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SECTION D

Giving storytellers a TV voice of their own

CreaTV San Jose director channels her creativity

By Sue McAllister

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Suzanne St. John-Crane always finds a way to communicate her passion, concern or heartache.

Executive director of public-access television station CreaTV San Jose, St. John-Crane once wrote and starred in a play about mother-daughter relationships. She regularly belts out blues tunes with her band, Pearl Alley. And for nearly 20 years she has produced award-winning videos and television series for a variety of outlets.



St. John-Crane

"I love the art of making a moving, informative video and reaching an audience. I love that," says St. John-Crane, 40. And one of her favorite things about her job, she says, is introducing new members of CreaTV to the many ways they can tell their stories using video.

"I sort of feel like Santa Claus, teaching people 'Guess what you have access to here?'" she says, laughing at the kid-on-Christmas-morning excitement she still feels about videography after years in the business.

CreaTV San Jose is a 3-year-old, nonprofit community media center that operates four public-access channels. It also offers video production and editing workshops to the public, and allows San Jose residents to make their own cable-TV shows, once they've taken a class or two. The center now has more than 600 members, who produce more than 140 shows a month for CreaTV's community channel (15) alone. Individual memberships cost \$50, with discounts for San Jose residents younger than 25 or older than 64.

Series range from an award-winning gardening program called "The Naked Garden" to "WomenNow," a show geared toward women of the South Asian diaspora, to "The CEO Show," featuring Silicon Valley business leaders.

In addition to running CreaTV, St. John-Crane is also the mother of Hannah, 7, and Ruby, 4, and she heads up Pearl Alley, the blues band put together about 10 years ago with her husband, guitarist and Apple employee David Crane.

"How much I'm singing is directly in proportion to how satisfied and happy I am," she says.

But she didn't always find it easy to express herself. In fact, the idea of singing onstage used to terrify her. Nonetheless, she craved the experience, which she'd first tasted when singing at St. Robert's Church in her hometown of San Bruno.

After her mother, who lived a tumultuous and often painful life, died when St. John-Crane was 24, she knew she needed to overcome her fears. "I said 'I've got to sing. You know, I can't keep making excuses for not doing this, or being too afraid,'" she recalls.

One night about 15 years ago, she was at JJ's Blues club in San Jose watching a guitar-playing friend in a jam session led by Archie Lee Hooker, nephew of the legendary

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CREATV SAN JOSE PROGRAMMING

Comcast subscribers in San Jose and Campbell see it on Channels 15, 27, 28 and 30. Others can view it on

DAVID PACKARD'S dream



JOSIE LEPE/STAFF

"It was a crazy gesture, a romantic gesture, a gesture of love for Mozart," David Packard says of his latest project.

Philanthropist injects a passion for Mozart and nearly \$4 million into Opera San Jose's stunning new production of 'Idomeneo'

By Richard Scheinin

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Opera San Jose's new production of Mozart's "Idomeneo" at the California Theatre is setting records for lavishness on a South Bay stage: Massive sets, with multiple balconies and towering columns, reproducing the ancient Palace of Knossos. A troupe of dancers from Ballet San Jose. A 40-voice chorus. And in many ways, it's all been guided by arts philanthropist David Packard, whose Packard Humanities Institute is co-producing "Idomeneo" — and pouring in most of the funds to make it happen.

The total is edging toward \$4 million, pushing the production toward San Francisco Opera-style spending levels. And why is this happening? Because Packard is a lifelong Mozart nut, whose Harvard doctoral thesis concerned Linear A, a writing system in ancient Crete — which is where "Idomeneo" is set. So Packard cherry-picked Mozart expert George Cleve as conductor and brought in the ballet's Dennis Nahat as choreographer. He even translated the supertitles from the Italian, and wrote new software to synchronize them with the musical score — all this at the California Theatre, whose \$75 million restoration was guided a few years back by Packard.

I spoke by phone with Packard, 70, about "Idomeneo," which runs through Sept. 25.

Q David, is it fair to call "Idomeneo" a vanity production?

A You could say it's a vanity production if you want. But the purpose is so other people will learn how wonderful Mozart is and how wonderful this opera is. I'm certainly not doing it to make myself famous. I didn't take a bow or anything. Doing something you love and believe in — if you want to call it vanity, you can call it vanity. It was a crazy gesture, a romantic gesture, a gesture of love for Mozart.

