

# The History of Michigan Opera Theatre

## An Overview of Highlights and Historical Mileposts

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**1963** For David DiChiera this would be a pivotal year both personally and professionally. It was the year that the young Oakland University Assistant Professor, fresh out of UCLA, would meet Karen VanderKloot, who he has called his most faithful friend, critic and counselor. In 1996 he stated, "Her contribution to shaping the first decade of activities at the Music Hall and her impact on having MOT touch the lives of thousands of children's and adults throughout the state is incalculable." 1963 was also the year that DiChiera was asked to take over the project known as Overture to Opera, which was the precursor to Michigan Opera Theatre. Overture to Opera (OTO) was the educational program of the Detroit Grand Opera Association (DGOA) who sponsored the annual visits of the Metropolitan Opera (Met) to Detroit each spring. In its eleven seasons, OTO laid the groundwork, secured the financial support and gained the respectability which allowed for the founding of what was to become Michigan Opera Theatre. Opera News reported that, "Detroit could be a great operatic center if local effort had time to take root and to grow to a high level."

**1964** Dr. DiChiera took the reigns of OTO and immediately began building an opera company. He looked at it as an opportunity, a chance to build something that would last. One of the primary reasons he had come to Oakland University was because he had a sense that the greater Detroit area was indeed fertile ground. In a 1982 article in the Ann Arbor News he reflected: "Detroit was the fifth largest city in the nation and the only major city without a resident opera company. I couldn't accept that fact, I knew the consistency for it was here". He was committed to the idea that the future of opera in America was in the continued growth of regional opera, that it would take a grass roots community wide effort and that it would require a large measure of patience as well as a long range perspective.

**1965** The DGOA thought of the OTO program as its educational arm, a promotional vehicle from the annual Met Tour visit. DiChiera, on the other hand, saw it as an opportunity to develop something local that belonged to the city. His first two seasons with OTO were, as planned, programs of scenes from the operas to be performed by the Met Tour in its annual Detroit season. Typically DiChiera would introduce the opera to the audiences and fill them in on relevant opera and music history. He greatly expanded the number of performances and assembled what can be considered stellar local casts and production teams. Looking back now one is struck by the assemblage of names during the OTO years. It is a veritable Who's Who of Detroit area talent.

**1966** The 1966 OTO season was the first break from the formula in that it was no longer to be just scenes from the Met Tour program. OTO was evolving as an introduction to opera in general with no relationship to the Met visit. In all, there were nineteen performances, including seven specifically designed matinees for students, in a season that began on February 5 at the Rackham Auditorium and concluded on April 2 at Oak Park High School. This year's program marked the exciting return of Barbara Gibson to the opera stage after an absence of eight years. She was featured in the "Mad Scene" from *Lucia di Lammermoor*. Miss Gibson had made her professional debut on the Bell Telephone Hour and had appeared many times in television and radio with Toscanini. Gibson became Mrs. Sam B. Williams and was a key supporter, serving on the MOT Board for many years.

**1967** DiChiera expanded the original format of Overture to Opera (OTO) and included the company's first complete work, the Michigan premiere of Cherubini's one act opera *The Portuguese Inn*. The Detroit Free Press reported that "there is a place in Detroit for an operatic stock company." The season had a total of twenty-one performances at sixteen different locations. DiChiera was in the process of solidifying two of the company's key philosophies, the first being that opera should be vital theatre. During the OTO years the productions were sung in English, which gave the audiences a real contact with the drama and a clearer insight into the relationship between words and music. The second philosophy was to nurture local talent and give the artists a chance to develop their skills right here at home. The critical response was overwhelmingly positive.

**1968** The progress and growth continued in this OTO season which featured Gian Carlo Menotti's *The Medium*, a tragedy, along with a revival of the comic one-act opera *The Portuguese Inn*. The highlights of the season were two performances where the world famous Muriel Greenspon sang the lead role in *The Medium*. These were historical mileposts in that they were OTO's first performances with an orchestra, on March 26 and 27, 1968. The orchestra was made up of members of the DSO and was conducted by longtime OTO colleague William C. Byrd. Overall, there were six evening performances and fifteen student matinees that were seen by over fifteen thousand students.

**1969** Adventurous programming marked the 1969 season which featured two short complete works, both Michigan premieres: Kurt Weill's grimly striking *Der Jasager* (The Choice) and the wonderfully comic *Il Campanello* (The Night Bell) by Donizetti. The season was enhanced by the appearance of the internationally recognized operatic star Italo Tajo, as the frustrated bridegroom in *Il Campanello*. The Detroit Free press sounded what had become a familiar theme: "The real moral of the evening, however, is what it has been for several years. If a night of such operatic professionalism can be achieved by local talent in Detroit, why can't there be a completely successful opera company here?"

**1970** The next step for OTO was the crowning achievement of the first decade. For the 1970 season, OTO produced its first full-length opera, Rossini's comic masterpiece *The Barber of Seville*, starring then 19 year old Detroit Maria Ewing in her professional debut. Italo Tajo, the star of the Met and La Scala was back, this time as stage director and the critical response was completely

positive. The Detroit News stated.” “Musically, it was a buoyant, graceful, attractive production with fresh, young attractive voices, neatly dovetailed ensemble work and close coordination between the pit and stage”. Overture to Opera was becoming a full-fledged opera company, one in search of a home.

**1971** Overture to Opera ended its ten nomadic years with its first of fifteen seasons in the Music Hall. That first season featured two Michigan premieres: *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* and Puccini's *La Rondine*. The opera company as we know it today had its inception in the fall of 1971 with the company's move into the Music Hall Theatre. Overture to Opera had laid the groundwork, a committee that would become MOT's first Board of Trustees had been formed and with the move into the Music Hall there was now a home base from which to work. In addition, as a major contribution to the quality of life in southeast Michigan, let history show that the company's move into the Music Hall, saving it from the wrecking ball, was the spark that ignited the rebirth of Detroit's now magnificent theatre and entertainment district.

**1972** DiChiera's company, still formally known as the Detroit Grand Opera Association's Overture to Opera Company was officially accepted as a member of OPERA America, the national association of professional opera companies. DiChiera's dedicated involvement in OPERA America over the years has put Michigan Opera Theatre in the mainstream of the opera world. During his two terms as President in the 1980's the organization more than doubled in size. DiChiera was in the middle of the action as the organization galvanized the philosophies and practices that have defined its existence. His association with OPERA America over the years clearly shows David DiChiera as a major presence and key leader in the regional opera company movement in the United States in the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

**1973** In March the company officially changed its name to Michigan Opera Theatre (MOT). The time had come for the company to formally establish its own identity and begin the process of separating from the Detroit Grand Opera Association. Michigan Opera Theatre, the name was a natural. It evolved out of DiChiera's philosophies of serving the entire state and of presenting a full range of opera and music theatre that was not just a musical experience but a vital theatre experience as well. In addition, in May, DiChiera was selected as the first Executive Director of the Music Hall Center for the Performing Arts. As such he would be wearing two hats, general director of the Michigan Opera Theatre and executive director of the Music Hall Center for the Performing Arts.

