time consuming assignment of supernumeraries, there are many other duties directed by 24 committees. One team of a couple dozen, the Greeters committee, welcome ticket holders to the opera garden tents and theatre foyer. At each performance knowledgeable volunteers stand in the lobby and garden holding a sign saying "Questions? Ask Me!" Janet Hoyne, a former Guild president, was the quiz expert during the conference. Newcomers and old- hands were delighted to get answers. Where to pick up box dinners? Where are the nightly pre-opera lectures? What is the plot of tonight's opera?

Most opera volunteers are recruited by word of mouth, Hoyne said. In the company's early years the first two managing directors Richard Gaddes and Charles McKay directly asked people for help, volunteer Jane Feibel recalled. That first year, 1976, Gaddes and the late Georgea Coleman were the only employees. Feibel helped with bookkeeping.

"We had lots of housewives helping then," she said. "It was work, but we knew that we were really making a difference. Richard set very high standards and seeing them achieved was exciting."

She and her husband, Dr. Robert Feibel, now a life member of the

company's board of directors, even helped make tickets in first seasons. "We were asked to help, and we were always thanked," she said.

"We are considered to be experienced, knowledgeable, Opera Theatre volunteers, and are never shunted aside," said guild president, Gailya Barker.

Volunteers also staff the theater lobby boutique, which benefits OTSL. It sells the practical: umbrellas, shawls for the A/C, ladies' paper fans, picnic accessories, CDs, books and libretti. The boutique also stocks watercolors, sculpture and fabric art by regional artists, handmade gifts supporting artisans in Third World countries and witty opera-related hats, tee shirts, and neckties.





*Volunteer buyer Beverly Clarkson, a retired owner of a chic boutique, knows what sells.*

“You have to know what the audience wants to buy,” said Elliot Zucker, a retired Merchandise manager at the former May department Stores flagship Famous Barr Stores. For many years he was the opera boutique buyer. About 25 volunteers staff the shop nightly during the season.

“People love volunteering in the boutique,” boutique operations chair Susie Hahn said. “Shop volunteers become friends like family.”

Over the six-week, May-June season, boutique volunteers stand at the counters from 6:30 PM till final curtain, about 11 PM. They are fast on their feet during intermissions, but when the performance begins they relax and visit with each other. When the season is over many continue to visit together in small groups for breakfast or dinner, Hahn said. About 95 percent of the shop volunteers have been serving there for a decade, said Hahn, who has chaired the boutique operations committee for 11 years. “Most have season tickets and know so much about opera,” Hahn said. “That is really helpful to our knowledgeable customers.”

With authority, they can suggest buying the opera company’s own libretti editions of each of the year’s four opera productions. Four scholarly volunteers spend months researching, interviewing music scholars and living composers, then, writing and producing the meaty introductions to

the booklets. The introductions are so fresh and fascinating that buyer demand led the company to compile a fifth booklet composed just of all four season operas' introductions. The introduction, written by volunteer Tani Wolff, to the world premiere of the riveting, two-act *An American Soldier* ran nine pages and included interviews with the composer Huang Ruo and librettist David Henry Hwang. Dr. Robert Feibel, a medical school professor, had already spent scores of hours researching his introduction for a 2019 edition when the 2018 season closed, his wife Jane said.

After each evening's performance, singers, conductors, directors, set, costume, lighting and video designers join the audience for drinks in tents set in the acres of candle and torch-lighted garden. Many volunteers get hugs from the grateful cast. Among St. Louisans being embraced were 28 volunteers who met 197 artists and crew at

baggage carousels at St. Louis' Lambert International Airport. After a warm welcome, volunteers drove them to their hotel, apartment, or residence of a family hosting them. Each artist and artisan gets a "Welcome Bag" packed with company and city information, maps and gifts from 18 local businesses. Elliot Zucker and co-chair Linda Seibert run the transportation committee. They dispatch drivers, reminders and update flight arrival times.

