

Salt Marsh Opera
The Early Productions - 2002-2008

By Marianne McNee

Salt Marsh Opera Board Member

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While not everyone recognized that there was a new ‘superpower’ hovering around the salt marshes in the early 2000s, a young opera company had made a big impression by staging a well-received classic, ***Madama Butterfly***, in Westerly in September, 2001. Notably, the show was a complete sell-out, creating exactly the kind of buzz that arts organizations want in a launch. Word was spreading. ‘There’s a new opera company in town, and a good one.’ Now, it was time for Salt Marsh Opera to build on its formidable introduction.

Perhaps knowingly, the company had tapped into a hotspot of talent, epic music, dedicated volunteers, professional direction and a growing realization that area arts lovers were looking for just this kind of entertainment. Can we say that the energy Salt Marsh Opera created in their debut moment was a different version of, if you’ll allow us, a superpower? Why, yes, we think we can.

According to an AI-enabled, smarty-pants search, a ‘superpower’

“...highlights a unique strength that allows a person[s] to make a valuable contribution whether in their work, personal life or community.”

If you read Salt Marsh Opera’s Mission, the concept sounds close to what a superpower delivers:

Salt Marsh Opera is dedicated to enriching our community by delivering outstanding music productions, showcasing emerging artists, and providing education for both youth and adults.

Unbeknownst then, Salt Marsh Opera also was leaning into a cultural trend that is easier to recognize now with the benefit of hindsight. According to [Silpayamanant.com](https://silpayamanant.com), between the years 2000 and 2022, 439 opera companies were created in the United States, an average of twenty per year. Granted, many of these new companies were small entities like Salt Marsh Opera and some have since closed due to a variety of reasons. But the company kept sticking to its plan. The confluence of artistic purpose, beautiful canonical opera, professional talent, community participation, and local venues appealed to many people, not just opera devotees. This enabled Salt Marsh Opera to grow and expand its repertoire.

In addition, at this time, the broader popular culture was paying more attention to opera. Luciano Pavarotti was performing at soccer games and The Three Tenors were bringing famous, luscious arias to new audiences. The timing was perfect.

Early Years

Salt Marsh Opera's early productions, *Madama Butterfly* (2001), *Tosca* (2002), *Così fan tutte* (2003), and *The Mikado* (2004), firmly established Salt Marsh Opera as a premier performance troupe who poured their talented hearts and souls into each show.

Much of the company's vibrant energy came from Director Simon Holt, co-founder of Salt Marsh Opera. Simon had relocated from the UK to the United States in 1999 with his family to become Director of Music at Calvary Church in Stonington borough. At the start of his relationship with Salt Marsh Opera, he was Music Director, and David Black, an accomplished Broadway producer, was Artistic Director. Both men were critical in these formative years.

Simon recalls, "It was such a pleasure working with David Black. His experience on Broadway as a producer and director helped us shape our early productions into experiences eaten up by our audiences. David helped to set the artistic bar very high, an aspiration still very important to the company and of utmost importance to me as a performing artist."

Rhode Island native **Diana McVey**, soprano, who began singing with Salt Marsh Opera in 2003, said, "Simon was fantastic and, under his baton, was the absolute key to Salt Marsh Opera's success."

Leading the way were the many professional singers who graced the stage in those early years. *Tosca* in 2002 featured **Kevin J. Andersen, Frank Matto, Matthew Kirchner, Judy Brown Kirchner, Rene de la Garza, and Jim Russell**. In 2003, we heard **John Pickle, Maksim Ivanov, Thomas Woodman, Krista Wozniak, Hillary Nicholson, and Diana McVey** in *Così fan tutte*, and in 2004 our production of *The Mikado* highlighted **David Feiertag, Brian Cheney, Matthew Furtado, John-Scott Moir, Dennis Keohane, Carolyn Cole, Jenna Tremblay, Erin Marie Horne, Madeleine Gray, and Andrew McLeavey**.

Mixed in with all these professionals were local, home-grown talents who sang in our early choruses, including a retired nuclear sub commander, a stone mason and many more. **Dorothy Adams, Holly Bewlay, Andrew Brown, James Conover, Marie Coste, Arthur Cottrell, Sharon Davis, John Delmhorst, Michele Delmhorst, Allie Dennis, David DeAngelis, Jenny Dowker, Karen Fand, Harold Hefel, Julie Johnson, Patricia Johnson, Abbey Jones, Cathie Krakowiak, Jan MacGregor, David Percival, Jane Percy, Tibor Pusztai, Peter Snyder, Judy Tostanoski, Margaret Tyler, Joan Virga, Douglas Wray, and**

Isabella Zagare added wonderful choral flavor to the performances. Our *Tosca* production included a Treble Chorus including **Ashley Kozlowski, Christine Miner, James Purnell, Florence Robinson, Cody Williams, Tess Williams, and Piere Yerkes.**

With all this camaraderie, there was a level of comfort that appealed to young, promising talent, a key part of part of Salt Marsh Opera's mission. **Diana McVey**, picked up on the company's vibe:

"It was very clear from the beginning that the focus was in the right place -- on getting very good singers, a good orchestra, and putting the money into the product and focusing on the music and the artistry. Everything else would sort of fall into place. Now it helped that there was a very vigorous board of volunteers helping. It was clear that people were very invested in this newish small company. In my opinion, geographically, Salt Marsh Opera was perfectly placed. New York was not a stone's throw away, and then there was this sort of dearth of opera until you got to Boston, so it was just sort of the right place for it. The picturesque, beautiful, pastoral Stonington, Connecticut, and Westerly areas are so beautiful, and it just seemed to be the right formula for Salt Marsh Opera to expand."