**1974** MOT marked its third season of bringing a major production to Kalamazoo and Flint. These performances, along with MOT's expanding Opera in Residence Program, which visited nine different communities, showed MOT expanding its base, building its audience and tending to its mission to serve as the operatic resource for the entire state. This is also the year of MOT's first venture into the realm of light opera at the Music Hall with Lehar's *The Merry Widow* and its most mammoth production to date, Mussorgsky's masterpiece *Boris Godunov* in its seldom heard original version, starring world famous bass Jerome Hines in the title role. The incredible and varied programming at the Music Hall Center also

continued and was filling a major void in the cultural life of the Detroit metropolitan area and beyond.

**1975** The company's continuing outstate tour of communities, from Livonia to Traverse City, established MOT as one of Michigan's major cultural resources. Thousands of Michigan residents had the opportunity to enjoy opera as the touring company presented workshops, seminars, and productions in classrooms, gymnasiums and theatres throughout the state. At the Music Hall the mainstage season was highlighted by MOT's first production of Donizetti's *The Elixir of Love* as well as MOT's first production of Gershwin's beloved *Porgy and Bess*, directed by Ella Gerber, known the world over for her association with the powerful folk opera. The production featured a 24 year old Leona Mitchell, as Bess, in the midst of a meteoric rise to international stardom.

**1976** "Nothing testifies to the growing up of a regional opera company quite like a world premiere," proclaimed Time Magazine in the fall of 1976. It was called a "rite of maturation" and MOT's first world premiere, American composer Thomas Pasatieri's *Washington Square*, brought forth tremendous national recognition and incredible press and media coverage. The Christian Science Monitor stated in reference to Dr. DiChiera; "He has overcome Detroit's inferiority complex about the arts by mounting events of national interest." The production, starring Catherine Malfitano, was clearly one of the most important historical mileposts in the company's formative years. The diverse programming continued at the Music Hall Center and the foremost entertainment journal Variety stated, "The flourishing of Michigan Opera Theatre and Music Hall Center for the Performing Arts are due to the efforts of a great many interested people but no one doubts that the prime mover in what is happening in Detroit is 39-year old David DiChiera."

**1977** David DiChiera's emergence into national prominence as one of the country's foremost creative producers and operatic impresarios was an exciting success story in the American contemporary cultural scene and was highlighted by his election as Vice President of OPERA America, Inc. His contribution to Detroit and Michigan were cited in a resolution of the state Senate which hailed him as "a man of creative talent, a man of artistic conviction, and a man of impeccable aesthetic taste." Mainstage programming at the Music Hall included *Naughty Marietta*, *The Magic Flute* and *Carmen*. Also, MOT continued to make good on its pledge to feature a full range of music theatre works with its production of the American composer Marc Blitzstein's rarely heard *Regina*.

**1978** Michigan Opera Theatre's Community Programs Department was founded by nationally prominent composer and arts educator Karen VanderKloot DiChiera. The department's myriad activities included the highly successful Opera in Residence program and all of the company's touring and educational/outreach activities. This was the year of another truly momentous development as 1978 also marked the debut of the MOT Orchestra. Longtime colleague and friend Mark Flint was on the podium to conduct the orchestra's first two productions, Bizet's *The Pearl Fishers* and the company's first mainstage production of an American musical, Kern and Hammerstein's *Show Boat*.

Another highlight was a production of Gounod's *Faust* featuring Leona Mitchell that the Detroit Free Press called "Heavenly" and the Eccentric called "Brilliant".

**1978 Additional Note** June 1978 was the inaugural season for a major summer festival in Midland, sponsored by the Dow Foundation. Matrix: Midland, as it was called, featured a major contribution from MOT which included a stunning, major revival of Aaron Copland's wonderful American opera *The Tender Land*, with the composer on the podium, along with outdoor performances of *Madame Butterfly* and the world premiere of *Singers*, a new work by Charles Stouse commissioned by MOT for this festival.

**1979** The year started off with *La Traviata* starring Catherine Malfitano and a startling double bill of *I Pagliacci* and the rarely seen American opera, *The Emperor Jones*, featuring the notable baritone Andrew Smith in the title role and legendary Clifford Fears as choreographer and in the role of Congo Witch Doctor. In the fall MOT co-sponsored a pre-Broadway tryout of a major revival of *The Most Happy Fella* starring Metropolitan Opera bass-baritone Giorgio Tozzi. When it hit Broadway, it was extremely important exposure for MOT in the center of the performing arts world, New York City. Also on tap were *La Boheme* and an ambitious staging of Tchaikovsky's *Joan of Arc* starring Mignon Dunn as Joan. Other noteworthy developments included David DiChiera being elected President of OPERA America, a position he would hold for four years, and being named a "Michiganian of the Year" by the Detroit News.

**1980** MOT continued to address the goals of eclectic programming and casting which features a unique blend of established performers and up and coming new talent. Productions included *Die Fledermaus*, Carlisle Floyd's powerful American opera *Of Mice and Men* and MOT's first stagings of *Don Giovanni* and *Rigoletto*. Also on tap was a full staging of Bizet's *The Pearl Fishers* in Midland. Stage Directors included Italo Tajo, Rhonda Levine and Carlisle Floyd. Conductors included Mark Flint, John DeMain and W. Anthony Waters. Also, Dr. DiChiera was named Artistic Director of Dayton Opera, a post he would hold for ten years in conjunction with his duties at MOT.

**1981** MOT expanded its season to five productions in the Music Hall and began to offer some performances in the original language. The season included *Tosca* featuring Nancy Shade, *Carmen* featuring Victoria Vergara and the American premiere of Armen Tigranian's *Anoush*. The production of this Armenian opera launched an exciting new exploration of the opera repertoire beyond the Italian, French and German mainstreams. The Detroit area Armenian community stepped up with an outstanding show of support for this unique cultural gem. 1981 also featured Beethoven's *Fidelio* in a unprecedented collaboration with Antal Dorati and the Detroit Symphony Orchestra.

**1982** MOT was evolving as one of America's important cultural forces, reaching an audience of over 100,000 annually. The goal of presenting a broad range of repertory was achieved with a wonderfully diverse slate which included *Porgy and Bess* featuring Wilhelmenia Fernandez and Gilbert & Sullivan's *The Mikado* featuring MOT favorite Mary Callaghan Lynch. Continuing the exploration of unique nationalistic operas MOT presented the American premiere of the Polish

opera *The Haunted Castle* by Stanislaw Moniuszko which created an outpouring of support from the area's Polish community. Also in 1982 are productions of Donizetti's *Lucia Di Lammermoor* and the Detroit premiere of the legendary but rarely seen Scott Joplin opera, *Treemonisha* which featured Carmen Balthrop in the title role.

**1983** MOT completed its long range plan and established its mission to be one of the outstanding opera companies in the United States serving as a major cultural resource. To achieve this five goals were established, the first was to present the broadest possible range of music theatre repertoire with the highest artistic standards. The second goal was to assure that MOT made its work accessible to all segments of the population in a variety of ways. Goal three was to provide opportunities for emerging talent, both local and national. Goal four was a commitment to American works and the fifth goal was to develop broad based financial stability. On the mainstage were productions of *The Marriage of Figaro*, *The Sound of Music*, *La Traviata*, a production of *Faust* featuring Wilhelmena Fernandez and Vinson Cole, and *A Little Night Music* starring Cleo Laine and Ron Raines.

