Backstage with Matthew: Reflecting on an Extraordinary Year



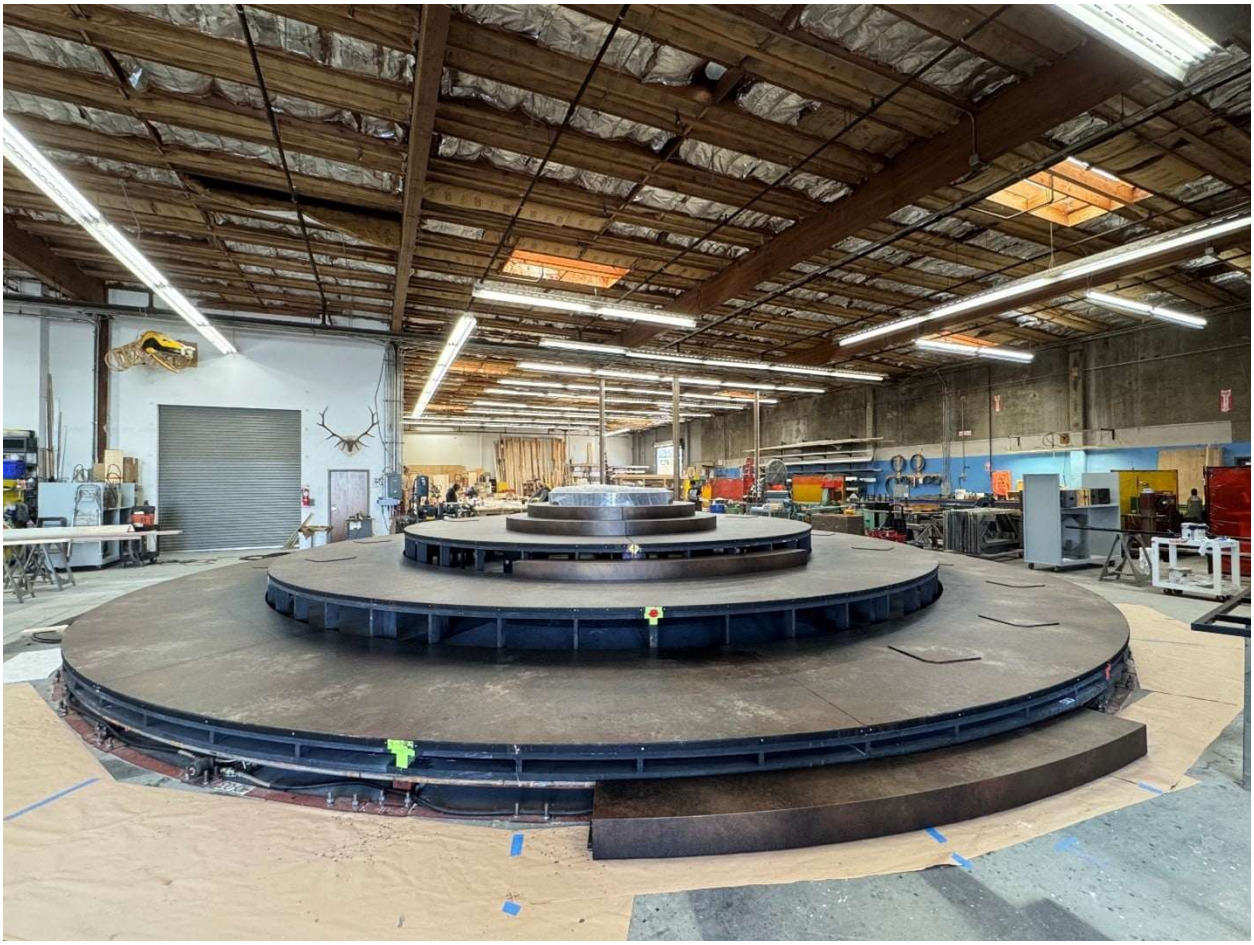
Happy New Year! I hope that you are having a peaceful start to 2026, and that this year ahead will be one of happiness, health and many magical moments. In just a few weeks, on February 3, we will be announcing our 104th season, and I cannot wait to share that with you. But, before we raise the curtain on a new season, I wanted to take a moment to celebrate what we collectively accomplished in 2025!

