

# SEATTLE OPERA.

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## **Speight Jenkins, former leader of Seattle Opera, dies at 89**

SEATTLE—Former Seattle Opera General Director **Speight Jenkins**, who transformed Seattle Opera into one of the leading opera companies in the US during his 31-year tenure (1983–2014), died Saturday at age 89.

"Seattle, Seattle Opera, and the opera world have lost a giant," said former longtime Board Chair **John Nesholm**. "Speight brought Seattle Opera into the first rank of opera companies nationally and internationally. His groundbreaking productions of Wagner's *Ring* attracted audiences from every state and dozens of countries. Speight's manifold contributions to opera were extensive, influential, and brought many into McCaw Hall. In retirement he continued teaching and inspiring others through his deep knowledge of and infectious passion for our beloved artform. He will be sorely missed."

A passionate, precise, and persistent leader, Jenkins was an icon in the Pacific Northwest and held in the highest esteem across the opera industry. Under Jenkins' watch, Seattle Opera grew into one of the largest and most respected opera companies in the United States, recognized worldwide for its ambitious programming, its nurturing environment for young artists, and its vital presentations of the works of Richard Wagner, including the composer's four-opera epic, *Der Ring des Nibelungen*.

"As we mourn the loss of Seattle Opera's former General Director, we also celebrate the extraordinary impacts he made on the world of opera and the greater arts scene in the Pacific Northwest," said **James Robinson**, Seattle Opera's current General & Artistic Director. "Speight was a force, a true impresario who launched countless careers over the years. He was exacting, demanding, and utterly committed to excellence, and he remains an inspiration to so many of us who now lead opera companies in the US."

"Everyone has a few people who believe in them when they are young and getting going—Speight Jenkins was one of those very special people for me," said **Francesca Zambello**, stage director and Artistic Director of Washington National Opera. "He was a true impresario in the classical sense. In his role as General Director, he was hands-on, always in rehearsals, always watching and making suggestions in a constructive way, softened by his charming Southern accent. He always phrased everything as a question when he was giving a note. A good lesson I tried to learn from him! I will miss our many exchanges—always signed 'Love, SP8'."

"Some people enter our lives and, through the simple yet profound act of believing in us, alter the course of our journey forever," said tenor **Lawrence Brownlee**, an alumnus of Seattle Opera's Young

Artist Program. "Many people have encouraged me throughout my career, but few have believed in me as faithfully and intentionally as Speight Jenkins. His support was endless and came not only in moments of success, but also in moments of uncertainty. He saw possibilities in me that I sometimes could not see in myself, and gave me opportunity after opportunity to hone my craft and establish myself as a serious artist. This is a monumental loss for me. Whatever I have or will accomplish will be thanks to my dear friend, Speight Jenkins."

"So many of us truly owe our careers to Speight," said stage director and tenor **Peter Kazaras**, who directed Seattle Opera's Young Artist Program from 2006 to 2013. "More importantly, we came to understand how to fully be our artist selves thanks in part to his unique mentorship style. In my case, he always gave me permission to disagree with him, especially once I started directing. He would listen to my point of view, and he'd let me know he trusted me to do the job he had hired me to do. His faith in an artist was a serious business, and so many people in our world today are doing what they do because Speight believed in them at a crucial juncture. He inspired tremendous devotion and love in countless others. I so hope he understood and felt this over these many decades."

"Speight was a brilliant, hands-on producer unique in American opera," said stage director **Stephen Wadsworth**. "His encouragement and loyalty spurred the careers of many singers and directors, and his blue-chip friendship was and remains singular—intellectually stimulating, steeped in laughter, and constant. He is the only impresario in history who regularly received frenzied, lengthy applause simply stepping before the curtain to make a pre-show announcement. On the last night of our *Ring* cycle in 2013, I called him out onstage for the summer's final solo bow, and every single person in the theater rose as one and screamed. I've heard every great singer of the last sixty-five years, but to this day I've never hear an ovation like that."