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PAT KIRK/OPERA SAN JOSE

In foreground from left, Rebecca Davis, Christopher Bengoceca and Aaron Blake star in Opera San Jose's production of "Idomeneo" by Mozart.

OPERA SAN JOSE

Presenting Mozart's "Idomeneo," conducted by George Cleve, directed by Brad Dalton, choreographed by Dennis Nahat, with two casts in rotation; co-produced by the Packard Humanities Institute

Through: Sept. 25

Where: California Theatre, 345 S. First St., San Jose

Tickets: \$51-\$101, 408-437-4450, www.operasj.org

Also: David Packard's essays about the show: www.idomeneo.co

Packard

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And nothing makes me happier than to see people love Mozart or Fred Astaire [Packard is also the classic-film buff behind the Stanford Theatre in Palo Alto]; they're kind of in the same category. I'm hoping the audiences that come to this opera will come away feeling how wonderful it is.

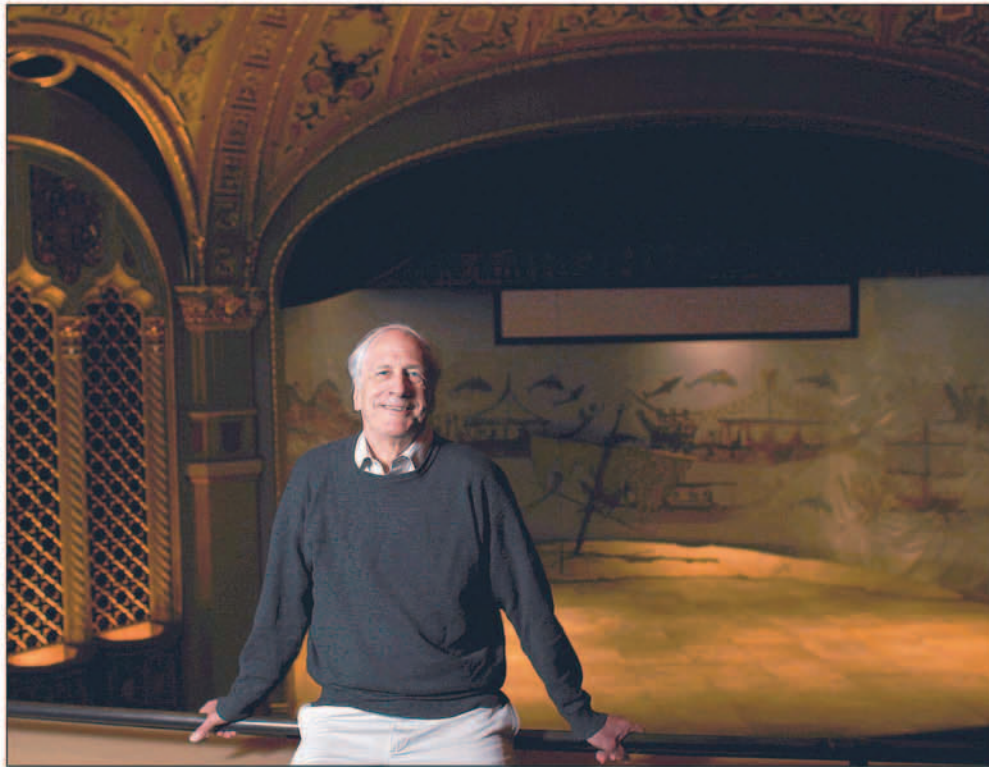
Q You've called Mozart "the most important person in human history."

A I love Mozart, all of Mozart, and over the years Opera San Jose has been doing the same four Mozart operas that everybody does ("The Marriage of Figaro," "The Magic Flute," "Don Giovanni" and "Cosi fan tutte"). I really thought they ought to try this one for a change, but they would always say, "It's deadly boring. We'll lose our audience." And I said, "Oh, I don't think so, this is a wonderful opera." And it turns out Irene Dalis (Opera San Jose's founder and general director) had never even seen it, and I gave her a couple of DVDs, and said, "Will you please just watch these?" And by 10 the next morning, she called me, and she was a complete convert: "This is a sensational opera! I had no idea."

