



Show Boat Production *top center clockwise* Erik Austin, Allison Generux, Roger Phillips, Eli Zabala, Tom McPherson, Stephanie Roberson, Drew Silvaggio, Brian Asher Alhadeff, and Sharon Dobson



Brian Asher Alhadeff  
photo courtesy Kathy Miller

ALLIANCE

# The *Curious* Mathematics of Collaboration

Even in the best of times funding for the arts generally falls short. But in the throes of the Great Recession, Opera San Luis Obispo was struggling mightily to fill seats at its annual show. In 2010 its *La Bohème* production filled about half the seats at the Performing Arts Center, and the following year, *Barber of Seville*, yielded similar results. The organization had cut its costs down to the bone and the conversation centered on how to cut still more in order to survive. But, there is a danger in those many small sacrifices as organizations who have met a “death by a thousand cuts” can attest.

Ironically, it can be spending rather than saving that may pull an organization back from the brink. Opera San Luis Obispo decided it was time to do some soul searching and elected not to put on its large annual production in 2012. For the opera, founded in 1985 by Dr. Jill Anderson and the late Jean Cook, this was a bitter pill to swallow. Under the direction of its new artistic director, Brian Asher Alhadeff, the organization put on a series of more informal, low-cost shows he referred to as “friendraisers.” According to Alhadeff, “The idea wasn’t so much about just raising money—although that was very important, too—but we wanted to reach out to this community, which is so tight-knit and very supportive of the arts.” At the same time that he was reaching out to prospective donors and expanding the organization’s audience, he was also initiating conversations with other arts organizations locally.

When Alhadeff sat down to talk with his artistic peers, he outlined a formula he had developed over the past fifteen years—most notably as the artistic director and founder of the International Summer Opera Festival in the Czech Republic—that allowed one plus one to equal three. What Alhadeff discovered, as he was bouncing around Europe to drum up support for his upstart festival, was that relationships really do matter. “There were all of these little performing groups that had very loyal followings, people who were intensely interested in what they were doing and would go to every show,” he observed. So, he began selectively inviting various local groups to join in performing at the festival. As this collaboration grew to include other organizations, the festival expanded. Not just incrementally, but exponentially. Now, Alhadeff is applying the same math, right here on the Central Coast.



2013 Carmen Dress Rehearsal

The concept is rather simple on the surface. Each group included in the citywide collaboration, as it has come to be known, is asked to reach out to its supporters. These efforts are supplemented by an email marketing campaign where each organization’s contacts are combined and sent out as a series of massive appeals to everyone who may be interested in the production. Following the show, Opera San Luis Obispo pays the collaborating organization a fee for their participation. Using this tactic for the first time last year for its production of *Carmen*, Opera San Luis Obispo was able to fill 91% of the seats at the PAC—nearly doubling attendance. The best part, however, according to Alhadeff, is “that it is so exciting to see everyone come together.”

This year, Opera San Luis Obispo looks to build upon its success with *Carmen* by upping the ante with its production of *Aida* by increasing its investment in set design and props, along with an expanded collaboration with Civic Ballet, Central Coast Children’s Choir, Ballet Theatre San Luis Obispo, CORE dance company, Deyo Dances, and Studio@Ryan’s American Dance. *Aida*, an enthralling story of an Egyptian princess that spans love and politics, will be conducted by Adelheff, directed by Daniel J. Witzke, and choreographed by Drew Silvaggio. The opera by Giuseppe Verdi, is known as a “grand opera,” which as the name implies is larger and more elaborate than other productions—a fitting description considering the impressive results that have come from the dedicated efforts of so many. **SLO LIFE**

*Tickets are available for Aida, which will show during the weekend of October 11 and 12, by logging onto [pacslo.org](http://pacslo.org) or calling (805) 756-4849.*