

Take Me Out to the Opera

Video Director Frank Zamacona brings the San Francisco Opera to the Home of the Giants

The San Francisco Opera and the San Francisco Giants baseball team have teamed up to bring free opera performances to crowds of 23,000 in AT&T Park.

By Geri Jeter

Today, when most people think about opera (if they think about it at all), they envision an elegant night out with fancy clothes, jewels and a stuffy be-on-your-best-behavior attitude. That's how it is in the movies, and even sometimes in real life.

But that's a far cry from opera's beginnings, when these events were the rock concerts of the day. No politely sitting in their seats for 18th-century opera patrons — they wandered about the hall during performances, talking with friends and drinking and eating. And due to recent technical improvements in live simulcasts, opera companies throughout the world are bringing the art form back to its roots. While the opera house audience enjoys a fashionable, staid evening, other opera fans enjoy the same performance in civic plazas, art center courtyards and sports stadiums, often for free. Since 2006, San Francisco Opera has used these free events to bring world-class opera into the community. The first event was a simulcast of Puccini's *Madame Butterfly* in May 2006, which drew 8,000 people to San Francisco's Civic Center Plaza across the street from the opera house. In September 2007, San Francisco Opera and the San Francisco Giants baseball team partnered to bring Saint-Saëns' *Samson and Delilah* to a crowd of 15,000 at AT&T Park, followed by the June 2008 simulcast of Donizetti's popular *Lucia di Lammermoor*, which drew 23,000.

Like the opera audiences of old, fans strolled between the stands and the field, munching on hot dogs, garlic fries and nachos, and kept the beer concessions busy on the unseasonably warm evening. The sounds and smells of popping corn, along with other ballpark noise, only added to the festive mood.

The production was transmitted live from the War Memorial Opera House in 1920x1080 high definition (HD) via fiber and satellite to AT&T Park's 103-foot-wide Mitsubishi Electric Diamond Vision scoreboard. The multi-camera shoot was directed from the fifth floor of the

opera house using the company's new Koret-Taube Media Suite. The suite uses Sony cameras and Cambotics robotics, operated by robotic camera operators using remote-control technology. It is the first permanent HD broadcast-standard facility installed in an American opera house.

This technology also made it possible for San Francisco Opera and The Bigger Picture, a subsidiary of Access Integrated Technologies Inc. (AccessIT) to launch this past spring a digital cinema series of six operas at 121 movie theatres across the U.S. The performances are recorded live at the opera house in San Francisco, and each includes a 10-minute intermission and English subtitles.

Video Director Frank Zamacona coordinates it all. Having worked in television as a director/producer for the past 20 years, Zamacona has produced and directed over 100 entertainment specials and series distributed by PBS, The Discovery Channel, ABC and in syndication. His many awards and honors include several Emmys, a Clio, a Broadcast Media Award and two Cine Golden Eagle Awards. On the day he spoke with *PLSN*, Zamacona and his team were setting up for a live simulcast of *Lucia di Lammermoor*, which would attract a crowd of 23,000 to the park.

PLSN: Did you have any background in video or film lighting that might have helped you prepare for this project?

Frank Zamacona: As a kid, I played drums in a band. The sense of timing I developed while drumming is crucial to my work today. The raw timing from this affects everything else I have done, including my stints as stage manager and AD for sitcoms, ballet and opera.

I love music and love entertainment. When I went to San Francisco State, I majored in film and TV production — and I loved it. After college, I taught television production at Reardon High School in San Francisco, where the entire school was wired for TV. We used the broadcast technology for stage plays, using TV cameras and monitors, and we covered sports and

other public school events.

From this, I produced a show for KQED, the local PBS station, called *Comedy Tonight*. The program showcased new comedy talent — many well-known comics, including Whoopi Goldberg, Ellen DeGeneres and Will Durst, had their television debuts on this show.

