

Army of Artists Builds Civic Opera

BEHIND the grand opera curtain a great industry flourishes. Behind the scenes at Chicago Civic opera, for use in Chicago and on tour, is an enterprise owning property worth many millions and served by a regiment of artists and skilled workmen in smocks and overalls.

This regiment works continuously—that is, fifty two weeks a year—that grand opera may have its magnificent attire, prima donnas their radiant settings, and the ladies and gentlemen of the ensemble convincing background.

Chicago Civic opera's regiment is commanded by the technical director, Harry W. Beatty, the emperor of the industry that clothes the stage and the personages performing there. The story of that industry is never told because it is ever new. It encompasses the building of grand opera, the full mounting of production, and the care of those already built.

No other industry perhaps is quite so glamorous. Certainly none is required to scale dizzy heights nor to meet more imposing emergencies. Through the incessant hum of a grand opera season, the leaders of this industry and their men work literally night and day. When the season is over and the artists of the stage, at the close of the tour, have scattered to sing elsewhere, to play, to rest, and the grand opera theater is dark and apparently deserted, then the industry behind the curtain line functions with an even greater earnestness.

It is then—between seasons—when creative effort has its day and grand operas are built. The artist before the curtain has his rest; the artist behind the curtain, never . . . and care little.

Assembling the Pieces.

The business and artistic direction—that is to say, the management of the company—generally decides toward the close of one season what shall be given in the season to come. Decision is reached by the committee, the board of management, of the Chicago Civic Opera company, composed of the president, chairman of the finance committee, the business and tour managers, technical director, musical director, and auditor.

The moment the management votes for a new production, the technical director sends for a copy of the composer's score. He goes over it with the stage management. They take note of the traditional way the opera in question has been given elsewhere, assuming that this is an opera that has been produced in other opera centers. They go over the score scene by scene, act by act, listing all of the requirements in detail and classifying the list.

A decision is reached as to the general character of production it would be most advantageous, most effective to assemble. Thereupon the scenic artist, under the direction of the technical director, goes into retirement in his studio, to emerge some time later with sketches of scenes in color. These are subjected to review. In the event, or when they are satisfactory, models of the scenes are ordered. These are built by the scenic artist in the form of models of the stage set with individual scenes and built to scale one-quarter inch to the linear foot rule.

When Julian Dove, the scenic artist, has these ready, they are displayed at another meeting called by Mr. Beatty. The models are shown in daylight and lighted; an electric bulb set in the top of each model gives the effect, in miniature, of light upon the color scheme employed. From that point the building of grand opera proceeds in actual materials.

The work divides into the following classifications: 1. The building and painting of scenery. 2. The arrangement of lights to light it and the scenes. 3. The design and construction of properties; that is to say, all that is employed in dressing a scene, whether it be a ship, a throne, a sculpture, furnishings of all kinds and descriptions, all kindred objects. 4. The design and making of all costumes to be worn with the exception of those worn by principal artists, who furnish their own. 5. The design and construction of all armor—the trappings for offense and defense. 6. The making of wigs.

From Jewels to Javelins.

Be it known, if the fact has not been heralded before, that Chicago Civic opera, physically, is a self-contained institution. Everything the company employs on the stage is built by the company in its own factory—everything from scenery to wigs, from jewels to javelins. In the warehouse here the investigator will even find a fine laundry, where, at great saving, costumes are kept spotless by washing when washing will serve; by dry cleaning when the latter process is necessary.

Through long experience the technical director's men know what to expect from any kind of work passing beneath their eyes. Before a new production has stood the test of exhibition they know pretty well whether they have attained their objective or risen higher.

A stream of trucks passes between warehouse and theater during the opera season. Stage crews work days and crews work nights. Productions are entering and leaving the theater day and night. For many weeks the technical director is the busiest man in the world of theaters. "Recreation," however, is never at hand. He can and does plan the transporting of the company on its post-season tour, a job in itself sufficient to stagger most good men.