



SAN LUIS OBISPO



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# Co-Opera: Opera San Luis Obispo Finds Its Survival Strategy

Sarah Linn



Months before work began on Opera San Luis Obispo's production of "Carmen," artistic and general director Brian Asher Alhadeff printed up a poster listing the local performing arts organizations he hoped to recruit for the project. Then he asked the groups' directors to sign it.

One by one, they did -- as Alhadeff collected contracts from the Central Coast Children's Choir, Civic Ballet of San Luis Obispo, Cuesta College Concert Choir and San Luis Obispo Symphony.

"I felt I was signing my life away," Civic Ballet Artistic Director Drew Silvaggio recalled with a laugh. "But it was so right for him to do ... (Alhadeff) just understands that, in a small community like this, the arts only exist if we come together."

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In an era when performing arts powerhouses such as New York City Opera and San Diego Opera are closing their doors, community-wide collaborations aren't simply a pleasant sentiment, Alhadeff said. They're essential to ensuring the future of the art form.

"Don't you see what's going on around (us)? We're dying!" the artistic director said. "So we have to reinvent ourselves and we have to openly embrace the reinvention of ourselves. Otherwise, say goodbye!"

"I'm doing this as a survival tool just as much as being a crusader for fine arts," he added.



Brian Asher Alhadeff conducts the Opera San Luis Obispo orchestra in "Carmen" at the Performing Arts Center in San Luis Obispo. | Opera San Luis Obispo

According to company co-founder Jill Anderson, she and late singer Jean Cook started what was originally called Pacific Repertory Opera in 1985 to fill a musical niche in the community.

The company presented its first performance - a brown-bag concert featuring a few scenes from "The Marriage of Figaro" and "Der Rosenkavalier," accompanied by piano - in June 1985 on the back patio of San Luis Obispo coffeehouse [Linnaea's Cafe](#).

"At the very beginning, we were doing it on a very economic level on a very small scale," Anderson recalled, working in cramped venues with few sets and scant costumes and props. "As long as we kept things small, we could afford to operate. We were really living hand-to-mouth for quite a few years. I always questioned whether we could keep things going."

During her 23-year tenure as artistic director, however, funding firmed up and the company expanded its calendar to include concerts, operas and a summer day camp for children. With the company's 25th anniversary in 2010 came a new name, Opera San Luis Obispo.



Brian Asher Alhadeff, general and artistic director of Opera San Luis Obispo | Opera San Luis Obispo

Alhadeff came aboard as artistic and general director in 2011, after serving as associate conductor on productions of Giacomo Puccini's "La bohème" and Gioachino Rossini's "The Barber of Seville" the previous year.

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The Long Beach native, who studied conducting at the Peabody Conservatory in Baltimore and the Janáček Academy of Music and Performing Arts in the Czech Republic, holds a bachelor's degree from Loyola Marymount University in Los Angeles, a master of music degree from CSU Los Angeles and a doctorate of musical arts from UCLA. His resume includes stints as artistic and music director of the Hradec Kralove International Summer Opera Festival in the Czech Republic and director of orchestras at Grand Valley State University in Michigan.

"He's got the energy. He's got the passion. ... He is continuing the traditions I hoped to continue," said Anderson, who now serves as co-artistic director of Canzona Women's Ensemble in San Luis Obispo.

Among Alhadeff's passions is a penchant for teaming up with his performing arts peers. "There's a lot of things a citywide arts collaboration does. It unifies us. It creates new marketing strategies," he said, and paves the way for cross-promotion.

In 2012, the Opera San Luis Obispo orchestra paired with two local dance companies - Civic Ballet and State Street Ballet in Santa Barbara - to present "The Nutcracker" with live accompaniment for the first time. They teamed up again last year.

Thanks to the opera company's involvement, "The Nutcracker" has attracted new audiences. "It's not only for dance lovers now. It's not only for people who love 'Nutcracker,'" said Silvaggio, choreographer, teacher and owner of The Academy of Dance in San Luis Obispo. "It's for people who love orchestras. It's for people who love live music."

Opera San Luis Obispo also enjoys a partnership with Cal Poly's Student Opera Theatre. Last spring, the company joined Cal Poly students and members of Cuesta College's North County Chorus for a "co-opera" production of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's "The Magic Flute."