"Artists find it nice to have an airport welcome and transportation," Zucker said. He and his wife Sharon volunteered at the opera in the 1970s until he took a job away from St. Louis. When the couple moved back to St. Louis they returned to helping at the opera, and renewing friendships that they had made there decades before.

"The drivers like doing it," Zucker said. They enjoy hearing the stories of the artists recent work, family and plans for the current St. Louis production. In 1976, OTSL's first year, founding general director Richard Gaddes asked opera buffs with extra bedrooms and extra bathrooms to host the singers. He liked those with swimming pools.

Myrna and Arnie Hershman have hosted singers annually ever since. They invite houseguests to eat with them but singers rarely have time. They use refrigerator space for what the couple consider interesting food,

like coconut milk and kale chips. Some artists want scant interaction with hosts and they respect that, too. Others appreciate a strong shoulder to lean on when they have ill parents or other emotional issues.

Often volunteers' friendships with singers goes beyond a warm rapport over wine or ice cream in the OTSL's tents. Many keep up with their former guests, sometimes traveling to cities from Santa Fe to Vienna, London to Calgary to hear them. In 1979 singer Fredda Rakusin was the Hershmans' guest. They followed her career and family life as she married a cantor at a synagogue. Now, 39 years later, the couple shared with delight the news that Rakusin's son is also a cantor.

Many of the volunteers were well out of sight when OPERA America participants visited. The colorful garden is planted, weeded and deadheaded by a core group of volunteer gardeners under staff member Lucie Garnett's direction. Also quiet are seven volunteers who man company phones and do office chores from the first week of rehearsals over the next three months. They are near the front door of the Sally Levy Opera Center with its three rehearsal halls.

"We love it and get to know many cast, staff and crew that we help. We talk to (music director emeritus) Stephen Lord a lot," said Rowena Van Dyke, coordinator of the office volunteers.

Two more committees work far beyond the opera buildings. This year Jamie Spencer and Helen McCallie lead the opera advocacy committee in meetings with seventeen legislators in the state capitol to advocate for support of all the arts.

And another group educates. Each fall and winter about two dozen docents, and docents-in-training, with strong music backgrounds, attend five or more lectures by music professors, conductors and living composers on the four planned spring season operas. They form their own study groups and share their research.

Michael Herron, an Information Technology high school teacher, transfers docents' videos, slides and music to a disc. Then, docents can smoothly use special computer projectors in multi-media talks. In mid-winter, docents fan out and give dynamic, witty presentations to a variety

of groups. This year they gave more than fifty presentations. The docents' presentations draw subscribers and curious people who have never even attended an opera. Docents always explain that the company is a national leader in commissioning new operas. They pass out ticket buying information.

Younger volunteers under forty-five, have their own group, The Young Friends. Most Have demanding careers and growing young families, and cannot commit to traditional volunteer tasks. They focus on introducing their peers to opera. Many attend early spring cocktail events featuring OTSL singers at chic bars, round up pals for special OTSL picnics/opera performances date nights. The Young Friends program also encourages parents to bring their young children to "Kids Club," a babysitting/learning experience while parents attend weekend matinee operas.

"Young Friends are important in getting new audiences," says Mary Susman, longtime Guild leader. After a summer breather, in early September, the general director and staff give a thank you party. They invite every volunteer to an elegant picnic under a park gazebo. Departing OTSL General Director Timothy O'Leary and his wife Kara, always attended. Nearly every volunteer interviewed said they are buoyed by the leadership's warm appreciation for their hours of service.

"They thank us, continually show their appreciation and respect our expertise," said OTSL Guild president Gailya Barker. "We think that our new general director Andrew Jorgensen will continue that tradition," she spoke on his first day on the job.

"All our volunteers want people to know how darn good this company is," Arnie Hershman said.

*Patricia Rice is a journalist who wrote her first article about Opera Theatre of St. Louis in 1976.*