Young Talent Is Nurtured and Developed

Michigander **Brian Cheney**, tenor, was one of the young singers who performed with Salt Marsh Opera in the early years. Brian credits Salt Marsh Opera as the reason he's had such a successful career:

"I was in their fourth opera, *The Mikado*. I was cast as Nanki-Poo, and that's when my friendship with Simon and my relationship with Salt Marsh Opera began, and it was wonderful! I had a great experience. Salt Marsh Opera was just this new, budding, small regional opera company with big aspirations, and I remember the thing that set them apart for me was their mission statement at the time, which was to really cultivate and support young artists in launching their careers, and I was a perfect candidate for that. I had gone through lots of years of experience performing but was just coming into my voice. And so, it was the perfect company for me to really try things out."

In 2004, Massachusetts native **Jenna Tremblay**, soprano, sang in *The Mikado*. She has fond memories of this experience when she was still in college studying musical theater at Rhode Island College.

"I remember the beautiful venue, George Kent Hall in Westerly. We had lovely costumes. Someone was able to house me, so I was meeting all these opera people. It was amazing because I was taken into their lifestyle, and they were

teaching me about Salt Marsh Opera and the people they're looking at to perform in the future. Their whole culture of soirées and creating opportunities for us to perform, that were outside of musical theater, was great. It was wonderful to get out of an academic environment into a professional environment. It was a big challenge because when you saw the expectations that were set for us, we were able to learn from and perform with people that were very experienced."

The Mid-Aughts Shows

Salt Marsh Opera's productions continued between 2005-2008, including *La bohème* (2005), *La traviata* (2006), *The Barber of Seville* (2007) and *Lucia de Lammermoor* (2008). In addition to all the stage talent, every show requires a multitude of people to create the magic. The community turned out in force to support various aspects of the production. Musicians, seamstresses, hair stylists, make-up artists, public relations support, front-of-house managers, ticket sales managers, set creators, and many more. The costumes might come from a New York City based rental company, but they needed to be altered for this singer in this exact show. Derick Nicholas recalled that between 150 and 200 people helped Salt Marsh Opera put on the show. The company's Board members also handled many tasks including making sure the bathrooms were clean and ready for the event!

Jan Macgregor recalled happily that **Bruce Wineberg's** vision of using local talent on stage had been realized. "Those of us who were interested sang all the choruses, learned the blocking, and sang in the performances even though we had professional leads. As soon as people realized how much fun it was to do this as a group, when you stick your neck out to sing, well that's part of the magic of a local opera company."

John Delmhorst, Salt Marsh Opera Treasurer at the time, found that he loved performing. "I was in eleven operas, mostly singing in the chorus, which was fantastic. My late wife, **Michele Delmhorst**, was in the chorus as well. She started [volunteering and singing] before I did. We sang together quite a bit," John explained.

Local Hosting Builds Sense of Community

The professional singers came from across the country and relished staying with local hosts.

In 2004, John and Michele Delmhorst hosted **Brian Cheney**, his wife, **Jeannean**, and their kids, including an eighteen-month-old daughter who apparently cried all night but is now a recent college graduate, Brian relayed.

"Among all the many opera companies I've worked with that have the same type of family feel, where it's really about the community and how valued the community

volunteers are, Salt Marsh Opera takes the cake. They're number one for that from all my experiences. It's the way they value the community, and it shows from the top down. They all had this common belief of what Salt Marsh Opera could do for its community."

Long-lasting friendships have been created through this hosting model. Social media helps keep the connections going, but it's the general feeling of caring and interest in each other's lives that makes the Salt Marsh Opera experience so unique and meaningful.

Salt Marsh Opera's Budget and Fund-Raising Efforts Grow, Too

Salt Marsh Opera's current bookkeeper, **John Delmhorst**, started volunteering with the company in 2001. He recalls,

Susan Connell, then President of Salt Marsh Opera, asked me to be treasurer. I was treasurer for ten years and, in that ten-year period, our annual budget went from \$75,000 per year to \$250,000 per year. Our 2025 annual budget now tops \$500,000, so the company keeps growing. It's amazing."

Derick Nicholas recalled how foundations helped Salt Marsh Opera move to a higher level of fund raising.

"I believe our earliest sponsor was the **Community Foundation of Eastern Connecticut**, run by **Alice Fitzpatrick**. Not only was she the manager of the organization, but she was a supporter of opera also and she looked out for us and helped us when she could, so that was a big step forward. And then other foundations got interested and we expanded our donor base by those foundations."

The **Connecticut River Advisory Board**, created in 2007, also boosted Salt Marsh Opera's outreach in the Connecticut River Valley. The Ivoryton Playhouse was added as a performance venue in 2007, which was the beginning of a concerted effort to bring the show to wider audiences.

Salt Marsh Opera enjoyed a string of successful productions between 2002 and 2008. It was beginning to evolve its personality, migrating from more of a social organization to a more professional organization. There were some growing pains, but as the years ticked on, those challenges led to understanding what Salt Marsh Opera could achieve while keeping within the financial and artistic parameters established at the very beginning.

Next month, we'll recap the years 2009-2015, when the suite of musical offerings expanded even more. We'll see how the continuing superpower of Salt Marsh Opera was visible in the performances, audience enthusiasm and dedicated community support.