So we decided to do it — and this is completely beyond anything that Opera San Jose would ever consider doing on its own. They kind of agreed to "let David go in and go crazy." So this is a one-of-a-kind event.

Q What's special about the opera?

A It's in a different world from what Mozart normally wrote in. If you think about it, if Mozart had lived longer, he might have



JOSIE LEPE/STAFF

"This is completely beyond anything that Opera San Jose would ever consider doing on its own. They kind of agreed to 'let David go in and go crazy.'" Packard says.

gone back to this kind of music again. There were so many forests he could walk in, and if he'd lived, maybe he would've come back to this one.

I've only seen it professionally performed one other

time, and that was in San Francisco about 12 years ago. And the overwhelming memory I have is of the orchestra and the chorus. I just had this feeling that the opera was full of orchestral sounds and choral writing

that I'd never heard from Mozart before. It's almost like Haydn's "Creation" or something. It's a huge work

of a different kind.

Q Tell me about some of the sets and their relationship to ancient Crete.

A I love the set for the beginning of Act III, where they also sing the quartet. They're in a little basement room with some frescoes — of lilies of some kind, and some swallows. And that's a direct reproduction of a fresco from Thera, which is an island about 100 miles north of Crete. It's now known as Santorini. And the ancient site was covered by volcanic eruptions, just like Pompeii, and that's why those excavations are preserved.

And in Act II — the harbor scene with all the boats in the background; that is an exact copy blown up many times of a miniature fresco painted about 1700 B.C. on the island of Santorini. So when you look at those guys in the boats, you're actually looking at people who lived 3,700 years ago. The miniature fresco was only about 16 inches high and a couple of meters wide; this is a cyclorama we're using

in the theater, a backdrop that's about 86 feet wide.

Then there's the huge palace set with the two balconies in Act III, which weighs 14,000 pounds — that was my craziest gesture for this production. Originally, the set designer wanted to do something simpler. But I said, "Shouldn't we try to reproduce the original facade from the palace at Knossos?" We had it built someplace on Treasure Island, a shop where they do things for San Francisco Opera and other places.

It's 26 feet high and at least 50 feet wide. And for the rest of the opera, that whole set is hanging up in the air on eight steel cables.

Q You selected all these images? Many of the sets were your vision?

A All of these ancient images were chosen by me, 100 percent. That doesn't mean that the official set designer didn't have an important role in making it work in the theater, but I said, "Take a look at this image."

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PAT KIRK/OPERA SAN JOSE

Alexander Boyer, center, portrays the king of Crete in "Idomeneo." The Opera San Jose production runs through Sept. 25 at the California Theatre.

Packard

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Q This is costing you a phenomenal amount of money.

A Yes, I promised Irene that, whatever happened, Opera San Jose would not suffer from doing "Idomeneo." I wouldn't be surprised if we hit \$4 million by the time we finish — an incredible amount. Most companies don't ever hit that number. I'm still not sure; it may be \$3 million and something.

I insisted on all these fancy and authentic sets, and it's a big, complicated thing. And then you have to have a lot of stagehands; I had no idea how hard it is just to get all that stuff rigged into the theater. It took about 50 stagehands a full week to get it all in, and that cost a

shocking amount of money.

Q You haven't mentioned the giant pipe organ at the California Theatre. You're using it to signal the earthquake in the final act.

A We put in four 32-foot pipes — installed especially for the production. (Organ restoration expert) Ed Stout got them all ready at his shop in Hayward. There are supposed to be 12 of them, but we only restored the ones we needed for this production. We'll do the rest another time.

The fact is that this production combines my reasonable professional knowledge of the period, together with my fanatical interest in Mozart, together with my love of old theaters. So it's a strange thing. Here I am sitting in a theater that I essentially restored, watching a production that I essentially created.

Q Will you underwrite another production for the company?

A You probably have no idea how much stress goes into producing an opera. There's one crisis after another. I don't rule out doing something else, but you have to think of what you can do to make a contribution.

Do you know Satyajit Ray's film, "The Music Room"? It's about an old guy who wants to put on a really beautiful music concert. He wants to get all the best musicians. The world is collapsing around him; the modern world has caught up with him. And he wants to do one glorious gesture just to show that beauty still exists in the world, so he can go out in a burst of glory. Sometimes I feel like the crazy guy in that movie.

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