

Celebrating the American Songbook

OFAM is 20 years strong



Clairdee, Ken Peplowski (clarinetist and OFAM music director) and company in concert at The Shedd (OFAM 2009), above left. Shirley Andress (a founding member of The Emerald City Jazz Kings and The Shedd's most regular musical lead) and Michael Stone (a Jazz Kings and OFAM regular since 1999) at the 2007 OFAM finale, "Something Wonderful," a festival dedicated to Richard Rodgers's career with Lorenz Hart and Oscar Hammerstein II, above right.

BY VANESSA SALVIA

THE JOHN G. SHEDD INSTITUTE for the Arts may be best known for its Oregon Festival of American Music—indeed, that was The Shedd's original name, in 1991—but it's only a small part of what the organization brings to the arts community in Eugene.

Jim and Ginevra Ralph, the couple who founded The Shedd, named it for Ginevra's great grandfather, a Chicago businessman who became president of Marshall Field & Co. department stores following Field's death. The family has a long history of philanthropy and supporting the arts—Shedd worked his way up from stock boy, and became the namesake of Chicago's Shedd Aquarium (Field was the adjacent Field Museum's largest benefactor).

Ginevra, The Shedd's director of development and education, and her former brother-in-law founded Eugene Opera in the mid-1970s. "They did that pretty singlehandedly," recalls Jim, The Shedd's executive director. "I had to either learn to like opera or that was the end of our relationship!" Then, Ginevra helped create Eugene Ballet. "We were pretty uncomfortable with how much was being dedicated to a fairly narrow set of cultural experiences here at that time," Jim adds. "Our journey, through all our different permutations, has been to put some established organization and financial structures to bear on a broader set of cultural experiences."



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COURTESY OF THE SHEDD INSTITUTE (3)

Siri Vik (third from left) with male ensemble in Rodgers & Hart's 1943 revival of *A Connecticut Yankee* (OFAM 2009). The Shedd has also produced Irving Berlin's *White Christmas* (a recent stage adaptation of the 1954 film), and Rodgers & Hart's 1938 *The Boys From Syracuse*. This June they'll do a concert production of Rodgers & Hart's 1940 *Pal Joey*, starring Siri Vik and Bill Hulings.

OFAM was founded as a summer-only cultural presenting series. Everything that they do—and it's a lot—is based around the Ralphs' championship of the classic American songbook that arose in the 1920s and '30s through the mid-'50s. "We try to put it into a better context," says Jim.

In 1995, the Ralphs secured the building at Broadway and High streets, a former First Baptist Church, and changed the name to the John G. Shedd Institute for the Arts. In 1993, The Shedd (then called OFAM) became a resident company of the Hult Center for the Performing Arts, joining six other local nonprofit arts groups: Eugene Symphony, Eugene Opera, Eugene Ballet, Eugene Concert Choir, Oregon Mozart Players, and Oregon Bach Festival. The Emerald City Jazz Kings, founded in 1997, is the Institute's resident jazz and historic popular music ensemble. The Shedd's presenting series *Now Hear This*, started in 2000, offers 30 to 40 concerts yearly in a wide range of genres, including upcoming performances by country artist Lucinda Williams and gospel legends Blind Boys of Alabama appearing with Ralph Stanley. The American Symphonia, founded in 1997, is dedicated specifically to the championing of post-1900

classical music written in the Western Hemisphere. The *Magical Moombah*, launched in 2001, is a musical vaudeville for kids. The Shedd Presents, begun in 2007, presents top local artists such as Siri Vik and Mood Area 52. The newest package, says Jim, is the Shedd Theatricals, which focuses on musical comedies of the 1920s and '30s. The Ralphs are dedicated to preserving tradition and presenting these works as they were seen and heard in their day. That means not updating jokes, and honoring specific performance practices of the time. The Shedd works closely with budding performers, teaching them how to play instruments (offering 350 private music lessons weekly) and perform. "They'll open their mouths and sound like they're on 'American Idol,'" he says, "and that's a very different style of singing than what was done in the 1930s. We're cultural stewards; we want to give the real thing, not dumb it down."

OFAM champions the "American songbook," a canon of songs that have established themselves as a kind of literature, says Jim. The festival often focuses on important composers, such as Cole Porter, George and Ira Gershwin, and Rodgers and Hammerstein. This year's festival looks

at Frank Sinatra and Ella Fitzgerald. "They were very unique people in what they did," Jim says. "They both represent some very historically important things in terms of performance practice."

Jim and Ginevra spent their careers as educators—Jim taught high school history and economics, while Ginevra worked with severely disabled students. "Our goal as teachers has always been to create a context," he says. "Beyond the obvious—be entertaining—we're really wanting to champion an art form, and we hope that people come away with a strong sense of the history of that form and the distinctions between different aspects of it. To have a true music appreciation for a particular genre, you get to the point where you can distinguish between different practices within that genre—a piece from the baroque and classical and romantic periods, for instance—then eventually you can recognize Brahms from Chopin."

"The same is true of the songbook," he continues. "The tendency is to think, 'Oh it's all the same darn thing.' Ginevra and I want to develop the attitude that's open-minded to artistic work of any form on its own terms." ■



Julie Alsln (a long-time Jazz Kings and OFAM vocalist), and Ian Whitcomb, whose specialty is early popular music of Britain and the United States.