Jenkins began his career as a music critic, hosting the Metropolitan Opera's "Live from the Met" television broadcasts and working for several years for *Opera News* and later the *New York Post*. He first came to Seattle Opera as an educator and opera-lover, giving pre-show talks for the 1982 presentation of Wagner's *Ring* cycle in his inimitable, fast-paced Southern tenor voice. Jenkins' enthusiasm for opera captivated the Board of Directors, who asked him to succeed founding General Director Glynn Ross. Although Jenkins had extensive experience in the music industry, he had never worked for an opera company. However, he proved a quick study, and within a few years Seattle Opera was attracting national attention for innovative and provocative productions.

Jenkins built on the foundation Glynn Ross had established, extending Seattle Opera's reputation as a Wagner epicenter by producing all ten of Wagner's major operas, including two very different *Ring* productions. Seattle Opera became synonymous with Wagner's works, and productions such as *Lohengrin* ('94), *Tristan und Isolde* ('98), the *Ring* ('01), and *Parsifal* ('03) became must-see events for opera lovers around the world.

Thanks to his uncanny ability to hear the potential in a voice, Jenkins brought to Seattle many young singers who would go on to spectacular careers, including Vinson Cole, Lawrence Brownlee, Gordon Hawkins, and Mary Elizabeth Williams. He developed Seattle Opera's Young Artist Program and International Wagner Competitions, which launched the careers of dozens of young singers. Jenkins also mentored young stage directors like Francesca Zambello and Stephen Wadsworth, who went on to have long and distinguished careers in the industry.

A staunch believer that even the grandest operas should be for the people, Jenkins helped usher in a new era of audience accessibility when he introduced translated supertitles to Seattle Opera for a production of Wagner's *Tannhäuser* in 1984, making Seattle Opera one of the first companies in the United States to feature the new technology. Seattle Opera's tradition of post-show talkbacks with

singers and creative teams also began with Jenkins, who hosted nearly one thousand such sessions during his time as General Director.

Jenkins made significant contributions to the development of new opera and new opera productions in the United States. He spearheaded the commission of *Amelia*, which premiered in 2010; co-commissioned *Floriencia en el Amazonas*, Seattle Opera's first Spanish-language opera, in 1998; and co-produced *Iphigenia in Tauris*, the company's first joint production with the Metropolitan Opera, in 2007. During the 1990 Goodwill Games held in Seattle, Jenkins produced Prokofiev's *War and Peace*, the most complete version of that opera yet presented in the US and a performance that was heralded as the Games' "crown jewel."

A native of Dallas, TX, Jenkins was transfixed by opera at the young age of six, when he was in second grade. Jenkins recalls his mother's explanation of the art form: "It's like a play, but they sing. They have crazy stories." The first time he heard *Die Walküre*, he was rapt. "I can't explain it, but I was totally suckered in, absolutely dumbfounded," he said of the experience.

Jenkins trained as a lawyer at Columbia University and served in the US Army's Judge Advocate General's Corps, where he honed his writing and lecturing skills. Following his Army service, Jenkins returned to New York City to begin his career in music journalism.

Jenkins received a Mayor's Art Award in 2009, the National Endowment for the Arts Opera Honor in 2011, the Governor's Arts Organization Leadership Award in 2014, and honorary doctorates from Seattle University, the University of Puget Sound, and New England Conservatory of Music. The *Seattle Times* named him one of the 150 most influential people who have shaped the character of Seattle and King County in 2000, and in 2006, Opera News called him one of the 25 "most powerful" names in American Opera. On the occasion of his retirement, the city and county proclaimed August 9, 2014, Speight Jenkins Day, and the city named a street in his honor.

### **About Seattle Opera**

Established in 1963, Seattle Opera is committed to serving the people of the Pacific Northwest through music, storytelling, and programs for people of all ages. Each year, more than 50,000 people attend the company's performances, and more than 100,000 people are served through school performances, radio broadcasts, and more. The organization brings opera to life in several ways, offering artistic performances of the highest caliber through national and international collaborations. Seattle Opera strives to create an environment where artists, staff, behind-the-scenes workers, and members of the community feel a strong connection to the company, and to the art of opera. As one of the largest arts organizations in the Pacific Northwest, Seattle Opera employs more than 750 people annually and is an essential component of the region's economy. Follow Seattle Opera on Facebook, Twitter, SoundCloud, and on Classical KING.

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