

The Business

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Starving Artistes

How come the world-class Chicago Opera Theater is still turning its pockets inside out?

By Deanna Isaacs

Wanna grab a seat on what should be the hottest board in town? Chicago Opera Theater president Dorothy Osborn Walton is looking to fill a half dozen of them right now, as COT launches into its third season in the Harris Theater and sixth under resident genius and general director Brian Dickie. But Walton's unabashed about the requirements: she wants folks with a pipeline to deep corporate pockets. COT, whose provocative productions showcase flawless performances of some of the most esoteric material around, has an international reputation for high culture that pops but is still living paycheck to paycheck. With no endowment and no cash cushion it operates on a shoestring, one misstep away from extinction. This board, Walton notes, has not been a place for the fainthearted.

That was never more obvious than during the 2004 season. The company had just taken the dicey step of relocating from the 900-seat Athenaeum in Lakeview to the Harris's 1,400-seat venue on the north edge of what was becoming Millennium Park. But the park was still a hard-hat zone, people didn't know where the theater was, and the company had its own identity issues. ("There are still a lot of people in Chicago, even among those who love opera, who don't know about COT," Walton says.) Ticket sales fell short of expectations, and expenses at the Harris, where the rent was \$4,000 a day and union labor was mandated, were 30 percent higher than in the old location. They'd barely completed their season opener—an acclaimed production of *L'incoronazione di Poppea*—when they ran out of money.

At an emotionally charged meeting a faction of the COT board voiced concern about management and viability, citing everything from a failure to cut expenses to Dickie's attitude. They discussed shutting the company down unless drastic changes were made; when the rest of the board balked, five of them—including the chairman—resigned. According to a former board member they left in frustration. But Walton says she thinks there was a fear factor. "People didn't want to take the risk, personally or professionally, in case it didn't



Chicago Opera Theater president Dorothy Osborn Walton, the current production of *Dido and Aeneas*



CARLOS J. ORTIZ (PORTRAIT); LIZ LAUREN (STILL)

work. We lost some good people and I thought to myself, what do we do now? But the rest of the board kept calling, saying, 'Let's just keep going,' and I couldn't really picture folding. I know how to keep it going; I don't know how to shut it down."

COT racked up a \$290,000 deficit over its \$3.2 million budget that year and was able to stay alive only because several board members came to the rescue with loans—and it didn't get easier in 2005. While the product continued to knock everybody's socks off, attendance, which had risen from about 10,000 at the Athenaeum to more than 14,000 the first year at the Harris, dropped slightly. Determined not to have another deficit, Walton says, they took a knife to the budget and managed to close out the year in the black—though "just barely."

The 2006 season, which opened with a typically quirky double bill of 17th- and 18th-century works, *The Padlock* and *Dido and Aeneas*, and is budgeted at \$3 million, looks like a

turning point to Walton. The Millennium Park location has blossomed into a greater asset than anyone could have anticipated during those tough days two years ago, and the season's closer, *Nixon in China* (with composer John Adams present and a China-themed gala in the works), is expected to generate even more than the usual buzz. Still, Walton, a senior vice president at Northern Trust, is the only member of the COT board with a corporate affiliation, and after ten years as president she's ready to hand off the baton. She just needs to find someone with the pockets and guts for the job.

Also Strapped

A brand-new name wasn't the only thing the Chicago Historical Society acquired last week. The day before CHS announced it would dump the snobby old S-word and henceforth be known as the Chicago History Museum, it took on \$51 million in

debt, about half of it new. President Gary Johnson says the museum issued low-interest bonds to refinance existing debt and raise money to cover the rehab of 75 percent of its public space, which began December 5 and is now pegged at \$27.5 million. CHS ran a \$1.5 million deficit last year and projects a \$1 million loss this year while everything but its research center is closed. But Johnson expects a surge of visitors when the museum reopens, which, along with a new-and-improved wedding and event space featuring the "longest unobstructed view of the lake in the city," he says will soon have the organization operating in the black. He says the budget for next year has been set conservatively at \$10 million, and adult admission—a suggested donation of \$5 before the museum closed—will likely jump to \$12.