I say collectively, because opera is a team sport! Opera is a coming together, not only of many artistic and technical disciplines, but also of philanthropists, subscribers, ticket buyers and community members. It takes everyone to realize what we just experienced.

It's very meaningful to me when an opera house sits in the middle of a city (as ours does) because it reaffirms a fundamental truth: opera houses are meeting places. Places where we come together, free of judgement, and connect around the things that we share as humans – emotions, relationships, feelings. So, when we have a year of extraordinary impact, like this past year, it is because we have come together as a community to make it possible. And what a year it was!

First, it was a year of creativity! I love that this company is capable of making *anything* come to life. To have had two brand-new productions of huge, vast work and to see them launch within weeks of each other is no small feat. *Parsifal* and *The Monkey King* were conceived and built right here in the Bay Area, in our scene and costume shops, and with local artists and artisans. That is one of the great joys of originating new productions. We see them go from concepts to sketches, to

fully rendered designs, to technical drawings, to fully produced physical scenery and costumes. And, all of it right here. There are not many communities in America for which that is possible.



Construction process for Parsifal.

Interestingly, *Parsifal* and *The Monkey King* represented such different nuances of that process flow – one very physical in nature (the whole set model was created on a 3D printer and looked exactly like the final set); and one very ephemeral, coming together much more in the act of unfolding the work in rehearsal.



Early stage rehearsals for Monkey King in August 2025.

Originating new productions and new operas is a hugely important expression of the creative DNA of a company and a city. When we can originate, we bring to bear all the subtle nuances of this city and this audience, crafting work very intentionally for Bay Area audiences. I think that is a big part of why these new productions of *Parsifal* and *The Monkey King* resonated so profoundly for many people. They were of this community, of this time, for us right now.



Jessica Jahn's costume design for the Acolytes in Parsifal.

Whether a production is brand new to us, a revival or a rental, it is the ultimate impact for audiences that matters, and I am so proud of how profoundly everything resonated this last year for audiences and press alike. Joshua Kosman, retired critic of the San Francisco Chronicle, captured this with incredible generosity in his round-up of 2025:

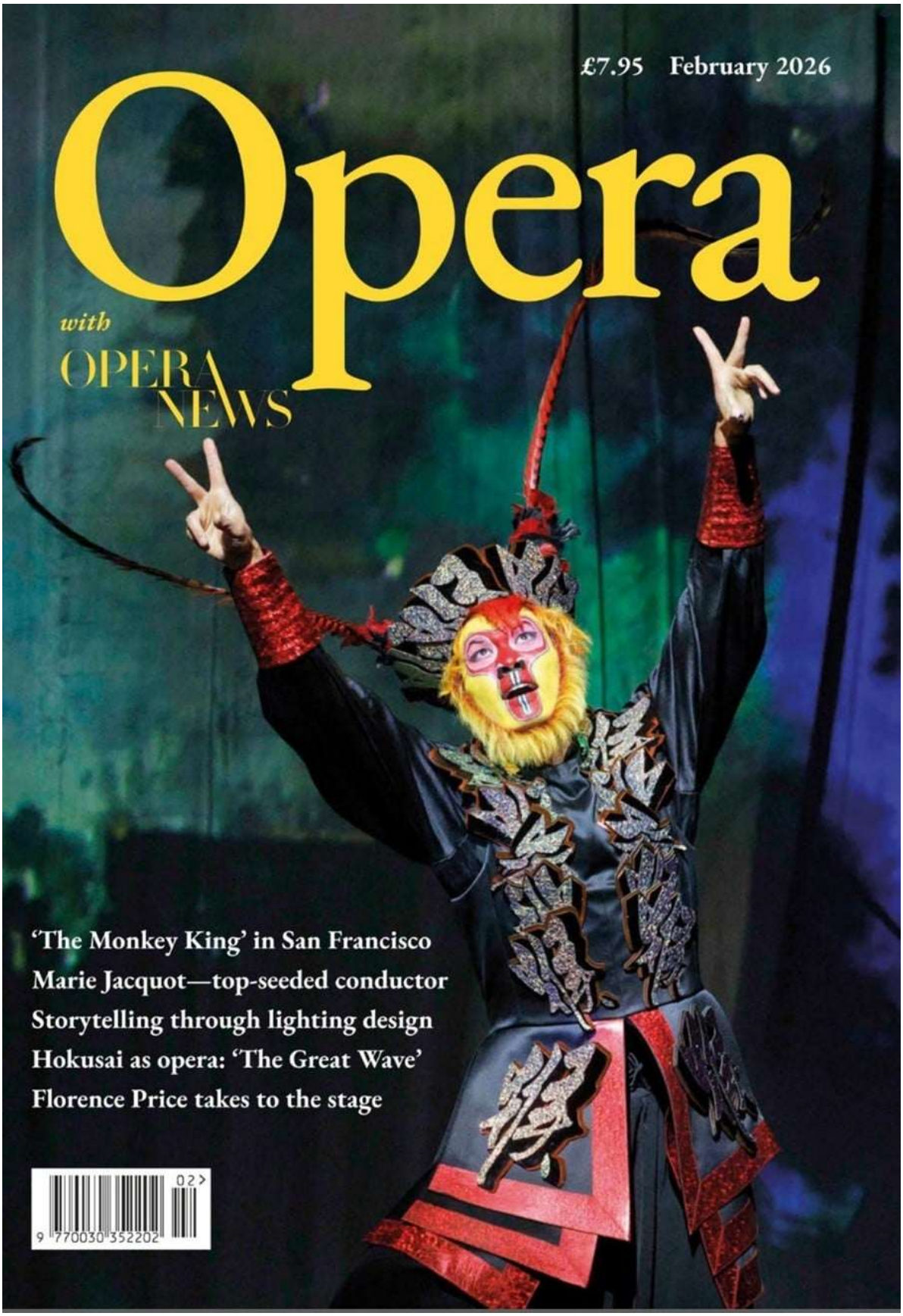
"The astonishing highlight of my musical year was so splendid and so multipartite that it stands at the head of, and completely outside, any enumerated list. I'm talking about the four productions of the San Francisco Opera's fall season, a series of one triumph after another that, taken together, augur a promising future for the company."

Recognition like this is so treasured, because it includes the totality of our work, whether new productions or a work like *Rigoletto* - a revival of a treasured production with a new cast, brought to life so movingly under the baton of Eun Sun Kim. We take pride in caring for all titles with equal weight, reflecting a systemic commitment to excellence across all that we do as a company. We aspire to hold those standards at the highest level every single time we open the curtain.



Post-bows at opening night of Rigoletto.

Press recognition came with extraordinary abundance for *The Monkey King*. It reverberated in publications in the US, China and Europe. And we're the cover image for the UK Magazine "Opera" this month.


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Thinking back on the extraordinary press coverage for *Monkey King*, I wanted to share two quotes in particular because they speak to this vision we have as a company i) to be firmly connected to this community, and ii) to be one of the most respected stages in the world.

Joshua Barone in the New York Times wrote: *"...congratulations are especially in order for San Francisco Opera, which has a recent track record of presenting shows that speak to its local audience with the ambition of an opera capital."*

And Mark Swed, writing in the Los Angeles Times commented: "*The potential this opera signals is for a major cultural change for San Francisco."*



The Monkey King *team celebrating after a performance.*

I cherish these reflections, because they say so much about what San Francisco Opera should be: locally reverberating, and globally impactful. We saw that in powerful ways in 2025.

As we reflect back on last year, I also want to call out the continued growth in ticket sales and contributions. While we still have a great deal of work to do as a company to find the stable, viable financial paradigm for the future, audience and donor trends reflect the incredible passion we're seeing for opera.

