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Lights. Camera. Opera.

The 2021 Merola artists did something no group of Merolini has done before—they made a movie. Award-winning director David Paul worked with the young artists on *Back Home: Through the Stage Door*. Using classics and lesser-known gems of the vocal repertoire as its words and music, the film focuses on artists returning to the theatre to create music together.

Working on the film was a new experience for young artists used to performing live on stage. "When the film project was presented to me, I didn't know what to expect," says tenor Edward Graves, "but during the filming process, I felt like I was on a movie set. There was a large crew and a lot of equipment. I'm really excited to see the final product!"

"Getting to work on a film project as part of Merola's 2021 season was so thrilling," adds soprano Catherine Goode. "It was very different from any other production or experience I've had at other programs or companies. Opera is evolving, and I'm grateful Merola provided an opportunity to participate in a new and exciting way of sharing opera with the world."

A lot of preparation was involved, both for the singers and the pianist/coaches. "Working on this film project was one of the highlights of my summer at Merola, as well as one of the more intense working periods of the program," says pianist/coach Marika Yasuda. "The preparation leading up to the filming itself involved numerous daily coachings and staging rehearsals that pushed all of the artists to be as open and imaginative to what the filming process would be like, as we did not have access to Herbst Theatre until filming week. When it all came together, it was incredibly



joyful for me to see everyone in their costumes against the backdrop of the beautiful Herbst Theatre."

Even before the pandemic, film played an increasingly important role in the opera world. "Filmed opera is a longstanding tradition that's currently experiencing a thrilling and innovative resurgence," says soprano Ashley Marie Robillard. "Getting to be a part of that resurgence was a gift beyond measure. Not only was it wickedly fun to shoot, it provided us with vital experience in a realm of opera making that is very much here to stay. I'm so very excited to see the hard work of the many incredible artists both on camera and off!"

The film was a collaborative effort for all 27 of the Merola artists. "Taking direction from a director as accomplished as David Paul not only facilitated my growth as a performer, but also allowed me to collaborate with my fellow artists in a way that proved generative, kind, and safe," says tenor Gabriel Hernandez. Summing up a feeling that seems to be shared by all who worked on the film, he adds, "Coming back home could not have felt more welcoming."

Back Home: Through the Stage Door premiered online for Merola members on August 13 and for the general public on August 27.



In Memoriam



Donna and Nordin Blacker at the 2015 Merola Gala. Photo by Kristen Loken.

Nordin F. Blacker

Nordin F. Blacker, of San Francisco, passed away on May 9, 2021. He was born in 1937 in Omaha, Nebraska, to Harry and Sonya Blacker. The family moved to California after World War II following stints in Philadelphia and New York City. Nordin attended Los Angeles High School where he met his wife Donna. After high school, the two started college at the University of California at Los Angeles and got married in their sophomore year. Nordin transferred to an accelerated

law program at the University of Southern California, where he obtained an undergraduate degree in 1961 and a law degree in 1963.

In 1964, Nordin and his family moved to the Bay Area, and he took a job at the Santa Clara County Counsel's office, where he focused on social services and health care, and developed his life-long interest in legal issues for children and families. In 1969, he went into private general practice in San Jose. While practicing in San Jose, he was also appointed as a part-time Federal magistrate, at the time—in 1971—the youngest-ever appointment to the Federal bench. He served in that position until he moved to San Francisco in 1986 to establish a new boutique family law practice where he practiced until his retirement in 2018.

Nordin was a devoted and beloved husband, father, and grandfather, and was a cherished friend to many. He was an avid reader of history, a gourmand, a jazz enthusiast, a green thumb, and a political junkie. Nordin will be remembered as a consummate gentleman, generous with his time, wise, warm, and kind.

He leaves behind his wife of 65 years, Donna (former Merola Board President), their children Deborah and David, Deborah's partner David Brown, David's wife Rani Spudich, and four grandchildren: Nathan Richardson, Lida Richardson, Anjali Blacker, and Alexander Blacker. "Nordin's affable personality, great sense of humor, and generosity will be greatly missed by the Merola family," says Jean Kellogg, Executive Director.

Raymond O'Shaughnessy Kelly

Raymond O'Shaughnessy Kelly, was born in Chicago, Illinois, to Ann O'Shaughnessy and Edward Kelly on May 27, 1934. He left this world surrounded by loving family on April 21, 2021.

Raymond's career was in accounting with expertise in tax compliance. After many years in the corporate world, he started his own CPA firm which led to enduring partnerships that were a source of both accomplishment and endearment for many. His love for business was only surpassed by his love of family, the arts, and community.

Raymond's passions were education, above all, providing advanced opportunities to his progeny. He learned

about opera as a youth and became a supporter of many organizations, including the Merola Opera Program. He had a lifelong love of literature and read voluminously, offering his exacting and incisive opinions to all who shared his table. He enjoyed skiing, golf, and held a reputation for ruthlessness in bridge. He and his wife Elsie traveled the world, but he never lost his humility. Residents of Pacific Heights will remember him as the man in the yellow jacket who would pick up the trash on the streets when he walked to get the morning paper on Fillmore Street.

Raymond is survived by his wife of 43 years, Elsie (a Merola board member for many years), seven children, three stepchildren, eleven grandchildren, and three great grandchildren.

From the Executive Director



Dear friends,

It will come as no surprise that the 2021 Merola training program looked a bit different from previous summers, but after a year's hiatus, we were thrilled we were able to bring 27 talented young artists to San Francisco for an in-person experience. In their first summer helming Merola's artistic program, Carrie-Ann Matheson and Markus

Beam designed an innovative curriculum that integrated insightful virtual seminars and in-person coaching. The summer took place under strict COVID protocols that conformed to higher education standards, as all of our rehearsals, coachings and lessons took place at the San Francisco Conservatory of Music.