**1984** After extensive strategic planning, and in anticipation of the imminent demise of the Metropolitan Opera Tour, Michigan Opera Theatre announced its decision to broaden the scope of the company by producing large-scale grand opera at the Masonic Temple Theatre. To begin this era, in the spring of 1984, DiChiera put together a stunning production of *Anna Bolena*, featuring a cast of international stars including Dame Joan Sutherland and Ben Heppner, conducted by Maestro Richard Bonyngue. This production featured the Midwest premiere of English surtitles. The fall season included Lehar's *The Merry Widow* starring Cleo Lane and Ron Raines and *The Magic Flute* starring Carman Balthrop and the wonderful Jerome Hines as Sarastro. MOT's final production at the Music Hall was the unique music theatre piece *Sweeney Todd*. It was adventurous programming at its finest as Dr. DiChiera brought yet another major American work for its Detroit premiere. *Sweeney Todd* closed on December 1, 1984 and when the final curtain came down, the Music Hall years ended in a blaze of glory on the wings of a critically acclaimed aesthetic tour de force. It was a fitting way to end an era.

**1985** The Music Hall era came to a close with MOT's move to the Masonic Temple Theatre for its spring season and to the Fisher Theatre for its fall season. The move was made in order to allow the company to be in theatres with larger auditoriums, especially since the projected increased ticket revenue was critical to MOT's growth. The administrative offices also moved to the New Center Area. The decision to leave the Music Hall was a difficult one, but ultimately it was a natural evolution considering the momentous growth and impressive goals laid out for the company by DiChiera and the Board of Directors. The eclectic programming continued with a stunning *Aida* featuring the world renowned James McCracken, with Leona Mitchell in the title role. Also on tap were a double-bill of the one act operas *Gianni Schicchi* and *I Pagliacci*, as well as the seldom seen romantic comedy *Martha*. The year ended with an extremely popular production of Bernstein's *West Side Story*.

**1985 Additional Note** Dr. DiChiera was named General Director of Opera Pacific in California's Orange County. Now, as general director of MOT and Opera Pacific and artistic director of Dayton Opera he could essentially collaborate with himself, sharing the combined artistic resources and leveraging the financial resources of all three institutions for considerable savings and higher quality productions. DiChiera was indeed on the vanguard of the activity in the regional opera company movement in the last quarter of the twentieth century.

**1986** MOT established itself as the nation's tenth largest opera producing organization, supported by a record budget of \$4.7 million, and presented an expanded repertory of six full scale opera/musical theatre works with 51 public performances. The year began with a smashing production of *Turandot*, which featured world-class artists Ghena Dimitrova and Martina Arroyo in the title role. The season continued with Offenbach's *Orpheus in the Underworld* with sets and costumes designed by the celebrated Gerald Scarfe, Puccini's *Madama Butterfly*, and the beloved American musical *My Fair Lady*.

**1987** MOT continued to present the very best in operatic and musical theatre repertory in their mainstage productions at the Masonic Temple and the Fisher Theatre and was supported by an ever-growing patron base. In addition, MOT lead by Karen DiChiera, continued to enhance its current 15-week state touring outreach program and its ongoing Community Programs activities. Mainstage productions included *The Barber of Seville* featuring noted Met baritone Pablo Elvira in the title role, *Tosca*, *Porgy and Bess*, Verdi's *Falstaff*, as well as two major musical theatre works, *The Man of La Mancha* and *Kismet*. The budget topped the \$5 million mark.

**1988** Without doubt the most eagerly anticipated musical event of the year was MOT's presentation of legendary tenor Luciano Pavarotti in his Detroit concert debut at Joe Louis Arena. Over sixteen thousand area residents as well as over four thousand guests were witness to this magnificent finale to MOT's spring season. Mainstage activity included *Il Trovatore* starring Leona Mitchell, *Die Fledermaus* featuring Jo Anne Worley as Prince Orlofsky, *La Boheme* featuring Stephanie Friede and Marianna Christos, Stephen Sondheim's *Follies* starring Nancy Dussault, Edie Adams, Juliet Prose and MOT favorite Ron Raines, along with *The Pirates of Penzance* starring Gary Sandy and MOT stalwart Mary Callaghan Lynch. The company was proud to also feature the long awaited return of one of the great American operatic dramas, Douglas Moore's *The Ballad of Baby Doe*.

**1989** With the dedicated efforts of leaders from MOT's Board of Directors and Trustees, the dream of owning its performing facility began the transformation to reality with the purchase of the first parcel in the Grand Circus Theatre block. The Grand Circus Theatre, formerly the Capitol Theatre, was selected as the vitally necessary future home of Michigan Opera Theatre. For this year MOT commissioned a new production of *Norma* from English artist John Pascoe for Dame Joan Sutherland's final performance in the title role. This production garnered the company its first NPR broadcast. The year also featured *The Marriage of Figaro*, *Carmen*, *Les Miserables* and *Hansel and Gretel* during the

holiday season. The year also included MOT presenting two outstanding British treasures, the renowned Academy of Ancient Music under the direction of Sir Christopher Hogwood, performing Handel's *Orlando*, a rich forerunner of the grand opera form, rarely heard in the United States.

**1990** The Opera House Capital Campaign ran a successful program to name the private grand tier boxes which enabled the company to acquire the remaining parcels of the Grand Circus Theatre block, giving terrific momentum to the Opera House project. Also during this year MOT added classical ballet to its programming with a production of *Swan Lake* starring one of the world's greatest interpreters of the role, Cynthia Gregory. Mainstage programming included a new production of *Don Giovanni* designed and directed by John Pascoe and conducted by Klaus Donath, *Rigoletto* and *La Traviata*, both conducted by longtime MOT friend Mark D. Flint, *Romeo and Juliet* starring Ruth Ann Swenson and the American musical classic, *Show Boat*, with Ron Raines as Ravenal and Eddie Bracken as Cap'n Andy.

**1991** In the fall of 1991 during a press conference in the Opera House prior to his return concert engagement in Detroit, legendary opera star Luciano Pavarotti made the startling promise to return to help open the Opera House, bringing the project to the attention of the public at large and providing a tremendous boost to the Opera House Campaign. As a non-profit company MOT derives its annual income from a variety of sources, including ticket income of course, but also through the generosity of private donors, corporations, foundations, state and local agencies and special fund-raising events like the Pavarotti encore performance. It created a very enthusiastic, palpable buzz in the community for the Opera House project. Mainstage programming included *The Mikado*, Bernstein's *Candide*, *The Magic Flute*, *Madame Butterfly* and MOT's first-ever Richard Strauss opera, *Ariadne auf Naxos*, featuring international opera star Alessandra Marc.

**1992** Michigan Opera Theatre, with a budget \$5.4 million, had quickly ascended the ranks of its more than 100 peer companies to assume the prestigious position as one of the top ten opera companies in the United States. MOT was cited by the Ford Foundation as one of the most fiscally responsible arts organizations in the county. The company's day to day operations were directed by a professional staff of 29 and were governed by a 35 member Board of Directors with further guidance by the 264 member Board of Trustees. Along with *Lucia di Lammermoor*, *Side by Side by Sondheim*, *The Music Man* and a sumptuous *Sampson and Deliah*, the highlight of the mainstage season was the American Midwest premiere of the Polish opera *King Roger* by Karol Szymanowski. The Polish community responded with an international outpouring of support.

