

For Immediate Release

September 10, 2008

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ACCLAIMED OPERA DIRECTOR NATHANIEL MERRILL DIES AT 81

DENVER, CO—Opera Colorado founder and internationally renowned opera director Nathaniel Merrill died from complications due to Alzheimer’s Disease approximately 9:10 pm on Tuesday, September 9 at Aspen Siesta nursing home. He was 81.

During his career as an opera stage director and producer, Merrill served for twenty-eight seasons as Resident Stage Director for the New York Metropolitan Opera and directed more than one hundred different operas in over two hundred separate productions worldwide. He produced operas in New York, San Francisco, Chicago, Denver, Miami, Baltimore, Philadelphia, Houston, San Diego and regional companies in Canada and South America. His European credits included productions in Vienna, Hamburg, Frankfurt, Karlsruhe, Strasbourg and summer festivals in Salzburg, Bregenz and Verona.

Mr. Merrill was born February 8, 1927. Merrill was a graduate of Dartmouth College, majoring in music theory and composition with a minor in mathematics. He continued his education at the New England Conservatory of Music under Boris Goldovsky and received a Master of Arts degree in musicology under Dr. Karl Geiringer at the Boston University Graduate School. As a graduate fellow, Merrill spent two years in Europe where he served as an apprentice and assistant to Gunther Rennert in Hamburg, Friedrich Schramm at the Hessian State Opera in Wiesbaden and Carl Ebert and Hebert Graf at the Glyndebourne and Salzburg Festivals.

Beginning with the 1960-61 season, Merrill’s long career with the Metropolitan Opera began as “Bing’s boy,” serving under the legendary impresario Sir Rudolf Bing.

That first season at the Met he directed *L'Elisir d'Amore* and *Turandot*. In the coming years, he would direct such notable productions as *Die Meistersinger von Nurnberg*, *Aida*, *Samson et Dalila*, *Hansel and Gretel*, and *Der Rosenkavalier* among many others. Many of these productions continued in the repertory for generations.

His international career spanned the repertoire from *Rigoletto* and *Andrea Chenier* in Verona, Italy, to *Porgy and Bess* at the Bregenz Festival and *Faust* at the Teatro Colon in Buenos Aires. In 1974 he took a leave of absence from the Metropolitan Opera to serve for four years with Opera Du Rhin in Strasbourg, France as Resident Producer and Director of Technical Services. He was responsible for building a production facility for the company and for the technical renovation of the theatre.

Merrill also directed operas across the U.S., including many performances for the Central City Opera Festival during the late 1950s and early 1960s. His productions for Central City Opera included a production of *Aida* starring a young Beverly Sills. His other directing credits included productions for Chicago Lyric Opera, Houston Grand Opera, Opera Company of Philadelphia, San Diego Opera and many others.

Merrill and his then-wife music director Louise Sherman moved to Denver in 1981 to found Opera Colorado. "I feel an urge to do opera in a new and different form," Merrill told the press at the time. Opera Colorado became the first company in the United States to produce "grand opera in the round" at Boettcher Concert Hall. The company became known for producing two operas annually in repertory during a spring season. In those early seasons, Merrill engaged such luminaries as Placido Domingo, Eva Marton, James McCracken, Jon Vickers, Sherill Milnes, Diana Soviero, Elizabeth Holleque, Catherine Malfitano, Pilar Lorengar, Justino Diaz, Richard Bonyngue, Julius Rudel, Cornell MacNeil, Hao Jiang Tian, Yalun Zhang, Samuel Ramey, set designer Ming Cho Lee and many others.

Under Merrill's leadership, the company added a third production to its season at the Temple Hoyne Buell Theatre at the Denver Performing Arts Complex during the 1990-91 season. Verdi's *Otello* was the first full production to be staged at the Buell. After the death of Louise Sherman in 1998, Mr. Merrill retired from Opera Colorado. Mr. Merrill married Pamela Meyers in 2001.

Merrill received many accolades during his time with Opera Colorado, including being recognized by the Colorado General Assembly in 1989 for his artistic contributions to the state. He was the 1990 recipient of the Bonfils-Stanton Foundation Annual Award for Contributions to the Field of Arts and Humanities and received the 1991 Governor's Award for Excellence in the Arts. Merrill also received an honorary doctorate from the University of Colorado.

“Opera Colorado owes a great debt to Nathaniel Merrill,” said Opera Colorado General Director Gregory Carpenter. “His work consistently thrilled Colorado audiences with superb productions year after year and he made significant contributions to the artistic fabric of our state. Nat introduced Colorado audiences to the true magnificence of grand opera. Thanks to his visionary leadership, Opera Colorado has become the company that it is today. Opera Colorado will dedicate the performances in our 2008-2009 season to Nat’s memory.”

Merrill is survived by his wife Pamela Merrill, a son Hank Merrill, a daughter Linda Ely and a son Christopher Merrill.

Plans are pending for a private memorial service for family members in the coming days. A public memorial service will be announced later this year.

Memorial gifts in Nat Merrill's memory may be sent to Opera Colorado at 695 South Colorado Boulevard, Suite 20, Denver, Colorado, 80246 or online at www.operacolorado.org/get-involved/.

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Photos

NatMerrill.jpg Nat Merrill directing an Opera Colorado rehearsal in the mid-80s

Pam and Nat.jpg Wife Pamela Merrill and Nat Merrill at the opening gala of the Ellie Caulkins Opera House, September 10, 2005

Photos can be accessed at www.operacolorado.org/press/image-gallery/