

From Troubadour to Cultural Catalyst

Bill Guerri '74 on a Life in Opera

In the winter of 1973, the Country Day Troubadours presented *Kiss Me Kate*. For **Bill Guerri '74**, who played the lead role, the memories of this decades-old high school production remain as vivid as the stage lights. This particular performance, he recalls, wasn't just a school play; it was a transformative experience that cemented a lifelong passion for the arts and arts education and ultimately shaped his career path as a mentor to operatic artists.

Guerri relished a 45-year career as an artist manager supporting opera singers, stage directors, and conductors. He became a mentor to a host of successful artists, helping them navigate the complexities of the opera world. To say opera is a niche is one thing; in the entertainment industry, being a manager of opera singers is an even deeper niche.

Finding His Voice

"My mother and father were not musical or theatrical in any way, but they were very into a rounded experience and education for their children," he said. "They took us to the Muny to see the great musicals of *Oklahoma*, *My Fair Lady*, *South Pacific*, *The Sound of Music*, and everything. I just loved it, and I thought it was beautiful. That started my interest in singing and playing the piano." Taking lessons from Janet Lee, a Lower School music teacher at Country Day and director of the Troubadours, he also joined the Country Day Glee Club and the Mary Institute Madrigals, eventually landing roles in Troubadours productions.



From the stage of Orthwein Theatre, Guerri left Country Day with a music scholarship to DePauw University. After two years, aiming for a larger community and more artistic competition, he landed at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and found what he was seeking. "I was introduced to grand opera at Lyric Opera of Chicago. I saw *Tristan Und Isolde* by Richard Wagner and was like, whoa. In the third act, the tenor John Vickers sang for 20 minutes nonstop at full throttle. It was unbelievable; that's where I got really hooked on opera," he said.

After college, armed with a music degree, he headed back to St. Louis, waiting tables at a restaurant in Clayton, and decided where he wanted to go next. While getting ready one day for work, he was listening to a radio broadcast from the Metropolitan Opera and realized he needed to be in New York. "I wanted to continue in music, not as a performer, so I went to New York intending to get a job at the Met. I had some interviews; it didn't happen. However, I got hired as an assistant at Columbia Artist Management, one of the world's biggest agencies at that time. For five years, I worked as an assistant to a woman who represented opera singers, stage directors, and conductors. I was fascinated with the business of artist management because of the close relationship with the artists, and the singers especially, and I wanted to help and participate in what they do. Then I was given my own roster of artists, which took off from there," he said.

The Business of Art

Being an artist manager is a multifaceted experience. It's more than an agent who is solely responsible for finding work for the performer. The artist manager sees the whole picture, handles the publicity interviews, and negotiates their contracts. Guerri said, "When they're young and just starting, you have to pursue work for them, arranging auditions and advising them the best you can about what they should and should not do. Maybe you should sing this, or maybe you

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BILL GUERRI '74

Another unique facet of opera is that repetition doesn't work. Every performance is new. Guerri said, "The artist has to be inspired, capable, and prepared. I can't expect perfection because perfection is not possible. If they want to do it, they have to really want to do it and hang in there. Just because you're not successful today doesn't mean you won't be successful tomorrow. And if you stick with it, give your very best effort, and work on your singing, musicianship, and ability to sing in other languages like French, Italian, and German, it might happen for you."

A Legacy of Inspiration

This mindset and his discernment as a mentor led to Guerri's success. "An artist manager is only as successful as the artists they represent. So the key is to find the right people. If they won't meet you halfway, there's no relationship. It's usually a handful of artists that really make your reputation," he said. Ben Heppner was one such artist, a Canadian tenor who sang with nearly every major opera company and symphony orchestra and recorded for Sony, RCA, EMI, and more. "He was the cornerstone of my career. He was a dramatic tenor who sang important repertoire and brought joy to the stage. He sang so beautifully."

Living in Florida 49 years after his time at Country Day, Guerri was invited to join the MICDS International Board of Visitors, an advisory board comprised of accomplished alumni living outside St. Louis. His first meeting was in the fall of 2023, and the topic was centered around the arts and art spaces on campus. Guerri was happy to see how the arts have come together between the

two schools over time. "What's happening now at MICDS would not have happened had the two schools not come together. What **Dr. Nardolillo** is doing here is fantastic with a strings program, orchestra, choirs, and band. I'm watching students sitting there making music and thinking, 'God, that's great. This might keep them interested and motivated to continue attending performances, and eventually, they will buy tickets.' That's what it's all about," he said.

When fondly remembering his former teachers **Janet Lee**, **Dr. Hugh Johnson**, and **Donald Webb**, he remarked, "The day I graduated from Country Day School was one of the proudest days of my life because it was rigorous. It was hard and it was socially challenging for me. I ended on a high note with the Troubadours, and when I went away to college the first year, it was a breeze."

"Of course, I learned reading, writing, mathematics, reasoning, cognitive thinking, and those horrible algebra word problems that I tortured myself with. But those algebra word problems form the basis of cognitive thinking and learning. What I also learned was discipline and self-reliance. If you don't have a certain amount of either in an atmosphere like this, you are going to fail."

When asked what's most important to him in education now, especially in his field of work, he said, "It's really about exposure to the arts and whether that exposure captivates the child's attention. I'm grateful to my parents for giving us that, and they never stood in the way of me pursuing music. When I was in college, my dad said to my mother, 'I don't know what Bill's going to do, but he's going to be in music.'"

CAST

Fred Graham, Actor, Producer, Writer.....	Bill Guerri
Harry Trevor.....	Mike Durgin
Lois Lane.....	Mimi Johnston
Ralph (Stage Manager).....	Greg Smith
Lilli Vanessi.....	Cindy Kohlbray
Hattie.....	Lyn McCandless
Stage Doorman.....	Bob Cockerham
Paul.....	Herb Golterman
Cab Driver.....	Anton Beffa
Bill Calhoun.....	Bob Loitman
1st Man.....	Wes Jones
2nd Man.....	Terry Finn
Harrison Howell.....	Herb Golterman

"Taming of the Shrew" Players