



BLO GENERAL & ARTISTIC DIRECTOR ESTHER NELSON TO STEP DOWN AT SEASON'S END

Move comes after 12 years in the job, with myriad highlights onstage and off.

Current C.O.O. Bradley Vernatter steps in as Acting General & Artistic Director, ensuring a smooth transition as the Board begins a strategic planning process.

BOSTON -- EMBARGOED FOR MARCH 10, 2021 -- The Boston Lyric Opera (BLO) Board of Directors, led by chair **Michael J. Puzo**, announced today that Stanford Calderwood General & Artistic Director **Esther Nelson** has decided to step down from her role at the end of this season. Nelson, whose 12-year tenure with the organization was marked with many artistic and organizational highlights, says stepping aside now makes room for the company to undergo an important new strategic planning process and to find new leadership to carry it out.

"Esther Nelson has had such a profound impact on Boston Lyric Opera and the industry in Boston and beyond, it's hard to imagine the Company without her," Puzo says. "Esther's tenure moved BLO from being a strong regional company into being a leading national and international entity. It's emblematic of her professionalism and commitment that she has worked carefully with the board and her colleagues to ensure a seamless transition. This moment finds BLO vibrant, artistically strong, and poised to take the next step in defining what a 21st century opera company looks like."

Puzo also announced that Chief Operating Officer **Bradley Vernatter** will serve as BLO's Acting General & Artistic Director. Vernatter has been instrumental in shepherding the company throughout the pandemic, which forced its live productions to be cancelled or postponed. He and Nelson worked closely the past year to develop and implement structural changes, make organizational decisions that kept BLO on sure footing, and create fresh artistic content.

NELSON'S TENURE AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS



Esther Nelson's long opera career brought her to BLO in 2008. She was previously General Director at Glimmerglass Opera and held several leadership positions in Nevada, and at companies in Virginia, North Carolina and Louisiana. Nelson was the first leader in BLO's history to hold both the top artistic and top operational titles.

Early in her tenure, Nelson grew the company's artistic output by adding a fourth live performance to BLO's seasons. She envisioned

the extra production to highlight contemporary opera works by rising and established composers, and to bring opera out of traditional theater spaces. The “Opera Annex” initiative saw productions in a Brookline temple, the JFK Library and Museum in Dorchester, Back Bay’s Park Plaza Castle, the Steriti Memorial Rink in Boston’s North End, and other distinctive locations throughout the city. Nelson ramped up the company’s work with other institutions such as the Boston Public Library, Artists for Humanity in South Boston, and the Museum of Fine Arts, underscoring her desire to bring opera to new audiences.

Nelson strengthened and restructured BLO’s artistic department, hiring internationally recognized stage designer John Conklin as Artistic Advisor, creating a Director of Artistic Operations position, and hiring Music Director David Angus in 2010 and Artistic Advisor Vimbayi Kaziboni last fall. The 2009/10 Season was the first that Nelson and her team fully planned and implemented.

Nelson’s commitment to commissioning new work for BLO gave the company a prominent place in the national and international opera scene. Among the acclaimed works created during her tenure: Tod Machover’s “Schoenberg in Hollywood”; James MacMillan’s “Clemency” (a co-commission with Royal Opera House, Covent Garden, Scottish Opera, and Britten Sinfonia); Mark Campbell and Julian Grant’s “Burke & Hare”; and a chamber version of Jack Beeson’s “Lizzie Borden.”

Nelson championed young singers, directors, administrators and production artists. She created the Jane and Steven Akin Emerging Artists initiative that gives significant opportunities to early-career artists -- from personal coaching and career advice, to artistic management introductions, the chance to understudy principal roles, and engagements in BLO productions. Many Emerging Artists studied music and management at area conservatories and university programs. Because of job opportunities at BLO, many remained in Boston, increasing the number of talented opera artists in the region and helping the artform grow stronger here.

With sound fiscal experience and background, Nelson closed ten of 11 seasons under her purview in the black. Under her watch, the company’s endowment grew from under \$2 million to over \$16 million. She further strengthened finances and ignited a new era of artistic creativity by moving the company out of its two-decade home at the Shubert Theater in 2015. That move was prompted by space constrictions in the theater and the need to develop direct relationships with ticket buyers. For more than five seasons, the company has performed at historic theaters throughout the city and found inspiration in other unique locations. Nelson and company observers have said the itinerant schedule made BLO more nimble and creative, while also fostering closer connections to its long-time ticket holders and new audiences attracted by adventurous, experiential productions. Nelson also led important initial steps toward finding the company a more permanent venue, a process that continues as the company continues to perform throughout the city.

"I have loved my tenure at BLO, working with an incredibly supportive board, with inspiring artists, and the pleasure of meeting so many wonderful patrons" Nelson says. "It has always been my belief that institutions benefit from a change of leadership after a decade or so. The financial and artistic stability at BLO now offers the perfect opportunity to make room for a new team to analyze new ways that resources can be focused on stewarding and providing access

to creativity. This period of pandemic recovery and social realignment has found BLO's board committing to a strategic analysis to strengthen BLO's purpose and broaden its opportunities. Bradley Vernatter, who proved to be a skilled manager in regular times and a visionary artistic leader during this pandemic, will provide excellent leadership and guidance toward that end. I am confident that BLO will become an ever-stronger creative force in Boston and beyond."

TIMING, AND MORE ON VERNATTER

Bradley Vernatter has worked closely with Nelson during the transition and will continue to do so over the next few months. He will formally assume the role of Acting General & Artistic Director later this spring, at the end of the season.

"In Brad Vernatter, we have an energetic, thoughtful professional with deep industry knowledge and expertise, developed both here in the U.S. and abroad," says Board Chair Michael J. Puzo. "His work at BLO has been marked by creativity and a respect for traditional works, while blazing new trails for opera in Boston, whether on stage, in digital form or in the neighborhoods on our mobile Street Stage. As Brad moves into this new position, he does so with the full confidence of the board and a shared resolve to initiate a strategic planning process for BLO, which Brad will lead in cooperation with the board."



Among Vernatter's other accomplishments this past year, he managed successful union negotiations for the company and led development of the operabox.tv streaming service. He was a key part of the team that produced the acclaimed animated film of Philip Glass's opera "The Fall of the House of Usher" for the service, and is the company's creative leader behind "desert in." Vernatter has previously served as BLO's Director of Production and held management, financial, and producing roles at opera and theater organizations around the country, and internationally.

"I am honored to take on this role at a pivotal time in Boston Lyric Opera's history," Vernatter says. "While it will be hard to follow a tenure so full of highlights like Esther's, I am eager to undertake a strategic planning process with our board and staff to chart a course for the company's future. We will grapple with issues facing many performing arts companies and identify the key priorities for BLO's future -- among them the safe return to live opera performances for both artists and audiences, the growth potential of digital media and streaming, advancing our commitments to diversity and equity, and interrogating the current opera business model. I am confident the future for BLO is very bright, and we will continue to be a leading example for the industry."

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MEDIA NOTE: Nelson, Puzo and Vernatter can speak about the transition of leadership at BLO. They, and others in the regional and national arts and opera industries are available to talk about Nelson's tenure at BLO. For more information, contact John Michael Kennedy at jmk@jmkpr.com or 781-620-1761