In the early 1990s, I began directing for ABC, including shows featuring Tina Turner, K. D. Lang and RuPaul. I also did a Dave Matthews concert for Link TV and am very proud of being on the producing team for two platinum-selling Grateful Dead DVDs.

Growing up, I never knew anything about opera, though. Then the San Francisco Opera called; I saw *Madame Butterfly*, and I was hooked.

There's a lot of discussion about how HD is changing the production realm. Has it altered your approach to lighting at all?

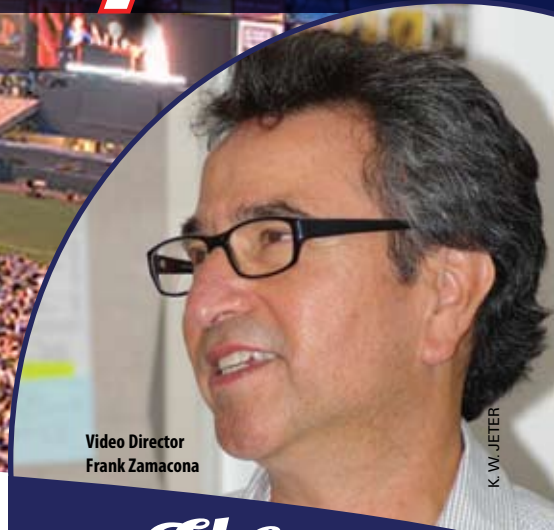
All the alterations in sets, costumes, wigs and makeup came about as fine details were exposed in the HD process — chips and tears in props, sets and costumes are all revealed so there was a need for extra vigilance in repairs and maintenance. For this, we collaborated very closely with the various backstage departments. Every department is affected because the HD is so revealing.

Do you have to use different sources or techniques to soften the subject?

We don't do anything special with the video technology to "soften" the images; we do it all through the lighting.

Many times colors come out very differently on video than in real life. Did you have to alter your color palette at all?

The LD in *The Rake's Progress* had used sodium stage lights. Because they lean so strongly toward the yellow, we had to shade the color toward the red to accommodate the video projection. Now, in the design phase, we ask LDs to avoid the sodium lights. It's a collaborative process.



Video Director Frank Zamacona

K. W. JETER

At The Opera House

OperaVision

OperaVision allows audience members seated in balcony seats an improved view of the stage through close-up and mid-range ensemble shots in high-definition video on two 5-foot 6-inch by 9-foot 6-inch retractable screens hung from the ceiling. OperaVision is also available on high-definition monitors in lounge areas in the lower lobby and box-level lounges of the Opera House.

Koret-Taube Media Suite

GEAR

- 9 Fujinon HD lenses
- 3 HA25X11.5 Berd lightweight ENG-Style telephoto HD lenses with servo zoom and focus
- 4 HS18X5 Berd standard focal length, HD 1/2-inch SCCAM HD ENG/EFP with Digi Power servo and 2X extender
- 1 HA25X16.5 Berd lightweight super telephoto HD ENG-Style lens with servo zoom and focus
- 1 HA42X13.5 Berd super telephoto ENG-Style lens (*Lenses are mounted on Sony HDC 1500L and Sony HDC X-310 cameras.*)

At AT&T Park

GEAR

- Scoreboard:** Mitsubishi Electric Diamond Vision AVL-OD10
- Pixel-Pitch:** 20mm physical pixel-pitch (10mm virtual)
- Dimensions:** 103' wide x 31'6" high
- Aspect Ratio:** 32x9 for main viewing area with a 4' high strip below (Note: Although the Diamond Vision Screen measures 32x9, the opera uses only the 29x9 template; the Giants mostly use the 29x9 format also.)
- Dots/Lighting Units:** 3,010,560 dots spread across 2,940 distinct lighting units
- Weight:** 56,420 pounds
- Peak Power Consumption:** 271 kW
- Standard Configuration:** 720p HD image with 832x1480 dot resolution above line score (128 dots high) flanked by AT&T branding.



