Washington State JEWISH HISTORICAL SOCIETY
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Paula Podemski

SUMMARY

Paula Podemski reflects on her nearly three-decade career at the Seattle Opera, where she advanced from production assistant to company manager and helped support the collaborative work behind major productions. She discusses the profound impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the organization, including canceled performances, staff furloughs, and the development of innovative safety measures that allowed rehearsals and streamed productions to continue. Podemski also shares her personal experiences during the pandemic, highlighting the adaptability and resilience required to navigate professional uncertainty and maintain audience engagement. In addition, she explores her family's history as Holocaust survivors, her evolving Jewish identity, and her involvement in Seattle's Jewish community and the Washington State Jewish Historical Society.

Jeremy Ehrlich: Cloud. Hi. This is Jeremy Ehrlich with the Washington State Jewish Historical Society, and I'm here with Paula Podemski. Paula, thanks for taking the time to talk today. Absolutely. Well, first of all, I'm going to pin you here because you're the star.

Paula Podemski: Oh, I'd rather look at the cat than myself.

Jeremy Ehrlich: Uh, can you tell? So you. How long have you been at the opera? The Seattle Opera?

Paula Podemski: It will be 29 years in February 2022.

Jeremy Ehrlich: And what's your current position there? And what have you done since you've been there?

Paula Podemski: Currently, I'm the company manager; before that, I was the production supervisor for most of my time here. I started in 1993 as a production assistant, which at that time was the administrative assistant to the director of production. and after one year, I was promoted to production supervisor, and then in 2016, I was promoted to company manager.

Jeremy Ehrlich: Got it, got it. And what's your, I mean, how have you enjoyed working at the opera pre-pandemic? Pre-pandemic? What was your experience like at the opera?

Paula Podemski: Well, considering I've stayed here for so long, it's a wonderful place to work on a number of levels. First off, the people are absolutely fantastic and creative, and very collaborative. Really. A group that puts together puts aside their own personal agendas for the good of the whole, which is the production, the show we put on stage. Of course, the art form is magical, and I've really come to love it and appreciate it, especially since I'm exposed to it so much of the time. Live with live singers in front of me. , and then the administrative work, which is really mostly what I do, is, uh, you learn that without that, nothing gets done on the stage. Right? It's absolutely crucial.

Jeremy Ehrlich: And can you take us back to sort of fall of 2019, looking at the 2019, 2020 season, where the opera was? Did you have a strategic plan or a goal? What was what were you thinking back then?

Paula Podemski: Well, we had just gotten our new general director, and her name is Christina Scheppelmann, and she took over from a Lang who was with us for six years. And prior to that, it was Speight Jenkins who was with the company for 31 years and put Seattle Opera on the map. So we were looking at basically a typical season. with Cristina getting her bearings with us. And, we were going to do our typical five-opera season of main stage shows, four of which tend to be big standard repertoire. And we tend to do one kind of smaller, more innovative show each year. And we tend to do that in the late winter, early spring, before it was, in 2019, February 2019, it was the revolution of Steve Jobs. And that slot the following year, which was February 2020, was Charlie Parker's Yardbird, about the jazz musician Charlie Parker, which we barely closed before everything shut down. So we were going along just fine. And then in February and March, when things became quite critical and companies were shutting down or working remotely. We were going to end our season after Charlie Parker's Yardbird. We were going to end with a large-scale production of La Bohéme, with a cast of thousands, including a children's chorus. And we had to cancel it. And so we just did nothing on the stage. We were sent home to work from home. And then June of 2020, I, along with I think about 44 other opera employees, was furloughed. I was furloughed for six months. Some people, after a specified time, got permanently laid off. But then the winter of 2021, things were slowly ramping back up until August of this year. They brought us back. I would say about half of that 44, probably around 20 employees. So, as you can imagine, some during the time of furlough got other jobs, across time, some positions were deemed, I don't want to say unnecessary, but that was what the company needed to do without them. And so those folks got permanently laid off. So we've been sort of a skeleton crew, but currently we're slowly ramping up, filling positions that had gone unfilled for, well, ever since the pandemic started.

Jeremy Ehrlich: And so what were you doing at home, and then, you know, post-furlough, I mean, obviously, there's so much that goes into creating an opera. It's not like you can just turn it on and plug it in.