A former securities lawyer with a reputation as a fund-raiser, and the first nonhistorian to head the museum, Johnson has been on the job since August. So far \$22 million has been

raised in a capital campaign with a goal that equals the rehab cost, \$2 million of it under his watch. The cash-strapped museum has been drawing money from its \$70 million endowment to cover construction bills, and Johnson says all of the donated funds will go to replenish and build the endowment. The Chicago History Museum will open September 30 with a new costume and textile gallery, a children's gallery, and twice as much space for the Chicago history galleries, which will thereafter be known as the Exelon Chicago History Galleries.

Just Plain Busted

Left of Center bookstore is closing just two years after it opened in an Edgewater storefront. In spite of "a nice, solid group of regulars," owner Arlene Levey says she's "deeply in debt and can't swing it anymore." She's selling the stock and fixtures at deep discounts and expects to be out by the end of the month. ☐

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Restaurants

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Reader staff and contributors and (where noted) individual Raters. Though reviewers try to reflect the Restaurant Raters' input, reviews should be considered one person's opinion; the collective Raters' opinions are best expressed in the numbers. The complete listings and information on how to become a Reader Restaurant Rater are available at www.chicagoreader.com/restaurantfinder.

R

Transformations

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5812 N. Broadway | 773-275-8797

F 8.8 | S 7.3 | A 6.2 | \$ (11 REPORTS)
ASIAN, VEGETARIAN/HEALTHY | LUNCH:
SATURDAY; DINNER: MONDAY-SATURDAY |
CLOSED SUNDAY | SMOKE FREE

☘☘☘ The name refers to Alice in Wonderland; the menu consists primarily of vegan versions of pan-Asian food—Smoked Veggie Duck, Almond UnChicken, Korean BBQ, Japanese Don Ka Su—though there's also a veggie burger and UnChicken Drumsticks. Dishes that don't use soy products are available, but Raters rave about the meat substitutes. Most entrees come with rice and salad; there's a large selection of appetizers, drinks, and vegan desserts. The walls are covered with bright mosaics and inspirational sayings. Raters say service can be slow. **Holly Greenhagen**

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\$
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If you're looking to impress the vegan in your life, this is the place for you. Amitabul offers an eye-popping array of vegetarian and vegan maki, stir-fries, pancakes, and noodle soups prepared with organic vegetables, tofu, legumes, and minimal oil. Some Raters find the food too bland, but dishes such as Dr. K's Cure-All (spicy noodle soup touted as, among other things, a hangover remedy), Chef Dave's Energy Nut (almonds, peanuts, and walnuts stir-fried with honey and plum sauce over noodles), and Nine Ways to Nirvana (whole wheat noodle soup with nine-grain miso beans) illustrate the belief of owners Bill and David Choi in the healing power of food.

Martha Bayne

Arya Bhavan
2508 W. Devon | 773-274-5800

F 8.0 | S 7.7 | A 5.8 | \$ (13 REPORTS)
INDIAN/PAKISTANI, VEGETARIAN/HEALTHY |
LUNCH: FRIDAY-SUNDAY; DINNER: SEVEN DAYS

☘☘☘ "Friendlier and more relaxed than Mysore Woodland and Udipi," says one Rater, while another gives Arya Bhavan points for serving southern as well as northern Indian dishes and a buffet that's "amazingly fresh." The lunch spread is offered Friday through Sunday, the dinner buffet nightly. Some favorite dishes include the garlic naan, mixed-vegetable pakora,

"I know now that cooked food is an addiction," Mehmet Ak says, explaining his decision to shutter his successful restaurant, Cousin's Turkish Cuisine, last summer. The previous fall he'd done a raw-food detox at some friends' urging—they claimed it could prevent cancer, but Ak, topped out at 235 pounds, was simply desperate to lose weight.

Cousin's Incredible Vitality
3038 W. Irving Park
773-478-6868

gone 100 percent raw (or "living," the term preferred by raw foodies).

For eight months after his conversion Ak continued to run Cousin's, but he felt increasingly guilty. "Why should I try to make money on something that is not healthy?" he says he asked himself. Plus his heart just wasn't in working with meat any longer: "I lost my passion to go behind the grill and make the kebabs," he says.

This wasn't the first time Ak's life dramatically changed course. He left Turkey at 20 to "discover the world," he says, and landed in New York after months on the crew of a cargo ship. He got his feet on the ground, then set off again with plans to drive cross-country, but halted in Chicago one sunny spring morning. "I said, you know what, I'm going to stay here, just like that," he says. In 1990, having worked for several years at Italian Village and other restaurants, he opened the first incarnation of Cousin's in Lakeview. By 1994 he'd opened three more locations. Business was good, but four years later Ak was burned-out. "At the time I said, this is too much work, it's no good," he says. He sold all four restaurants and started over as a general contractor.