We sold 82% of capacity last season and are on track for a similar capacity this season: that is a great reflection of our audience energy, manifest in many sold-out houses. In fact, *Monkey King* sold out every single seat for every single performance before we even opened this new opera! We're seeing so many new people join us. 50% of single ticket buyers for *Monkey King* were

brand-new to us, and 40% of single ticket buyers for *Monkey King* were Asian or Asian American, reflecting the power of opera to connect powerfully with community. We saw a growth of around 1,200 subscribers last season, and those numbers are holding well this season. And audiences are getting younger, coming back more often, and migrating into our Osher Subscription packages.

Oh, and I love this statistic: we sold 1,000 Dolby tickets for *Monkey King* in less than 30 minutes!



A full Monkey King *performance with sold-out standing room. Photo: Reneff-Olson Productions*

Philanthropically it has been so inspiring to see a work like *Monkey King* reverberate within the community. Hopefully you saw the extraordinary news that Jensen and Lori Huang made a 3-5 year commitment to the Opera of $5M a year – a fervent affirmation of the role arts and culture play in the creative vitality of the Bay Area. Jensen Huang is President and CEO of NVIDIA, and this is a profoundly meaningful celebration of the intersection of two amazingly creative worlds: technology and the arts. *The Monkey King* inspired many other business, technology and community leaders to participate in the Opera, and I'm thrilled that the community connected to the company and the piece with such joyful energy.



With Jensen and Lori Huang. Photo: Kristen Loken

Talking of community, this has been a deeply impactful fall in so many ways. Our Department of Engagement and Connectivity did so much to ensure a resonance between the work on our stage and the community. Eun Sun Kim and the San Francisco Opera Orchestra have been creating wonderfully inspiring immersive events. And our lobbies have been alive with vibrant activations.

Jake Heggie's *Dead Man Walking* in the fall provided meaningful opportunities for reflection on the continued importance of work being done on Death Row, and we were honored to be joined by Sister Helen Prejean through lectures and convenings in the City, including a program at the Nourse Auditorium featuring Sister Helen in conversation with faith leaders. We also featured work of incarcerated artists from San Quentin in our gallery space on the Grand Tier level, as part of our continued partnership with the William James Association's Prison Arts Project.



Faith, Law, and the Death Penalty lecture at the Nourse auditorium. Photo: Matthew Washburn

The Monkey King provided innumerable opportunities for community connection. In the house, each performance was preceded by a lion dance in the lobby by LionDanceMe, and a number of performances featured the Monkey King Public Market out in the War Memorial Courtyard, in partnership with Art Builds Community, open to the public and creating a wonderful point of connection in Civic Center. Puppetry workshops throughout the San Francisco Public Library system, screenings of *Monkey King* films at the Great Star Theater in Chinatown, and a host of events with our dear friends at the Asian Art Museum, allowed the community to delve deep into this beloved Chinese epic.



A puppetry workshop featuring Shadowlight Productions and Carefree Puppetry. Photo: Kristen Loken.

This is exactly the multi-faceted, reverberant impact that opera should be having. From transformational emotions in the theater, to resonance in the community, and to an inspiring force on the world stage - 2025 was a season of extraordinary impact that celebrated so much the values we hold dear as a company: creative excellence, resonant story-telling, artistry of integrity and heart, and a company redefining the very nature of opera on a global scale.

I wanted to close with sharing a heartfelt letter I received at the end of last year. This made me smile with such immense pride at what we realized this year:

"I write to congratulate you and the San Francisco Opera on the stunning performances of The Monkey King and Parsifal this season. I have been a subscriber to the Opera for over 40 years. I believe these productions rank among the very best SFO has ever put on the stage. The singing and the orchestra playing were consistently excellent and the staging simply the best I can recall. All involved deserve the strongest of kudos and applause. Keep up the excellence."

Thank you for being a part of this opera community and for being a part of this most extraordinary year we have just experienced at the Opera. I cannot wait to share in the new season with you on February 3 and to continue this thrilling creative journey we are all on together.

With profound gratitude,

Matthew



Eun Sun Kim leading the orchestra in an immersive donor event earlier in the year.