Paula Podemski: Yes. So, for myself personally, because the company could not guarantee any of us who were furloughed. They were very explicit that they could not guarantee that they would have us back. So for those six months, I actively looked for another job. I was, you know, doing the internet thing, sending out applications, and having interviews. Nobody took me on. And then in the late fall of 2020, my boss contacted me to say that they needed to have a COVID-19 rehearsal supervisor for rehearsals. They had gone through a couple of productions that they filmed for streaming without that, and found it necessary to have somebody in rehearsal who knew the protocol, who knew the rules. And so they had me back to do that. Along with a small portion of my regular work, which was doing visas for foreign artists. So I would be in rehearsals all day, and then what other time I could squeeze out, I was at my desk doing these applications, and so I did that from December of 2020 until May of 2021. And then I was furloughed again with no guarantee of a job. And so I was just about to start working. I'm actively looking again for another job when my boss contacted me and said, in late June, that they were bringing people back in August, and that included me if I wanted the job. Did I want the job? Well, of course I wanted my old job back. So I've been back full-time in my regular position, for lack of a better word, since August of this year.

Jeremy Ehrlich: Got it. The singing, of course, is a super spreader event. How do you hold an opera rehearsal safely in times of COVID?

Paula Podemski: We would have the singers be masked all the time while they were rehearsing. And during the height of the pandemic, when we were filming productions for streaming, the stage director was tasked with staging these operas with people, six or more feet apart. Which was, you know, a real creative endeavor. One of the shows we did was Don Giovanni, and he managed to convey the emotions and the feelings that are normal when people are very close together. He managed to do that with the singers, you know, sometimes 20 or 25ft apart. What we did was that they were never singing full out when they were together in rehearsal or filming. We recorded the music with the Seattle Symphony at Benaroya Hall with the singers, out in the audience, very far apart, with microphones, with a professional recording engineer. And then when we filmed the scenes, they would be masked until right before the scene was being filmed. They took off their mask, and then they lip-synched to the recording, which was played back on site on the set that we were filming. So they were never like it except at Benaroya Hall. When we were recording with the symphony, where people were very safely spaced. Yeah.

Jeremy Ehrlich: Interesting. How many performances did you end up streaming?

Paula Podemski: Well, for productions, the opera streamed, Cavalleria Rusticana. In the summer of 2020, they streamed Elixir of Love. And then we did Don Giovanni Winter of 2021, followed by Flight, which is a more recent opera, that we filmed at the Museum of Flight. That is about the gentleman who lived in the Charles de Gaulle airport for 18 years because he couldn't get his visa papers to leave the airport, and he didn't want to go back to his home country. And then we ended with Tosca in the spring of 2021.

Jeremy Ehrlich: And how did people react to those? Were you able to find some new audiences? Did your current audience stay with you?

Paula Podemski: They were very well received. They were critically successful. We didn't make any money on them, even though our subscribers got them as links to watch them for a set period. Subscribers got them as part of their subscription, and then the general public could buy them. I don't know, I think it was $35. So they were critical successes. And there are statistics about how many were new people who had never come to an opera before. Unfortunately, I don't have those off the top of my head, but it's not this, as you can imagine, it's not the same. And we didn't have the numbers that we would have if we had presented in the opera house. We just did our first back at McCaw Hall production of La Boheme, a scaled-down version. We did that in October, and we were generally around 61 to 65% sold of the house each night. So it that was that was more than we were expecting.

Jeremy Ehrlich: What's your normal percentage of seats to sell for a big opera?

Paula Podemski: Well, if it's a chestnut like La Boheme, it's, you know, in the 90 percent or sold out, something that's not so well known or not so popular could be anywhere from 70% on up. But, you know, that's why companies do the Carmen of the world. And, you know, La Boheme, Tosca. Because people know those people want to come see those. And they help pay the bills. Sure.

Jeremy Ehrlich: Sure. Opera is an art form that was never meant to be, you know, seen on film. Do you have any plans to continue once things reopen? Sort of completely? Do you have any plans to continue doing video work, or are you happy to leave it behind you?

Paula Podemski: Well, what we're currently doing is, um, we have a segment of our subscribers, as you can imagine, who are right now too afraid to come back. So with their subscription, they are sent a link to view, um, the opera. We film one performance, and they get a link to see that with their subscription. I think we're probably going to do that for the rest of this season. Uh, beyond the season, I don't think a decision has been made. So that's how we're handling it. But it's not being sold to the general public. It's just for our patrons who, for whatever reason, can. They've bought a subscription, but they cannot or are too afraid to come to McCaw Hall to see it in person.

Jeremy Ehrlich: Was there anything? Creative and interesting that came out of the switch to film, or was it all a compromise?

