

A Quarter Century of Song

Word on the street, especially in certain marshy locales, is that our beloved ***Salt Marsh Opera*** is celebrating twenty-five years of history this August 9th at a swanky Masquerade Gala at the United Theatre in Westerly! As we think about which opera character we might like to dress up as for the gala, Salt Marsh Opera Board Member Marianne McNee has spoken with some of the many illustrious singers, volunteers, financial supporters and production pros to glean interesting snippets of the company's history.

The first article below covers the very beginnings of Salt Marsh Opera and how the faith, love and talent of early organizers set the stage for many stellar productions.

The Birth of Salt Marsh Opera

By

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Have you heard the story about two guys who went to an opera in New London, enjoyed an impromptu lobby concert and then decided to start an opera party in Stonington, Connecticut? Well, there's a little more to the launch of ***Salt Marsh Opera***, but it's not a stretch to recognize that the nub of a good idea was born from their love of singing, opera, and that inspiring performance many years ago.

Jan Macgregor, early Salt Marsh Opera organizer, performer and former board member, recalls meeting ***Bruce Wineberg***, both Stonington residents at the time, and discovering their shared love of music, especially singing.

"We both were very interested in music. Bruce had a fine voice, and he also had a small band. We were in the choir at Calvary Church, so we sang together. We had some parties that were musically oriented. In the mid-nineties, Bruce and I went to see a production of *Don Giovanni*, put on by the ***Amato Opera Company*** at the ***Garde Arts Center in New London***. After the performance, all the lead singers came out to the lobby and they each sang their favorite songs. Most of them were arias, though not all. Afterwards, we were discussing how much we had enjoyed this unusual pop-up music event. And we decided that what we needed in Stonington was chamber opera. So, in 1997, we decided to have an opera party," Jan explained.

The Opera Party Singers Shine

This was no ordinary party. While they were held in lovely private homes and included a pot-luck dinner, all attendees had to sing an opera aria, with each performer being accompanied by piano. The evening showcased talented local singers who had little or no professional training, but it had the feeling of being a group of socially connected people who loved to sing.

Given the festive atmosphere, the now-annual party stretched its wings. The event came to be billed as **'A Night at the Opera,'** complete with black-tie dress. Copious red roses were on hand, too, for tossing at the singers at the conclusion of their performance. Apparently, it was all rather dramatic but, most importantly, great fun.

"Everyone who came would have to sing an aria, a daunting undertaking for a bunch of amateurs. It was a hell of a lot of fun and everyone was enthusiastic about it, especially Bruce and me. We held these parties for a few years, each one getting a little more elaborate, so our enthusiasm grew. One night, Bruce called me and said, 'I think we should start our own opera company in Stonington. We're having such a good time, and all these people are enjoying singing the arias,'" Jan recalled.

At this point, Jan was very involved with several other groups and thought that he did not have time to be a co-organizer of a new opera company, so he suggested Bruce carry on without him. Luckily, Bruce decided to keep going with the idea and approached a contact he had at the Stonington Historical Society, now known as Historic Stonington. From there, a committee was formed.

Drum Roll, please! A New Opera Company Has Been Created!

Hence, **The Stonington Opera Company** was formalized in 2000. Bruce Wineburg invited Stonington's Broadway producer **David Black** to become the company's first Stage Director. **Simon Holt** joined as Music Director. An opera was selected. First performance plans were sketched out. But, as with many organizations, a strategic conflict soon developed.

Wineberg's conception of this nascent opera company was that local singing talent would fill all the roles. First, many of the 'opera party people' were talented, and secondly, he felt a certain loyalty to all these singers. He wanted local talent to be featured in the shows, a unique selling proposition and a great way to attract audiences. But not everyone agreed with him.

Jan Macgregor remembers that "The Stonington Opera board decided that it wouldn't limit the show solely to local singers. Bruce insisted that only locals should be used, but the

decision was made, so he resigned from the board over that disagreement, even though he was a co-founder of the opera company. The remaining trustees carried on and the company morphed into Salt Marsh Opera. Sadly, Bruce died in December 2024, but he was integral to getting the opera company launched and we are very grateful for his early inspiration and contribution.”

The board selected **Madama Butterfly** as its debut production in September 2001. Enter **Derick Nicholas**, another Stonington resident and Salt Marsh Opera’s Chairman Emeritus, who had attended the famous opera parties in the late 1990s, to explain how it all came together.

“There were some very fine people involved, such as **Susan Connell** and **Paul Bunker**, who co-chaired Stonington Opera Company. I was asked if I would join the board, and I agreed, so I was voted in right then. After that, we had to elect a Chairman of the Board, and suddenly, Susan and Paul resigned due to too many commitments. So, at my first meeting, in June 2001, I was voted on the board, and then a short time later, elected Chairman of the Board on the same night. As you can imagine, it was a bit of a surprise,” Derick remarked.