**1993** Kim Johnson, former executive director of the Music Hall Center for the Performing Arts, was named Managing Director of the Detroit Opera House, and charged with overseeing the restoration and renovation of the building. In spring 1993, the wrecking ball came down on the Roberts Fur Building on Grand Circus Theatre block, making way for the enormous task of building a new 75,000 square foot stage house. With the \$1.25 million Kresge Challenge grant, the

acquisition of the last of the eight parcels in the Grand Circus Theatre block and the 1994 Opera Ball inside the unrestored auditorium before a crowd of many who had never seen the interior, the project gained incredible momentum. Construction began in earnest on the stage house during the summer. Opera presentations included *La Boheme*, *The Barber of Seville*, *The Merry Widow* and a powerful *Aida* starring Leona Mitchell.

**1994** Michigan Opera Theatre expanded its offerings in a 23rd season that featured opera, operetta and ballet repertory featuring some of the world's renowned artists and emerging talent. Prokofiev's ballet *Cinderella* brought together a talented corps of dancers from throughout the country, alongside talented Detroit dancers and international guest artists. Operas included *Faust*, *Turandot* starring Ealynn Voss, *Madame Butterfly* starring Karen Norate and one of the worlds most sought after coloratura sopranos, Tracy Dahl, illuminating *The Daughter of the Regiment*.

**1995** The Masonic Temple/Fisher Theatre Years came to an end with a powerful spring season that included Mozart's timeless *Don Giovanni* featuring Metropolitan Opera stars Jeffrey Wells and Martile Rowland in an opulent production by English theatre artist John Pasco. *Swan Lake*, arguably the most popular ballet of all time, was also on the bill choreographed by Detroit's own Jacob Lascu, and the era came to a close with Puccini's beloved *Tosca* starring famed Russian soprano Maria Gulegina in the title role. Tremendous enthusiasm was building for the opening of the Detroit Opera House slated for the spring of 1996. It would be the fulfillment of this company's long-term goal to control its own performance facility, one which would be comparable in function, size and aesthetics with the finest opera houses around the world.

**1996** The Inaugural Gala at the Detroit Opera House, on April 21, 1996, featuring Luciano Pavarotti making good on his celebrated promise, is without question the single most significant milestone in the entire history of Michigan Opera Theatre. The dream became a reality as Dame Joan Sutherland declared the Opera House "open and ready for music". This magnificent theatre is not just a world-class home for the opera company, it also instantly became a cornerstone in the cultural life of the city of Detroit. The Mayor, the Governor and the President of the United States all joined the tremendous international outpouring of support for this monumental achievement. Celebrating the company's Silver Anniversary while opening the beautiful new Opera House was both a stunning artistic achievement and a civic contribution of the highest order. Dear friend and colleague, Lofti Mansouri, then General Director of the San Francisco Opera wrote to Dr. DiChiera: "You have been a fantastic champion for opera in North America, David, with the commitment, dedication and talent to make the difference. Generations of opera audiences will reap the rewards of your hard work, and that is something to cherish." The incredible spring season also included, as the first opera on the Opera House stage, a wonderful *La Boheme* starring Marcello Giordani, followed by Prokofiev's ballet *Romeo & Juliet*, Verdi's *La Traviata* and a spectacular *Salome* featuring Maria Ewing in the title role. The 1996 Fall season, aptly named "Building on a Dream" included the beloved *Carmen* featuring MOT favorite Irina Mishura, a touring production of *West Side Story* and a new program, launched by Karen DiChiera, called

“Learning at the Opera House” which immediately began winning national awards for its scope and content.

**1997** MOT inaugurated its first Season of Dance at the Detroit Opera House with two special presentations by America’s premiere ballet company, the American Ballet Theatre. Also on tap were a visit from the Cleveland San Jose Ballet and a third, special program titled “An Extraordinary Evening of Dance”. In addition, there were Broadway touring productions of *A Chorus Line* and *Damn Yankees* featuring Jerry Lewis. 1997 also featured *Aida*, *Rigoletto*, *The Marriage of Figaro*, MOT’s first Wagner opera *The Flying Dutchman* and *The Magic Flute* with set and costume design by Maurice Sendak. World-class Maestros Steven Mercurio, Klaus Donath and John Mauceri were featured on the podium leading the way. MOT was firmly ensconced in its new home and spectacular programming was the order of the day.

**1998** The spring season opened with MOT’s first ever staging of Massenet’s moving and sensual *Manon* featuring Marcello Giordani and Ruth Ann Swenson, followed by Donizetti’s *The Elixir of Love* and a magnificent production of *Porgy & Bess* starring Gordon Hawkins and Marquita Lister. It has always been a great source of pride that MOT was among the very first opera companies to present *Porgy & Bess*. Another source of great pride is that throughout its history MOT has been a leader in seeking out and introducing some of the world’s great African American operatic talent. Kathleen Battle, Cleo Lane, Leona Mitchell, Wilhelmina Fernandez, Gregg Baker and Vinson Cole are but a few of the featured artists and are a reflection of MOT’s exemplary history of multi-cultural casting. Also on tap this year were productions of *Turandot*, starring Richard Margeson and Alessandra Marc and *Lucia di Lammermoor* starring Sumi Jo, Fernando De La Mora and Evgenji Dmitriev, along with a *Roméo et Juliette* presented by Le Ballet de Monte Carlo, which included an appearance by the president of the company, H.S.H. Princess Caroline of Monaco.

**1999** Spectacular programming continued with American Ballet Theatre’s third visit to their “Midwest Home” featuring a new production of *Don Quixote*, and a touring production of Andrew Lloyd Webber’s *Sunset Boulevard* starring Petula Clark. The spring dance season included a visit from The Paul Taylor Dance Company and the spring opera season featured *Madame Butterfly*, MOT’s first production of Tchaikovsky’s *Eugene Onegin* and a magnificent *Samson and Delilah* starting MOT favorite Irina Mishra. In July MOT presented The Three Tenors, at Detroit’s Historic Tiger Stadium, in the world renowned trio’s only North American appearance that year. The Three Tenors concert launched MOT’s New Century Fund and provided the opportunity to raise the first \$14 million. Also, super star tenor Andrea Bocelli made his North American opera debut in the Detroit Opera House in *Werther*, the first American production to be webcast.

**2000** MOT started the new century with stunning back to back visits from the legendary Stuttgart Ballet making its Detroit debut and American Ballet Theatre returning to its Midwest home with a new production of *Swan Lake*. The exciting spring opera season included presenting two incredible operas never seen on MOT’s stage, *Der Rosenkavalier* and *Peter Grimes*, as well as a powerful and

moving *Tosca* with Sylvie Valayre and Amy Johnson in the title role and MOT favorites Marcello Giordani and Ian DeNolfo alternating in the role of Cavaradossi. Wonderful programming continued and the fall featured a return visit from Les Ballets De Monte-Carlo performing Prokofiev's *Cinderella* as well as MOT productions of *Così fan tutte* and *La Bohème*. The fall programming also included the national tour production of *Rent* giving Detroit audiences a rare opportunity to experience these two important works back-to-back.