Paula Podemski: You know, I would say it was mostly a compromise from my purview, but it certainly stretched the performers and the directing staff. It certainly stretched their envelopes. Um, you know, they probably had to reach farther, Father. You know, the singers probably had to reach farther into themselves to bring out some things that they normally would convey through their voice live, and certainly the directing staff, as you can imagine, had to get very, very imaginative. Um, you know, you're talking about love scenes or fight scenes that normally people would be in very close proximity. That couldn't happen during that time frame.

Jeremy Ehrlich: Yeah. Interesting. I want to ask a technical question that I'm imagining someone might be interested in looking back on this era. I know we had a little bit of trouble with the Washington State unemployment system getting unemployment benefits. Did you hear of anyone at the opera who was, you know, who struggled to live during that time, the furlough time?

Paula Podemski: Well, I would, I mean, personally, I even had trouble getting benefits. I would say that is why a significant number of people had to go and get other jobs. Uh, they couldn't, you know, they felt like they couldn't wait around because these are people who need a consistent paycheck. That was more than what unemployment benefits provide. There were a significant number of my colleagues who are off working in totally other industries because they just couldn't wait around to see if the offer might come back.

Jeremy Ehrlich: Do you think that when do you when do you anticipate the opera being back to sort of where it was pre-pandemic?

Paula Podemski: Well, that's sort of hard to say. I think the rest of this season for us, which ends in May of 2022, will continue under a sort of Covid-type work environment. But I think that even, let's say our 22- 23 season. Let's say if we could, get back to producing in a way that we did before, I think there's it's just my sensibility that we're still going to have some audience members who are going to be trepidatious about sitting in a large house next to other people who they don't know, even though we require proof of vaccination or a negative COVID test to come and see our shows, and audiences have to remain masked throughout the show. I just think there's going to be a segment of the population that's not going to feel easy about coming. I have to say, I, as an aside, during La Bohéme, I went to the lobby a few times, and it was quite heartwarming to see so many patrons and including some elderly patrons who came bounding up the grand staircase with their masks on, just so eager to be back in the theater. I mean, people were just so excited to be back at the opera and see something live. And then, of course, they provided such a warm response. I mean, the curtain would go up, and they'd applaud the sets in each act. And, our general director went out for a curtain speech in just about every sentence. She said she got applause. It was just very heartwarming after coming through that leaked tunnel that we did, you know, coming out the other side and getting such a great response. It was wonderful.

Jeremy Ehrlich: Nice. Are you all required to be vaccinated to be back in the office?

Paula Podemski: And everybody is in all the crews. Everybody. Great. Yeah, the singers have to be.

Jeremy Ehrlich: Is that your job to check vaccination cards?

Paula Podemski: Uh, only for the people I supervise. So there are certain groups that I supervise. Um, supernumeraries, actors, dancers, children. Um, and so they send me those things, and I pass them on to our human resources director, and then I have to destroy them. I don't keep them.

Jeremy Ehrlich: Got it. Paula, I want to switch gears a little bit and ask you about yourself and your life. Can you give us a little bit of a biography? Where were you born?

Paula Podemski: I was born in Portland, Oregon, and my parents were Holocaust survivors. I have an older brother and sister. They're quite a bit older than I am. And in fact, they were born in Poland right after the war. I'm the only one in my nuclear family born in the United States. So that's my joke. I'm the only one who can become president of the United States. Um, and I came up to Seattle to go to the University of Washington, and then I never moved back. I stayed as a resident of Seattle all this time. After college, I worked for a bank for a few years, but I really hated it and always wanted to get into the theater. So I started volunteering backstage at community theaters, because I was too afraid to get on stage. And having learned that there's this whole world backstage, which makes you more employable on a consistent basis, I started in the world of stage management for a while, then became a production manager, and then got my job at the opera.

Jeremy Ehrlich: Nice. Do you speak Polish?

Paula Podemski: Oh, no. No. My parents spoke Yiddish at home, but they only used it so that I wouldn't understand what they were talking about. So I didn't learn it as well as my brother and sister did.

Jeremy Ehrlich: Were you involved as a family in the Jewish community in Portland?

Paula Podemski: You know, just peripherally because my parents weren't. Um, we belong to a synagogue, but we only went on high holidays, and they didn't force me to go to Sunday school, which, looking back on it, I'm really sorry that didn't happen. Because, you know, so many lifelong friendships are forged that way. I mean, I met these people later in life, but I could have known them in Portland and had, you know, such a fun time with them. So we were pretty assimilated and really not a part of it. I didn't get more into my Judaism until late high school and in college.

Jeremy Ehrlich: And what was that like? How did that happen to you?

