

## *A Quarter Century of Song*

Salt Marsh Opera  
Oral History Series, 2000 – 2025

***“But Wait, There’s More!”***

### ***The Guild, Building Audiences, and Education Outreach, 2009-2013***

**By Marianne McNee**

**Salt Marsh Opera Board Member**

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Over the past few months, we have revisited the exciting launch of Salt Marsh Opera at the turn of the millennium, with robust patronage, the emergence of young, talented singers and the local community’s realization that the company’s shows were a mecca for first-rate entertainment. The company’s brain trust knew that with opera bona fides, other music programs and outreach efforts could expand. So, if you’ll allow us a little fun once again, the evolution of Salt Marsh Opera echoes the words of the late, great infomercial king, Billy Mays, proclaiming “but wait, there’s more!”

Like a sound military campaign, Salt Marsh Opera reinforced its front line, main stage operas by expanding its repertoire of offerings in the years leading up to 2009. The launch of ***Kids Love Opera!*** now called ***Kids Love Music!***, ***Music at the Lighthouse***, ***Opera in the Park***, soirées, dress rehearsal performances, lectures, and more, were all part of the expansion plan of Salt Marsh Opera. Many serve as touchstones of the company to this day.

#### **The Guild Steps Up**

The development of The Guild was a crucial piece of the company’s growth. The Guild was conceived as a vehicle to learn about opera via mix and mingle, educational events, and to serve Salt Marsh Opera with a corps of volunteers. Anyone who has planned a big event knows that the devil is in the details. Salt Marsh Opera’s Guild was a tight-knit, opera-loving group that wanted to educate the community about opera while also handling those persnickety, time-consuming details that the stage professionals should not be spending their time attending to.

**Linda Dohrmann**, former Salt Marsh Opera Board Member, recalls sitting in an early meeting, recognizing that not only was community education about opera warranted, but more volunteers were needed to support the shows, the singers, and all the myriad pieces of pulling together a tiptop performance. She was eager to help, and while having no experience in this arena, suggested that a guild be organized *toute suite*. Of course, the

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next thing she knew, she was put in charge and quickly recruited **Caroline Joss** to co-lead TheGuild.

“I realized that Salt Marsh Opera needed some way to reach out to the community about opera, recruit volunteers, raise money, and take care of certain assignments that could not be handled by the board or staff, but could be managed by community members. I asked **Caroline Joss** to join me as a Co-Chair, and together, we started to make a list of all that we could do. We didn’t have any grand plan but rather responded to the needs of the Company. People were generous with their time and energy. We were very active in the early days, and we all relished engaging with people and supporting the company. It was a labor of love,” Linda recalled.

From the very beginning, members of TheGuild helped performers with hair and makeup, held “meet the cast” parties, hosted singers and production staff, provided airport shuttles, stuffed and stamped mailers, ushered, painted sets, altered costumes, arranged informative lectures, posted flyers, and more, all the while serving as ambassadors for Salt Marsh Opera. “Their contributions made a huge difference. Guild members did a fantastic job making the Salt Marsh Opera experience feel close-knit, almost like a family atmosphere,” **Simon Holt** added.

Original members of TheGuild included **Carole Barnard, Linda Dohrmann, Michele Delmhorst, Sue Hart, Ruth Ann Heller, Jane Hildreth, Caroline Joss, Judy Martin, Beverly Phillips, Carla Stebbins**, and others. We apologize in advance if we’ve missed anyone!

TheGuild continues to enhance Salt Marsh Opera’s shows to this day and supports the community with special programs revolving around opera and performing. One recent event was an interview-style concert featuring singer **David Pittsinger**. The evening was led by the incomparable **James Kuslan**. On this evening and many others over the years, he peppers the singers with fun questions and musings, while the talk is interspersed with beautiful musical selections. TheGuild has evolved and still hosts many educational and entertaining evenings, carrying on its original mission: *to promote Salt Marsh Opera through education and volunteerism and serves as a call to action.*

Today, TheGuild Board President is **Tom Mullaney**. “TheGuild programs broaden our understanding of the performance experience and opera in general. Additionally, we continue to make things happen with the shows. TheGuild would love to welcome new members to this fun group! Hint, hint.” added Tom. Other members of the Board include Liz Hall, Michelle (Mickey) Matthews, Carla Stebbins, and Priscilla Bollard Wilder.