In 2002 he signed up for a personal development seminar called the Landmark Forum, a descendant of est, where he came to feel he'd been wrong to leave the kitchen. "Being a chef and serving people lights me up," he says. He opened a new Cousin's, with all-new recipes, on Irving Park in October 2002. It did well over the next two years, becoming a favorite of Reader Restaurant Raters. Regulars were disappointed to see the place shut down last July.

Ak spent the next several months educating himself about raw foods and developing a menu for what would become Cousin's Vitality. He attended Living Light International, a raw-food culinary institute in California, where he learned to make things like "tuna" simulated with sprouted almonds, sunflower seeds, celery, spices, and kelp powder. Afterward he tweaked the spices in certain dishes and converted some of his old Turkish recipes: in his hummus, for example, he swaps pureed zucchini for chickpeas, which have to be cooked; his tabbouleh uses soaked and sprouted quinoa rather than bulgur. To test-drive dishes and drum up excitement for the new place he hosted a series of potlucks for other raw-food enthusiasts.

At one of these an energetic young woman named Lisa Persico introduced herself. She told Ak she'd been raw for three years, and had also converted after years of struggling with her body image. "I would just drink coffee and smoke cigarettes; I was on that diet," she says. A few years earlier Persico's sister had badgered her to attend a lecture by raw-food guru David Wolfe. "I was like this the whole time," Persico says, raising an eyebrow and crossing her arms over her chest. "He comes out and says, 'Today's the best day ever!' and I was like, What? Is he kidding?" But a few things Wolfe said that day clicked with Persico. She bought his book and started reading it, cigarette in hand. Eventually she canceled all her subscriptions to



Mehmet Ak and Lisa Persico at Cousin's Incredible Vitality, Mediterranean "pasta" made from zucchini

beauty mags, quit her corporate PR job, and signed on to work as an independent contractor for Wolfe's line of living foods.

Ak, as it turned out, was already using Wolfe's raw cacao powder and nibs in his desserts, such as a chocolate mousse made with pears and figs. Persico offered to be his wholesale supplier. She also suggested the addition of "Incredible" to the restaurant's name and threw out some ideas for fresh decor. Before long she was part of the Cousin's makeover team. "It evolved very quickly into a closer-knit relationship," she says.

Ak gave Persico free rein. She replaced the mustard-colored walls, white table linens, throw pillows, and Turkish kilns with a color scheme of earth tones. The tables are now bare except for a shock of bright nut grass in a petite yellow vase on each; the chocolate brown walls, accented by aqua molding, are also currently bare. The ultraminimal look is temporary, though: Persico plans to hang shelves of thick ivy. "I want it to be almost like a jungle," she says, "that feeling of oxygen. My goal is to have it be a place with a lot of energy and life force."

The menu still nods to Ak's Turkish heritage, with "living mezes" like stuffed grape leaves, shepherd's salad, and house-marinated olives alongside new creations like "not tuna" wraps and minipizzas with avo-

cado, mushrooms, olives, and almond cheese on flaxseed crackers that Ak makes with the help of two dehydrating cabinets. Mediterranean "pasta" has angel-hair made from zucchini, raw marinara, and "Parmesan" made from pine nuts; Ak makes mock feta and other cheeses with other ground seeds and nuts, which are as key to raw cuisine as veggies. A delicious wild cherry cheesecake contains cashews, dates, and raw agave nectar for sweetness; its crust is made of walnuts. Persico contributes rich hand-rolled raw-chocolate truffles.

Ak and Persico want to make Cousin's an education center, emporium, and juice bar in addition to a restaurant. "Forget Cooking" classes and demos are scheduled to start at the end of the month, and Persico's offering weekly and monthly prepared-meal packages. The picture wouldn't be complete without yoga, Saturday and Sunday mornings.

If Cousin's sounds similar to Karyn's Fresh Corner, Chicago's current raw-food mecca, that's fine with Ak and Persico. (And apparently with Karyn Calabrese, whose letter of welcome hangs on a bulletin board in the entry.) "We're not trying to reinvent the wheel here," Persico says. "We're trying to get people closer to what I like to say the truth is. They weren't kidding when they said eat your fruits and vegetables." —Susannah J. Felts

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