Although health and safety restrictions ruled out our traditional full opera productions, we were able to bring a number of innovative programs to life. *What the Heart Desires*, a recital featuring repertoire by women and people of color, curated by mezzo-soprano Ronnita Miller (Merola '05) and tenor Nicholas Phan, celebrated diversity in song and showcased vibrant works by under-represented composers. For the first time ever, our Merolini participated in a professional film production—*Back Home: Through the Stage Door*—under the creative oversight of award-winning director David Paul. This initiative allowed our young artists stretch their wings in an increasingly important medium in the opera world. We also saw the return of the beloved Merola Grand Finale, outdoors this year and showcasing a smaller group of artists who provided us with a vibrant musical celebration. The limited lineup for this concert was due to a breach in COVID protocols that necessitated a number of our Merolini switching to remote instruction for the final two weeks of the program for the health and safety of our artists, faculty, and production staff.

In these pages you'll find photos that capture memories from our five master classes streamed to members (page 4) as well as from our summer productions (page 5). Several of our 2021 Merolini share their experience working on *Back Home: Through the Stage Door*, in an article on page 1. On page 2, we remember friends we have sadly lost in recent months.

Carrie-Ann and Markus are preparing for the audition tour to select the 2022 Merolini. You can keep up with the 2021 young artists, and our alumni from prior years, by following us on social media where we share alumni news and also feature monthly alumni spotlights and exclusive Merolini Mixer performances (more details on page 8).

I look forward to seeing you at our virtual events this fall and winter—and hopefully in person before too much longer!

With all best wishes,

Jean Kellogg

A Generous Gift From J. Gerard Gagnon

Recently, Merola received a very generous addition to its endowment in a legacy gift from J. Gerard (Gerry) Gagnon. Mr. Gagnon, born in Chicopee, Massachusetts, was a Navy veteran of the Korean War. He and his partner, Troy Browman, resided in Honolulu and supported many arts organizations, both in Hawaii and in the mainland United States. Mr. Gagnon passed away on September 18, 2020. Mr. Browman pre-deceased him.

Merola has been very fortunate to have remained stable through the COVID pandemic that has been so devastating for the performing arts community. One of the reasons for the Program's ability to weather challenging times is its endowment. Merola annually withdraws 5% of the endowment (averaged over three years). Thanks to generous support, both in legacy gifts and gifts made during the donors' lifetimes, Merola's endowment supports almost 50% of its general operations. (Merola still has to fundraise extensively for the remaining amount).

Mr. Gagnon's legacy will provide ongoing support to Merola in perpetuity, helping ensure the program remains healthy and vibrant. Everyone at Merola could not be more grateful.



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Master Classes

San Francisco Conservatory of Music

Merola Opera Program showcased five master classes in-person and with video on demand. They featured master teacher Denyce Graves, and master coaches Warren Jones, Martin Katz, Carrie-Ann Matheson, and Howard Watkins.

Denyce Graves (July 1)



Left to right: Mezzo-soprano and master teacher Denyce Graves. Tenor Edward Graves with Denyce Graves. Soprano Johanna Will, pianist/coach Shiyu Tan, and Denyce Graves.

Howard Watkins (July 7)



Left to right: Master Coach Howard Watkins. Baritone Thomas Lynch and pianist/coach Anna Smigelskaya with Howard Watkins. Soprano Celeste Morales with Howard Watkins.

Carrie-Ann Matheson (July 14)



Left to right: San Francisco Opera Center Artistic Director and Master Coach Carrie-Ann Matheson. Tenor Victor Cardamone and pianist/coach Bryan Banowetz with Carrie-Ann Matheson. Mezzo-soprano Gabrielle Barkidjija, pianist/coach Marika Yasuda, and Carrie-Ann Matheson.

2021 Merola Summer Festival

What the Heart Desires (July 3, San Francisco Conservatory of Music Concert Hall)



Left to right: Mezzo-soprano Gabrielle Beteag. Mezzo-soprano Gabrielle Barkidjija with pianist/coach Marika Yasuda. Tenor Edward Graves with pianist/coach Anna Smigelskaya. Co-curators Ronnita Miller ('05) and Nicholas Phan with the cast of the recital: Gabrielle Barkidjija, Anna Smigelskaya, Bryan Banowetz, Tianchi Zhang, Shiyu Tan, Marika Yasuda, Erica Xiaoyan Guo, Gabrielle Beteag, Laureano Quant, Celeste Morales, and Edward Graves.

Back Home: Through the Stage Door (Herbst Theatre)



Left to right: Director David Paul. Baritone Laureano Quant, soprano Mikayla Sager, and mezzo-soprano Gabrielle Barkidjija. Director David Paul and Director of Photography Heath Orchard with the cast. Ashley Marie Robillard, Ben Brady, Gabrielle Barkidjija, Mikayla Sager, and Laureano Quant. Behind-the-scenes of *Back Home: Through the Stage Door*.

Merola Grand Finale (July 31, Bandshell in Golden Gate Park)



Left to right: Soprano Catherine Goode. Bass-baritone Andrew Dwan and tenor Victor Cardamone. Bass-baritone Andrew Dwan and mezzo-soprano Jesse Mashburn with pianist/coach Shiyu Tan. Anna Smigelskaya, Jesse Mashburn, Gabrielle Beteag, Andrew Dwan, Victor Cardamone, Catherine Goode, Shiyu Tan, and Audrey Chait. Mezzo-sopranos Gabrielle Beteag and Jesse Mashburn with soprano Catherine Goode.

Photography by Kristen Loken.

Photography by Kristen Loken.

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