**2001** MOT marked its 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Season by securing its place in the top ten of American Opera Companies by virtue of its \$12 million budget. The year-long celebration of Giuseppe Verdi continued with *La Traviata*, one of his most famous operas, followed by *Falstaff*, his final opera. The spring season came to a close with Offenbach's *The Tales of Hoffman*. The fall season included *Carmen*, with Detroit's own Irina Mishura and a revival of the Armenian national opera *Anoush*, which received its American premiere on the MOT stage in 1982. The production received a tremendous outpouring of financial support from the Armenians for *Anoush* Committee and the hundreds of Armenians and friends who contributed their time and resources to the success of this production.

**2002** MOT remained deeply committed to staging the greatest in dance programming and the year began with an amazing series starting with The Dance Theatre of Harlem and The Joffrey Ballet followed by a return visit from American Ballet Theatre with a lavish production of *Le Corsaire*. Opera offerings included two productions new to the MOT repertoire, Verdi's supreme masterpiece *Otello* and Delibes' beautiful and exotic *Lakmé*, along with perennial favorite *The Marriage of Figaro*, *Il Trovatore* and *Don Pasquale*. Renovation continued at the Opera House and this year marked the opening of the GM Opera Café', located at the Madison entrance. It is a cozy, pub-like bistro open to all guests before curtain and after the performance. The year came to a close with a stunning visit from the legendary Bolshoi Ballet performing *Swan Lake* and Cincinnati Ballet's *The Nutcracker*, now a holiday tradition.

**2002 Additional Note** Programming included MOT's first production of *Too Hot to Handel*, the Jazz Gospel Messiah, which would go on to be a favorite annual holiday tradition at the Detroit Opera House. Directed and conducted by MOT's Suzanne Mallare Acton, *Too Hot* captures the essential core of Handel's famous masterwork and reinterprets it with chords of rhythm and blues, jazz and gospel.

**2003** Most notable was the Michigan premiere of the stunning new American Opera, *Dead Man Walking*, which "makes the most concentrated impact of any piece of American music theatre since *West Side Story*," according to London's The Guardian. The opera repertory also included *Don Giovanni* directed and designed by John Pasco and conducted by MOT regular Steven Mercurio as well as *Die Fledermaus* directed by longtime friend Bernard Uzan and conducted by MOT's own Suzanne Mallare Acton. There was also a *Madame Butterfly* as well as MOT's first production of Verdi's *The Masked Ball* along with performances by The Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre and a rare North American appearance of the mighty Kirov Ballet, presented on the only stage in Michigan large enough to accommodate its grandeur.

**2004** Wonderful dance programming continued as the year started off with performances by Les Ballets Africains followed by Dance Theatre of Harlem. The Opera House stage was also graced by productions of *The Magic Flute*, *The Pirates of Penzance*, *The Pearl Fishers*, *Rigoletto* and *Faust*. Two other major developments occurred in 2004: the first was the completion of the Crowning Achievement Campaign allowing MOT to begin its final construction phase which included the six-story office tower on the Broadway Street side of the building, and the Detroit Opera House Parking Center. The second major development was the announcement that R. Jamison (Rick) Williams Jr. was elected Chairman of Michigan Opera Theatre's Board of Directors. Mr. Williams serves to the present day as the Opera Company's third Chairman, succeeding Lynn Townsend (1971-1980) and Robert Dewar (1980-2000) in this key position.

**2005** On May 7, after six years of preparation, MOT hosted the world premiere of *Margaret Garner*, the first world premiere to be staged on the Detroit Opera House stage. It is an incredible and powerful American opera by Richard Danielpour and Toni Morrison and it starred internationally renowned soprano Denise Graves in the title role. The opera repertoire also included *Tosca*, *The Daughter of the Regiment*, Bellini's bel canto masterpiece *Norma* and a revival of the ever-loved *La Boheme*. Also on tap was a much-anticipated return of the Kirov Ballet, one of only three U.S. performances this season, with a lavish production of *The Sleeping Beauty*. MOT and the City of Detroit were also proud to host OPERA America's Opera Conference 2005: Diverse Voices. MOT continued in its role as a major cultural presence as opera colleagues world-wide were welcomed to the magnificent Detroit Opera House and exposed to the many treasures of this great city.

**2006** One of the year's true highlights was the opening of the Ford Center for Arts & Learning which makes facilities available to expand the Community Programs and Dance Departments. The Ford Center, on the Broadway street side of the Detroit Opera House, is made up of the Chrysler Theatre, a flexible black box performance space for intimate presentations, the Margo V. Cohen Center for Dance, which serves as the nerve center for all dance activities, the David and Marion Handleman Media Studio designed to support interactive classroom programming and distance learning, the Lee & Floy Barthel Costume Shop and the Allesee Dance & Opera Resource Library which also serves as the MOT Archive. Also included is a much needed street-level retail space. MOT's mainstage repertoire included Les Grands Ballets Canadiens de Montreal, the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre, *Aida*, *Cinderella*, *Salome*, *Porgy & Bess* and *The Barber of Seville*, as well as holiday favorites *The Nutcracker* and *Too Hot to Handel*.

**2007** Without doubt the highlight of the year was MOT's third world premiere, MOT's own David DiChiera's magnum opus, *Cyrano*. The grand, romantic opera, to a libretto by long-time colleague Bernard Uzan, was a tour de force and unleashed a spectacular outpouring of support as well as a smashing kick-off to the 2007 season. This seminal year also included productions of *Turandot*, MOT's first *The Abduction from the Seraglio*, Gounod's *Romeo and Juliet*, *The Marriage of Figaro*, as well as appearances by American Ballet Theatre, Grand

Rapids Ballet's production of *Where the Wild Things Are*, Miami City Ballet and the Ballet Folklórico de México.

**2008** Michigan Opera Theatre's first *La Sonnambala* by Bellini was featured along with Puccini's *La Rondine* and audience favorites *La Traviata* and *Madame Butterfly*, as well as a return engagement of the powerful *Margaret Garner* which also toured to Chicago's Auditorium Theater. Return visits were made by The Grand Rapids Ballet, The Joffrey Ballet and Hubbard Street Dance of Chicago. Also notable is the arrival of MOT's newly formed Children's Chorus. Along with performing in concert and serving as the companies' in-house children's chorus for all mainstage production requirements, they presented their first full staging of a children's opera, *The Maker of Illusions*.

**2009/2010** With the economy in steep decline and after a series of dramatic cutbacks, MOT soldiered on with productions of *The Elixir of Love*, the ever popular *Carmen*, Sondheim's *A Little Night Music* and a critically acclaimed, spectacular production of Verdi's *Nabucco*, not seen in Detroit since 1961. There were return visits from American Ballet Theatre and The Grand Rapids Ballet and the legendary *Pilobolus* performed on the opera house stage for the first time. *Too Hot To Handel* and *The Nutcracker* were back during the holidays and MOT Children's Chorus undertook opera on a larger scale mounting Jewish Czech composer Hans Krása's dramatic *Brundíár*.