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### **Signature Salt Marsh Opera Events Come into View**

- ***Opera In the Park*** was first presented in July 2007 in Wilcox Park. The *Westerly Sun* headline read “**A Night of Met-Like Moments**,” adding that the night of grand singing would feature a full orchestra performing some of the most memorable selections from **Verdi, Puccini** and **Donizetti**. The free event showcased two new singers, **James J. Rollins**, baritone, and **Joel Andrew Weiss**, tenor. **Teresa Eickel**, soprano, **Hilary Nicholson**, mezzo-soprano, and Salt Marsh Opera regular **Diana McVey**, soprano, also contributed their mighty talents. The show is now presented annually in Old Saybrook and is a favorite in the Salt Marsh Opera season.
- ***Music at the Lighthouse*** made its auspicious debut on a stunning July evening in 2010. The expectant audience tucked in by the Stonington Lighthouse with beach chairs, blankets and picnic-style noshes, creating a casual al fresco vibe. The sun, combined with the azure sky, turned the Sound a slightly deeper shade of green-blue. Little waves rippled softly. Boats ambled by. Watch Hill fluttered in the distance. Suddenly, **Simon Holt** started playing the piano and beautiful, stirring voices cascaded outward over the rolling lawn. **Laura Shofner, Brian Cheney**, and **Ron Loyd** performed a selection of Broadway classics. It’s one of those moments you’d like to put in a bottle and pop open on a cold, dreary January day. If only!
- ***Kids Love Opera!*** held its inaugural event in 2012 when it performed *The Magic Flute* at elementary and middle schools in Connecticut and Rhode Island. Long-time Salt Marsh Opera veteran **John Delmhorst** explained how this program works.

“Presenting shows in school was a great way to expand what Salt Marsh Opera offered. We perform operas for around 3,000 – 5,000 school kids every year. We have a regular rotation of three operas, *Gianni Schicchi*, which we did this year (2025), *La Cenerentola*, which is *Cinderella*, and *The Magic Flute*. We do all these shows in English. They’re well received and are supported by foundations in the area, which is awesome.”

Now called ***Kids Love Music!***, this initiative continues to thrive and grow.

### **Main Stage Operas Continue with Enthusiastic Support**

Remarkably, with all these newer initiatives, Salt Marsh Opera continued to present the following fully staged shows, including a 20–30-piece orchestra, between 2009 and 2013:

- **2009 - *Die Fledermaus*** – performed in Westerly and at the new Katharine Hepburn Cultural Arts Center. Featured singers and their roles included:

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- Joel Weiss – Gabriel von Eisenstein
- Amy Schroeder – Rosalinda
- Sarah Callinan – Adele
- Laura Shofner – Ida
- Steven Sanders – Alfred
- Ron Loyd – Dr. Falke
- Benjamin LeClair – Frank
- Corey Trahan – Dr. Blind, Ivan, Frosch
- Andrea Arena – Prince Olofsky
- **2010 – *L'elisir d'Amore* – 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Show**
  - Brian Cheney – Nemorino
  - Laura Shofner – Adina
  - Christopher Burchett – Belcore
  - Ron Loyd – Dr. Dulcamara
  - Maria Alu – Giannetta
  - Hartley Horn – Del Giorno
  - Brian Barnard - Notary
- **2011 – *La Sonnambula* – George Kent Hall and The Kate**
  - Sarah Callinan – Amina
  - Timothy Birt – Elvino
  - Michael Reder – Count Rodolfo
  - Erika Person – Teresa
  - Christin Wismann – Lisa
  - Michael Scarcelle – Alessio
  - Roger Ryley – Notary
  - Brian Barnard & Carla Stebbins – Employees at the Inn
  - Libby Hall & Heather Jackson – Rodolfo's Valets
- **2012 – *Rigoletto* – great men's chorus**
  - Ron Loyd – Rigoletto
  - Sarah Callinan – Gilda
  - Brian Cheney – Duca
  - Michael Reder – Sparafucile
  - Maria Elena Armijo – Maddalena
  - Tynan Davis – Giovanni, Countess Ceprano, Page
  - Michael Scarcelle – Count Ceprano