Paula Podemski: Oh, well, it's an interesting question, because the synagogue we went to, the rabbi was a customer of my parents. They owned a men's clothing store in downtown Portland, and I had to work there as a teenager, of course. And he came in one day and was going on and on about how I should come to confirmation class, which is your final year of Sunday school. You're like 15. You're like a sophomore in high school. And I didn't want to go because I thought, well, I haven't been to Sunday school, I'm not going to know anything, and I'm certainly not going to know anybody there. So why do I want to, you know, put myself in that situation and then, um, the High Holidays followed, and we were sitting in synagogue, and he called this other young student girl my age up to the podium and whispered to her and pointed right at me. I was in the front row of the balcony and sent her up to talk to me, and she told me how, you know, it'll be fun. It's not that hard. And all this. And I thought, you know, how brave of her to come talk to me. I need to go to this just for her. And we ended up becoming very close friends and lifelong friends. And I went to this class, and I found it fascinating, because we not only studied, you know, Jewish subjects, but other religions as well. And I made lifelong friends there. And then I started going to synagogue every week. And in college, I went into comparative religion and took Jewish studies classes, and things sort of sprang from there.

Jeremy Ehrlich: And when they sprang from there, what did that look like?

Paula Podemski: Well, I was I got more involved in Jewish activities at U-dub. I kind of centered my social life mostly around other Jewish students. You know, I became friends with, um, I got a little bit more observant for a while. That sort of fell away after some years. Um, but, uh, yeah. So I, I, uh, I became involved in some things and, um, just gained more of a Jewish identity because of that experience.

Jeremy Ehrlich: And when did you join the Washington State Jewish Historical Society, and how? Well.

Paula Podemski: That was another sort of, um, getting, um, well, invited in. So, uh, Albert Israel is a long-time friend of mine. He

and I met in college, actually, and he's been a very integral part of the historical society for many years. And he started talking to me about getting involved and getting on the board. And I had been on the board of a community theater for a number of years, and a very grassroots organization that was going through some tough transitional times. And so I had been burned out on boards for a while. But, you know, some years had passed, and I thought, well, you know, I'd like to get involved with the board again, but with an organization that was more together and also kind of get a little bit more involved in the Jewish community. And I thought it was important that the history be preserved and the early Jewish history of Washington state be preserved. So I was interested in their mission. And so I got on the board and, boy, I really can't remember how many years I think I was on for, like three years, and I co-chaired two galas, and got to know Lisa Kranzler very well. So that's how I got involved. It was all Albert Israel's fault.

Jeremy Ehrlich: I think there are a number of people who can make that claim. Yeah. Paula, I never knew that your parents were Holocaust survivors. What was their story?

Paula Podemski: Oh, well, you know, the unfortunate thing about it is they would not talk about it, so I don't know too much. Um, they each came from small towns that were about 30 or 40 minutes by car, outside of which is a large textile city. Sometimes it's pronounced large, and, um, they were in ghettos and then sent to a number of work camps. I don't know how many years. And, until they were liberated by the Russians, they met after the war. They met through friends. They had returned to their towns, which, of course, did not want them back. And they suffered quite severe anti-Semitism, trying to re-establish themselves in their small towns. My parents met and got married, and my dad had gone to trade school as a child, as a tailor. And he and my uncle started a factory in which they made men's suits, that's where my sister and brother were born. And then the communists came in and demanded that the factory, you know, become communist. And they were like, you know, no, we're not doing that. So, they went to Israel for a year, but my father found he really couldn't make it in Israel, because who wears suits in Israel in 1948? You know, his joke was that even the prime minister wore shorts. So by then, my mom, who, uh, miraculously, was one of five siblings, five siblings out of eight, survived. My dad was the only survivor of his family, but my mom, there were five of them, and a number of them had already made it over to the US. So, of course, she wanted to be with her siblings. So, they got sponsored to come to the US, and my aunts and uncles had been sponsored in Portland. So that's how they wound up in Portland. That's kind of a nutshell. Version of the family story.

Jeremy Ehrlich: Very interesting. Thank you. Paula. It's been great to have a chance to talk to you before I go. Is there one thing that I should have asked you that I haven't asked yet? What's the super interesting thing that I haven't asked you about yet?

Paula Podemski: Oh, gosh. Of course, I'll probably think of it when we get off, but, um. No, I think you've been pretty thorough. I just want to say that even though I'm not on the board of the historical society anymore, I'm a huge supporter. And, I think it's really, really important work to preserve this history because it can be so easily lost. Um, so kudos to the historical society. Thank you for finding me even an atom's worth of interest to be interviewed.

Jeremy Ehrlich: Well, thanks, Paula. You're we're all we're all part of Washington State Jewish history. And appreciate your take.

Paula Podemski: Sure.