Continuing its steadfast commitment to quality programming, the 2010 spring opera season featured two treasured opera classics, Mozart's *Don Giovanni* and Puccini's *Tosca*. The spring dance season, featuring two vastly different companies, included a return of the popular Ballet Hispanico and one of Russia's top ballet companies, the Tchaikovsky Ballet, performing *Sleeping Beauty*. In the fall MOT kicked off its 40<sup>th</sup> season of opera with Gilbert and Sullivan's *The Mikado* and the timeless, tragic *La Bohème*. This Puccini favorite featured the MOT debut of Sardinian tenor Francesco Demuro, alternating with Noah Stewart in the role of Rodolfo and Kelly Kaduce alternating in the role of Mimi with Grazia Doronzio who was making her MOT debut following her performance as Liu in *Turandot* at the Met.

**2011** A more extensive look at 2011 will illuminate the philosophies and practices put in place by Dr. DiChiera long ago and show how they continue to be successful. This somewhat more extensive study will serve as an example of the operating procedures that began forming in the 1970's still holding true in refined form today, and how each and every season is carefully calculated and balanced to achieve the most positive effect possible. It is in this way that consistent sustained success, regardless of the financial and economic conditions, has been achieved over the years.

There has been a continuing commitment to scheduling of diverse repertoire, including well-known, classic material mixed with more contemporary and American works. Also, using established well known singers mixed carefully with new faces, and including a measure of young, up and coming performers in casting has been a DiChiera specialty over the years. As MOT continued its 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary season, the company remained committed to the fundamental goals

of presenting productions of the highest quality, using the arts to affect the revitalization of the community and offering outreach that brings programming to the most diverse audience possible.

In the spring there were productions of two audience favorites, *The Magic Flute* and *Rigoletto*. For the *The Magic Flute* the company was excited to bring back Canadian coloratura soprano Aline Kutan, after her last appearing in MOT's 2002 production of *Lakme*, where she had garnered praise for spectacular ease and technical agility. This production also marked the company debut of three rising artists, tenor Norman Shankle as Tamino and sopranos Katherine Whyte and Ava Pine as Pamina. The season closed with Verdi's *Rigoletto*. Acclaimed American tenor James Valenti returned to MOT to sing the Duke of Mantua, alternating with Polish tenor Arnold Rutkowski, making his Midwest operatic debut. Returning to the MOT stage, alternating in the title role, were baritones Todd Thomas and Gaetan Laperrière. The production also featured the company debuts of sopranos Rachele Gilmott and Sara Joy Miller as Gilda.

In addition, to celebrate MOT's 15<sup>th</sup> season as the home of dance in Detroit there were performances by the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre and the MOT debut of one of the Midwest's premier contemporary dance company's, the metro Detroit based Eisenhower Dance Ensemble in a performance celebrating the iconic Motown sound. Also notable that spring was collaboration with the Rackham Symphony Choir in an evening of Gershwin favorites featuring acclaimed Detroit pianist Alvin Waddles, conducted by MOT's own Suzanne Acton and featuring the MOT Orchestra.

The 2011 fall season began with a double bill of Menotti's *The Medium* and Orff's *Carmina Burana*, both productions featuring new sets and costumes designed by Detroit based, award-winning stage designer Monika Essen. *Carmina Burana* also featured the Eisenhower Dance Ensemble and acrobats from Cirque du Soleil. Returning to the MOT stage for these productions were lovely young soprano Andriana Chuchman and dramatic mezzo-soprano Melissa Parks, who appeared together in 2010's *The Mikado*, along with a return by Romanian baritone Marian Pop, who created the title role in the world premiere of *Cyrano*. In November there was a return of Mozart's *The Marriage of Figaro*. In this production MOT welcomed a number of both familiar and new faces, including the company debut of the impressive young conductor Kazem Abdullah. The cast included baritones Corey McKern and Ian Greenlaw as the philandering Count, and sopranos Rachel Willis-Sorensen and Sian Davies as his wife.

The 16<sup>th</sup> season of dance was made possible by a generous donation by long time company friend, Maggie Allesee and featured the Detroit premiere of Rasta Thomas' *Bad Boys of Dance* as well as the return of the annual production of *The Nutcracker* marking the first performance of the BalletMet Columbus on the opera house stage. The year came to a close with what has become an annual tradition, the audience favorite, jazz-gospel Messiah, *Too Hot To Handel*.

It was truly a year which reflected MOT's philosophies and practices, with a broad array of performances and diverse collection of artists geared to engage the broadest audiences and reach out to the widest possible public. Even in the

most difficult economic climate Dr. DiChiera continued to exercise his unique genius for programming and casting, bringing yet another stellar season to the Detroit Opera House.

**2011/2012** With the economy starting to show signs of life, MOT rode out the recession in 2010 and 2011 by hunkering down to meet expense and revenue goals and sticking with a reduced schedule of four instead of five operas for each season. Cost cutting trimmed MOT's budget from \$12.5 million to just under \$10 million. However, the company was handcuffed by a crushing \$18 million bond debt on the opera house and the parking center.

**The Legacy Preserved - A Secure Future:** Facing the very real probability of bankruptcy, in December 2011, MOT reached agreement with their lenders to cut the long term debt provided MOT pay \$11 million by June 30, 2012. Along with the omnipresent Dr. DiChiera, these actions to literally save the company were led by MOT Board Chairman R. J. "Rick" Williams in what can be described as a monumental effort. It was clearly one of the most critical historical mileposts in the entire history of the company. The Preserve the Legacy Campaign was launched and MOT raised \$7 million. With these funds the company negotiated a new lease, paid off its former lenders and as a result MOT became financially sustainable for the foreseeable future. "I cannot overstate the importance of what we've just achieved" DiChiera was quoted at the time. The company had struggled for years with extensive bank debt due to the collapse of the national and local economy. Now with the economic recovery moving forward and the company's restructured debt, DiChiera could look forward to his retirement strategy and laying the groundwork for the next era of his beloved, financially sustainable opera company.

**2012** The spring season brought a return of Bizet's exotic *The Pearl Fishers* which featured the wildly colorful designs of iconic fashion designer Zandra Rhodes as well as the return of audience favorite Leah Partridge, last seen in the world premiere of *Cyrano*. In May there was a production of Leoncavallo's *I Pagliacci* after a long absence from the MOT stage. The Maggie Allesee Dance Series featured a return of the ever popular Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre and the North American premiere of Barcelona Ballet's *Swan Lake*. In March was a performance of *Harold and the Purple Crayon* by contemporary dance company Hubbard Street 2. Also of note, the Michigan Opera Theatre Children's Chorus continued to thrive with a production of *HMS Pinafore*. MOT is one of the few opera companies in the country to have a permanent ensemble of young people, which is a vital part of the organization's mission to bring cultural enrichment to all the communities they serve. The fall season opened with *The Barber of Seville* followed by the company's first baroque opera, Handel's *Julius Caesar*. Noted American counter tenor David Daniels made his company debut in this production. The 17<sup>th</sup> season of "Dance in the D" brought the company debut of New York City Ballet's MOVES as well as a return of BalletMet Columbus' *The Nutcracker*. The year came to a rousing close with the now traditional performance of *Too Hot to Handel*.

**2013 An Opera Hero Plans His Exit** "An Opera Hero Plans His Exit," was the headline in the Detroit Free Press on February 3, 2013. The time had come and

after nearly 50 years at the helm David DiChiera was preparing to retire. MOT announced a national search for a new executive director. DiChiera would move into the position of Artistic Director with plans to stay in this capacity until 2017 to aid in the transition to the next era.