Zamacona and crew pay close attention to the effect the lighting has on shades of color. Each opera is approached differently.

K. W. JETER

COURTESY OF SAN FRANCISCO OPERA



Fans stroll between the stands and the field, munching on hot dogs, garlic fries and nachos. They also keep the beer concessions busy.

toward getting a rich saturation, like that in movies. For example, we went for a warm tone for *Madame Butterfly's* "Humming Chorus" dream sequence — we blew out the whites and de-saturated the color.

The bottom line is that each opera is approached differently, depending on the music and textures of the set and lighting.

You have said that you had to make only small modifications to the lighting to accommodate the video — mostly bringing

up the lighting levels in some instances. Since video cameras today are much more sensitive, why did you feel the need to increase the illuminance? What did you see in the playback that helped you make that decision?

I had to ask for more base light on the shadows to define the characters. Plus, I needed to create a background. There is very little in *Lucia* — the design was too dark.

Lucia is always in white, like a giant light bulb; other characters, like Raimondo, are in dark costumes. I needed more definition to keep these other characters from looking like floating heads.

For other operas, certain set pieces cause problems. In *La Rondine*, the large white piano

was very hot, so we brought that down to balance out the scene. Keep in mind that there still has to be a certain amount of footcandles to see what's going on.

Additionally, these shows are seen live as well. So the lighting has to be a hybrid of live and video lighting.

Did you bring in a video lighting director to work with the company lighting director?

We don't have an actual video LD, although we've had some LDs who have done some television. Most LDs who light for the stage do not have HD or film lighting experience so, at San Francisco Opera, we rely on our shader to work with the in-house LD.

Have you had a chance to view the final results on the Diamond Vision LED screen?

Yes, we have. What we found was that the Giants organization likes the contrast ratio on the green side. For the opera, we warmed it up going toward the red color spectrum and brought up the contrast from 80 percent to 100 percent. This helped bring out the colors on the set and for the singers' skin tones.

Now that you have some simulcasts under your belt, what have you learned from the experience?

Every opera is different. The *Samson and Delilah* was like one of those lush 1950s Cinemascope biblical epics. The *Lucia* is more minimal and harder to show on the wide screen. Basically, I had to learn to not be afraid of the large screen.

I did discover that in the smaller 16x9 screen — like those in most theatres with digital projectors and for our digital cinema series — you can see the Opera House stage deck, which is cut off in the 29x9 template of the Diamond Vision Scoreboard. Also, in 29x9, the moon (a major "set piece" in *Lucia*) is cut off. It was difficult to get a sufficient amount of the moon in the shot and still show the rest of the stage.

I had to shoot a lot up-angle with cameras in the pit. And the staging was adjusted to be slightly off-center. I also go in tight to the artist and terrain. To try and lose the deck, I use a camera that is positioned above the orchestra level, just below the boxes.

Also, because it is only used for the ballpark scoreboard, the 29x9 template is a one-time-only deal. When we shoot for our cinema releases, we shoot for a 16x9 ratio, as that is the standard in most movie theatres that have digital projectors.

Did anything surprise you during the process that you weren't expecting?

I didn't count on the fact that, unlike television actors, opera singers do not strictly adhere to the blocking. Every night they move a bit differently. Sometimes, entire groups will be on one side one night and the next night on the other side.

But this is opera, so it's all about the music. We pretty much let them do what they want. Like hockey players, opera singers go all out. Whatever it takes for them to get the note out — that's what they do.

Do you have a "wish list" for future projects?

At some point, I would love to do *Don Giovanni* in black and white, but it would have to be its own show — one that doesn't need to take a live audience into consideration. It would look great. I would soften it a bit and move it toward sepia, then blow out the whites and make the look softer and more dream-like.

In the future, we are looking forward to doing the productions in 3-D. The technology is just about there to do the job we want. **PLSN**

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