But Central Coast synergy reached its full potential with Opera San Luis Obispo's production of Georges Bizet's "Carmen" in October 2013. The show attracted the company's largest audiences since the PAC opened in 1996.

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Karin Mushegain as Carmen and Isaiah Musik-Ayala as Escamillo in Opera San Luis Obispo's October 2013 production of "Carmen." | Luis Escobar

Opera San Luis Obispo's next ambitious undertaking is "Show Boat," a sweeping tale of love and loss that many scholars consider the first Broadway musical. The full-scale production, which runs May 10 and 11 at the Performing Arts Center in San Luis Obispo, marks the first time in the company's nearly 30-year history that it has presented such a show.

Based on Edna Ferber's novel of the same name, "Show Boat" centers around the performers, stagehands and stevedores who live and work aboard the stately Mississippi River showboat Cotton Blossom. The decades-spanning storyline, which features music by Jerome Kern and lyrics by Oscar Hammerstein II, touches on romance, racism and the changing face of the South.



"Show Boat," playing May 10 and 11 in San Luis Obispo, brings together Drew Silvaggio of Civic Ballet of San Luis Obispo, Colleen Wall of Morro Bay High School Choral Ensemble, Brian Asher Alhadeff of Opera San Luis Obispo and Erik Austin of Kelrik Productions. | Luis Escobar

Opera San Luis Obispo is presenting "Show Boat" in "grand opera fashion" with a 40-member ensemble, a 40-musician orchestra and 10-person dance ensemble, plus lavish sets on loan from **Utah Festival Opera & Musical Theatre**. Nine lead roles will be played by a mix of locals and Los Angeles area residents.

Collaborators include Civic Ballet, the **Morro Bay High School Choral Ensemble** and **Kelrik Productions** in San Luis Obispo, which produces shows on the Central Coast and at **El Portal Theatre in North Hollywood**. The LT Choral Ensemble, led by **Lita Gaithers Owens**, will also take the stage.

Alhadeff hopes to "essentially recreate a classical American musical the way it was initially envisioned by the (creators)," he said.

"As musical theater has become more modernized and more popular and more successful, what we've seen is musicals reduced to the bare minimum," he explained. "The best part of opera is the large orchestras... the expensive costumes, the ballet. ... Basically, opera means 'big.'"



A scene from Utah Festival Opera & Musical Theatre's 2007 production of "Show Boat." | Utah Festival Opera & Musical

The challenge, he continued, is to offer that sumptuous opera experience without losing sight of practical matters. He sees "gross mismanagement" and "terrible, terrible greed" as the main reasons behind **San Diego Opera's downfall**, describing the company's annual budget of \$15 to \$20 million as "obscene."

"Carmen," in contrast, cost \$160,000, while "Show Boat" will cost \$140,000.

"The hard stereotype I still have to deal with is 'If it's from your community, it's not good. If it doesn't cost this many millions of dollars, it can't possibly be good,'" Alhadeff explained.

"That opera, it's not just an opera. It's the ballet your neighbors are in. It's the chorus your grandparents sing in. It's the sets your teacher builds in his spare time," he said. "We have to remind people about all the aspects that are in live performance and how we benefit (as a) society from that presence ..."

Silvaggio, who helped found Central Coast dance festival [JumpBrush: Pacific Coast Dance Convergence](#), believes "Show Boat" will lead to more collaborations between community groups. "People will get the power of banding with other arts organizations, and ... it's just going to be something that's done," he said.

Alhadeff's 10-year plan is even grander. It involves transforming San Luis Obispo into an "opera town" with adventurous tastes.

"My personal goal is to engender the trust of our community," said Alhadeff, whose company is producing Giuseppe Verdi's "Aida" in October. "Someday, they won't even have to know the title. (They'll go) 'Opera SLO is performing. This is going to be great.'"

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*Top Image: Carmen (Karin Mushegain) is courted in Opera San Luis Obispo's October 2013 production of "Carmen." | Luis Escobar*



#### About the Author

Sarah Linn covers film, television and the performing arts as an entertainment writer for The Tribune newspaper of San Luis Obispo, Calif. She shares her insights on Facebook, Twitter and via her blog, "She Likes to Watch." [MORE ►](#)

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