The tributes poured in, recognizing his incomparable achievements. Most notably DiChiera was recognized by the National Endowment for the Arts at the Kennedy Center as a recipient of their Opera Honors. It is our nation's most prestigious opera award. The general feeling was summarized by Marc Scorca president of OPERA America: "There is only one David DiChiera on earth. He is the most winning and visionary person I know."

On February 4, 2013 MOT announced it's search for a new Executive Director. There would be an evolution in leadership where Dr. DiChiera would transition to the position of full-time Artistic Director. DiChiera reported that he was thrilled, at this stage of his career to be able to step away from the administrative and financial headaches that would fall to the new Executive Director. "I'm giving myself a gift for the next several years," he said. "I'm going to give myself the pleasure of just worrying about what goes up on the stage."

Mainstage production in 2013 included Detroit's own Eisenhower Dance Ensemble, the esteemed Dance Theatre of Harlem, the ever-popular Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre and LA-based contemporary dance troupe Diavolo. The spring opera season saw the company premiere of Beethoven's *Fidelio* and the most grand and dramatic spectacle in all opera, Verdi's *Aida*. The fall opera season included a return of Wagner's ghostly romantic opera, *The Flying Dutchman*, and one of the most performed operas in the world, *La Traviata*, featuring Nicole Cabeli, recent winner of The BBC Cardiff Singer of the World Competition.

**The Great Transition** "David is our founder and has been the visionary leader for everything that has happened at the Opera House for over 40 years," said Rick Williams, MOT Chairman. "We have always known the day would come when David would want to scale back his responsibilities, and that when it does we would split David's role into two positions, that of an Executive Director and an Artistic Director. It has always been too much for one person, but David's a superman kind of guy and he always wanted to do it all." Williams reported that he and the board had initial discussions on the search and that he was in the process of organizing a search committee. "David is a beloved figure in our community and we don't take the job of replacing him – or even half of him – lightly. This has been in our thinking for quite a while," Williams said, "but we didn't want to do anything until we had our financial house in order. We were able to accomplish that with our successful debt restructuring this summer."

The search committee was made up of MOT Board members, Betty Brooks, Dodie David, Ethan Davison, Sandy Duncan, David DiChiera, Herman Frankel, Barbara Kratchman and Al Lucarelli. In light of DiChiera's decision to stay on as Artistic Director, the committee was able to focus on a nation-wide search for a

leader with significant background in the art forms of opera, music and dance, one whose primary attributes were based on demonstrated, successful experience in executive and administrative function in art's organizations. The new leader also had to be committed to building on the historical connection between MOT and the City of Detroit.

In November MOT named native Detroiters Wayne S. Brown as its new President and CEO. The news broke in the Detroit Free Press on December 6, where Brown explained that the lure of working with a visionary leader like DiChiera and returning home to Detroit were the deciding factors. The news of course was all over the media and Brown was quoted in a report from the online theater website Encore Michigan saying; "Coming home to Michigan to be part of the city's transformation and to work side-by-side with a legend like David DiChiera is a huge honor for me. It's an opportunity of a lifetime, and I look forward to building on the enormous strides David, the board and the staff have made in making MOT one of the premier opera companies in the United States. I can't wait to get started."

**Wayne S. Brown** After graduating from MacKenzie High School in Detroit, Brown attended the University of Michigan where he received his Bachelor of Music degree with a major in voice and a minor in business. He met his wife, Brenda Kee at University of Michigan, where she would go on to earn her Doctor of Music Arts degree in piano. After graduating from U of M, Brown went to work for the Detroit Symphony Orchestra where among other responsibilities he helped establish the Classical Roots Concerts, which brought awareness to ethnic musicians and African-American composers. Then it was on to leadership positions with symphony orchestras in Massachusetts and Kentucky, followed by a position in Atlanta as music producer of the Cultural Olympiad for the Olympic Games. From there, beginning in 1997, Brown served as Director of Music and Opera for the National Endowment for the Arts in Washington D.C. Among his responsibilities were managing the NEA Opera Honors and the NEA Jazz Masters. In addition, Brown was a founding member of the Magic in Music Advisory Board for the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, has served on advisory boards for the Mellon and Ford Foundations, is a former Vice Chairman of the American Symphony Orchestra League, and previously served as a member of the American Arts Alliance Board.

In response to Brown's appointment at MOT, Marc Scorca, president of Opera America said, "The appointment of Wayne Brown as President and CEO of Michigan Opera Theatre is tremendously exciting. Wayne will arrive at the company with an established national reputation, an incomparable knowledge of artistic trends and best management practices, and an unparalleled level of goodwill among his opera colleagues. He has a long-standing commitment to Detroit and its cultural community and will build on the strong foundation laid by David DiChiera." The Great Transition had begun and MOT was looking forward to a bright, sustainable future.

**2014** Newly appointed President and CEO Wayne Brown hit the ground running, planning to not only preserve the 43-year legacy of MOT, but also intending to "sustain the vitality and strengthen the future of opera and dance in

Southeastern Michigan and beyond.” He further stated, “Our shared goal is to continue to make the Detroit Opera House (one of the city’s cultural landmarks) a singular destination for artists and inter-generational audiences alike through our organization’s goal: defining and creating a sustainable path for exceptional artistic presentations and compelling community and educational programs.”

The spring season continued to reflect the programming philosophy that Dr. DiChiera has adhered to for years – presenting a balance of well known favorites along with works that were new to the MOT audience. The dance season brought familiar troupes, the Dance Theatre of Harlem and the Joffrey Ballet along with the American debut of the celebrated Ballet du Grand Theatre de Geneve in a thrilling program of avant-garde works. The spring opera season included audience favorite, *Turandot* and in an especially notable development, the Michigan Premiere of *A View from the Bridge* by William Bolcom, one of today’s most celebrated opera composers, and emeritus professor of composition at the University of Michigan. The opera is based on the play by the great American playwright, Arthur Miller, who also shares a connection to U of M. It was the first installment of a new DiChiera initiative called “Opera of Our Time,” a plan to introduce more modern and contemporary opera to the MOT repertory.

**2014/2015 A Triumphant Return to a Five Opera Season** An MOT press release on March 12, 2014 announced the details of the upcoming season and a “triumphant return to a five opera season.” After six years of seasons with a reduced schedule of only four operas, due to the extremely difficult economic climate, MOT was able to begin the rebuilding process in earnest. All things considered, it was a triumph, and it was due to the company having achieved financial sustainability by restructuring its debt, a clearly improving economy and increasing individual, corporate and foundation support. A bright, sustainable future was at hand and MOT was moving forward with confidence.

The fall 2014 opera season planned by Dr. DiChiera began with the company premiere of Richard Strauss’ horror-filled, signature opera *Electra*. Internationally acclaimed, Grammy-award winning soprano Christine Goerke was engaged to sing the title role in all of the performances. The opening night performance began at 5:00 PM and was immediately followed by MOT’s fall gala, Opera Ball, which was the signature event of a weekend full of events which reflected the growing support, the enthusiasm, the fund-raising, and the dedicated outreach which was all part of a vigorous effort to grow the company’s status and stature in the community. Also included in the opera season were productions of audience favorites *Madame Butterfly*, Lehar’s *The Merry Widow* featuring world renowned soprano Deborah Voigt in the title role, and to close the season in May, Gounod’s *Faust*.