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- Peter Scott Drackley – Matteo Borsa
- Michael Ventura – Count Monterone
- Juan José Ibarra – Marullo, Usher
- **Men's Chorus:** Ed Bosse, Patrick Dicesare, John Delmhorst, John Demlein, Len Dongweck, Aymeric Dupré la Tour, Dan Lama, Chris Lucier, Tom Mullaney, Ben Robinson, Arthur Turton.
- **2013 – *Don Pasquale***
  - Adelmo Guidarelli – Don Pasquale
  - Luke Scott – Dr. Malatesta
  - Megan Pachecano – Norina
  - Kirk Dougherty – Ernesto
  - Arthur Turton - Carlotta

### **A few fun nuggets about these operas:**

- **Brian Cheney:** “During 2010’s *Elixir of Love*, we performed on a thrust stage, so we were about two feet from the first row, the best seats. I’m pouring my heart out, playing this comedic and very sincere role of Nemerino. I was sweating and spitting as we singers really articulate our text, so it’s all falling out. And this poor little old lady, who probably paid really good money to attend, was sitting in the front row and I saw, out of the corner of my eye, this woman took her program and just held it up in front of her face because, I think, I was spraying her with all of my performance,” Brian recalled, laughing.
- **Sarah Callinan:** “One particular morning, very near showtime for *Rigoletto* (2012), we arrived for a rehearsal and the unpainted wood set was laying on the stage floor. With such a tight deadline, all of us singers banded together with Salt Marsh Opera staff and volunteers to finish the set painting and assembly. We had so much fun as we all worked together. Then, during the show, I had the pleasure of making a slow climb up freshly painted steps, singing one of the beautiful arias, and it was just so cool to have that moment. Of course, as the story goes, I was abducted forthwith but the whole sequence of events from set assembly to final performance made it all very special.”

**From the Salt Marsh Opera Update Desk:** *Recently, we were able to speak with Sarah, who was driving through the Dakotas, enjoying a victory tour over breast cancer! Everyone is thrilled to hear this news, Sarah! Brava!*

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- **Men's Chorus: *Rigoletto*** Men's Chorus member **Tom Mullaney** recalls: "I hadn't had any voice training and was still spinning up on opera when Simon recruited me to sing in the ***Rigoletto's*** Chorus of Courtiers. Unbelievably, I found myself involved in six big numbers in the show, which required more than simply singing in a community choral group. The story includes a posse of men who abduct Gilda, played by Sarah Callinan, and escape with her via the infamous staircase. I found myself wearing a 15th century costume, made from wool, and a funny hat. It was so much fun. It really was a life-changing experience, and I have sung with Salt Marsh Opera ever since."

Clearly, *Rigoletto* was a signature moment! By the time the aforementioned stairs were completed, much money had been spent - much more than Salt Marsh Opera had budgeted for one part of a set. While the show was terrific, the completion of the fabulous stairs left a mark on everyone. "Remember *Rigoletto*!" is the rallying cry when planning out sets these days.

All of these unique performances and events have demonstrated that Salt Marsh Opera is a multi-faceted arts organization. There is much more to the Company than opera, although staging grand operas remains central to its identity. Complementary programs have rounded out the suite of performances where many people enjoy a variety of music, from youngsters to more seasoned fans. It is an effective elixir. Even Billy Mays would be impressed.

Next month, we'll look back at 2014-2019 and the continued growth of the company.