Now, the new company just needed to create a budget and to start fund raising to pay for **Butterfly** which was scheduled for September 2001, a mere four months away. No problem!

The Mistake

Derick Nicholas recalls this period very clearly.

“That was the beginning of what I call ‘the mistake,’ because nobody knew me, and I did not know what my function was. I had not met David Black, the Stage Director at the time, and then, on top of all that uncertainty, we decided we ought to change the name of the company. **Robert Brown**, a member of the Board at that time, decided that ‘**Salt Marsh Opera**’ is what the name should be. The new name related to our area as there really wasn’t anyone in Watch Hill or Stonington, or as far as we could tell, who had not encountered a salt marsh, especially at Barn Island. The whole company was a social organization which was dedicated to a wonderful art called opera. So, I met David Black, and asked him what I had to do and I got to work,” Mr. Nicholas said.

In addition, Derick met Simon Holt, Music Director, who was obviously a very important person in the beginning as he oversaw the orchestra. He brought in a full orchestra to accompany the singers and that, too, was a novelty at the venue where the **Chorus of Westerly** performs.

The real stroke of luck, or perhaps deliberate strategic planning, was deciding to stage **Madama Butterfly** on Labor Day weekend of 2001, when the audience would be bigger

because of the holiday weekend. By then, enough money had been raised, mostly through the efforts of Derick Nicholas and other friends of Salt Marsh Opera. Watch Hill resident **Fred Whittemore**, opera devotee and involved with the board of the New York Metropolitan Opera, donated a substantial sum.

“We managed to raise the money all from local people. The debut performance was on the Friday and Saturday of Labor Day weekend, just a few days before 9/11. Had we performed just a week or so later, we would never have continued to exist, because 9/11 would have come along and attendance would have been an issue. But we performed *Butterfly* on that Friday and Saturday at the Chorus of Westerly Performance Hall, now the George Kent Performance Hall. Everybody at Saturday morning’s **Farmers Market in Stonington** was rather shocked at how good the show had been and thus the opera was launched,” Derick explained.

The Warm Elixir of Professional Singers and Local Talent

Professional singers have been crucial to Salt Marsh Opera’s development, so that early strategic decision enabled the opera company to evolve and grow. In addition, area residents did sing in the operas as members of the chorus. Jan Macgregor performed in the first production, *Butterfly*, in 2001, so Bruce Wineberg’s vision did partially come to fruition, and he attended many performances over the years. The marriage of professional and local singers provided a unique flavor, and has been one of the key elements of success for Salt Marsh Opera.

In addition, many professional opera singers were hosted by local families. This started as a warm way to welcome out-of-town artists, but also served as a cost-saving strategy, since multiple hotel rooms would have been a big expense. The net result of local hosting is the amazing sense of community that develops during each production. We will read more about that aspect next month when we hear from **Brian Cheney, Diana McVey** and **Jenna Tremblay**, all professional singers who have loved performing with Salt Marsh Opera.

Looking to grow the audience and educate people about the existence of this exciting new opera company, Salt Marsh Opera turned to newspaper advertisements, but that did not prove too successful.

“What brought the audience in was word getting out, and the mailings, but the real driver was the excitement of having opera singers around the town of Stonington itself, in the borough. People put them up for a couple of weeks while they were rehearsing and performing, and so there was an ambiance about the opera being in town. There would be talk of ‘are you going to the opera’,” recalled Derick Nicholas.

With the successful presentation of *Madama Butterfly* behind them, Salt Marsh Opera started planning for 2002 and beyond. It didn't hurt that the broader Stonington area found itself in a geographic sweet spot between New York, Hartford and Boston, and a built-in audience was looking for first-rate opera performances.

Salt Marsh Opera was onto something. With smart, engaged community members, local talent, professional musicians, singers and direction, Salt Marsh Opera pointed the tiller north and embarked on a full-speed-ahead tack.

Next month, we'll look at the early productions and detail the expanding suite of musical presentations and the attraction of wider audiences.

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- *The Birth of Salt Marsh Opera* – Late 1990s to 2001 (April 2025)
- *The Early Productions and New Programs* – 2002-2008 (May 2025)
- *Salt Marsh Opera Builds Audience and Education Outreach* – 2009-2013 (June 2025)
- *Expansion of Programs and More Fabulous Opera* – 2013-2019 (July 2025)
- *Surviving COVID and Beyond* – 2020-2025 (August 2025)