**Frida** In a season full of highlights the most notable historical development came in March of 2015 with MOT’s production of Robert Xavier Rodriguez’s *Frida*, a contemporary opera that paints a musical portrait of the life of Mexican artist Frida Kahlo. It was the Midwest premiere of this opera. This opera was a landmark co-production with the Macomb Center for the Performing Arts and was performed at the Macomb Center, as well as two other partner venues, The Berman Center for the Performing Arts and the Detroit Institute of Arts Detroit

Film Theatre. DTE Energy Foundation was the title sponsor of the production and this support enabled MOT's first mainstage opera production outside the Detroit Opera House, bringing world-class opera experiences of this kind directly to audiences in Macomb and Oakland counties for the first time. This co-production marked the beginning of an annual collaboration between MOT and The Macomb Center and there was an all out effort by MOT regarding audience building and engagement. A month long series of special events leading up to the highly anticipated premiere at the Macomb Center featured special presentations at recently formed Opera Clubs in Sherwood Forest/Palmer Woods, Macomb County, Rosedale Park, Birmingham/Bloomfield, Grosse Pointe and Indian Village. Other special events included a Gala Red Carpet Opening event, Complimentary Preview events, matinee performances and student/senior citizen dress rehearsals. All this activity was taking place, timed perfectly, with the documentary, *Rivera in America*, televised on WTVS, channel 56, Detroit Public Television, and the Diego Rivera and Frida Kahlo in Detroit Exhibition which was being held at the Detroit Institute of Arts. This was the initial offering in MOT's new initiative of bringing operas into the surrounding communities, to people who may not otherwise have been able to experience this powerful, dramatic art form. It was an intense effort which also included events co-presented by three other partner venues, the University of Michigan Museum of Art in Ann Arbor, The Mexicantown Mercado Food Resource and Engagement Center in southwest Detroit and The Whiting Auditorium in Flint. Wayne Brown, MOT's President and CEO declared: "Community engagement is a principal theme for Michigan Opera Theatre. Throughout the opera, *Frida*, these new partnerships reflect a new era for artistic collaboration in Southeastern Michigan." There was an outpouring of support from the Latino community with *Frida* Honorary Chairman Juan Manuel Solana Morales, Consul of Mexico to Detroit leading the way, and an impressive Friends of Frida committee of supporters from the community. In addition the production was a critical success with uniformly positive reviews and headlines like "Michigan Opera Theatre brings a Triumphant 'Frida' to the community", "MOT's Frida emotional and dynamic", "Fiery 'Frida' offers intensity and immediacy", and "An opera to see, and hear." To top it all off, Detroit City Council Member, Raquel Castañeda-López, invited Wayne Brown and Dr. DiChiera to a Detroit City Council Meeting to accept a Testimonial Resolution honoring MOT's new initiative of bringing opera into communities through "Frida" and the "An Overture to Frida" events. All of this reflected MOT's enthusiastic, forward thinking dedication to audience engagement and community outreach. It was a critically important new effort, based on a tremendous legacy of excellence, to build the brand and to further entrench the opera company into the heart and soul of its expanding community. There were truly strategies on which MOT could build a future.

**Building on the Legacy** This production of *Frida* points out several of MOT's strengths, practices and philosophies that have stood the test of time and continue to be effective. The entire effort toward community engagement, while updated for the present, is very similar to the practices DiChiera and his staff employed in the 1960s and 1970s to build the company in the first place. From the very beginning, during the Overture to Opera years, a primary goal was always to establish broad grass roots, community based support. The Opera in Residence program in the 1970s was just one example of a fundamental effort to

expose people from all walks of life, and from all around the state to the world of opera. During its formative years MOT became a model of audience-building technique and now, with the production of *Frida*, the company was relying on these fundamentals, in refined, updated form, to build relationships with an ever expanding constituency. In addition, *Frida* was the next installment in DiChiera's Opera of Our Time initiative, which was based on the practice of bringing new, relevant works to his audience in a calculated mix with the standard repertoire. This production also highlights yet another DiChiera specialty, which is bringing works related to specific ethnic communities within the MOT audience. He has garnered national recognition for championing opera of the Polish, the Armenian, the African-American and now the Latino community. Once again DiChiera had brought an opera that reflected and paid homage to the rich ethnic diversity that makes up the MOT community. MOT President and CEO Brown, quoted in the *Frida* program, summarized: "From the earliest days of MOT, this Detroit-based cultural entity, under its founder Dr. David DiChiera, has been committed to inclusion and diversity on stage and in all aspects of the organization's operation."

**A Bright and Sustainable Future** MOT was building on its solid foundation and the enthusiasm was palpable. It was called The Great Transition by Board Chairman Rick Williams and it was fully underway. MOT had achieved financial sustainability with its renegotiated debt load and the tremendous legacy put in place over 50 years by the visionary, indefatigable David DiChiera would be preserved. New President and CEO Wayne Brown was firmly ensconced and with the irreplaceable support of company founder DiChiera, now serving as Artistic Director, a smooth transition to the new era was assured. There was a triumphant return to a five opera season with a dedicated eye on outreach and a new strategic plan to plot the future was in the works. By all indications MOT was prepared, and very much looking forward to a bright and sustainable future.

**David DiChiera Awards and Honors** MOT's founder has garnered honor and recognition abroad and at home by the Detroit City Council, the Michigan State Legislature, the Michigan Council for the Arts and Cultural Affairs, the University of Detroit and the governor of Michigan. The Detroit News selected Dr. DiChiera as a Michiganian of the Year in 1979, stating "Dr. DiChiera has done more than any single person in the city or state to bring opera to the people." He expanded upon this concept by creating a permanent home for opera in Michigan with the 1996 opening of the Detroit Opera House. He delivered the commencement address at the University of Michigan's graduation ceremony in 1998 and was awarded an honorary Doctor of Music degree. He has also received honorary doctoral degrees from Oakland University (2001), Marygrove College (2004), Madonna University (2008) and Wayne State University (2010). In recognition of his significance to the musical world, he has been honored by the mayors of New York, San Francisco, New Orleans and Detroit, as well as the governments of France and Italy.

In recognition of his mandate to build bridges of understanding and cooperation across racial, social, economic and political divides, David DiChiera received the 2000 Bridge Builder's Award, bestowed by the Partner's for Livable

Communities, a Washington DC-based civic leadership organization. Also to honor his efforts as a “bridge builder,” DiChiera was honored by New Detroit, Inc. with its 2008 Closing the Gap Award and in that same year, also received the Neal Shine Award for Exemplary Regional Leadership. During the fall of 2010, DiChiera was recognized by the National Endowment for the Arts at the Kennedy Center as a recipient of their annual Opera Honors, given to four noted individuals each year for their exemplary lifetime contributions to opera. It is our nation’s most prestigious opera award. In 2013 came yet another notable tribute from the Kresge Foundation as he was named the year’s Kresge Eminent Artist for his lifelong devotion to the magic of opera as an impresario, a composer and an arts activist. He was called a community treasure and was celebrated for his passion, his creativity and his unrelenting drive toward the future.