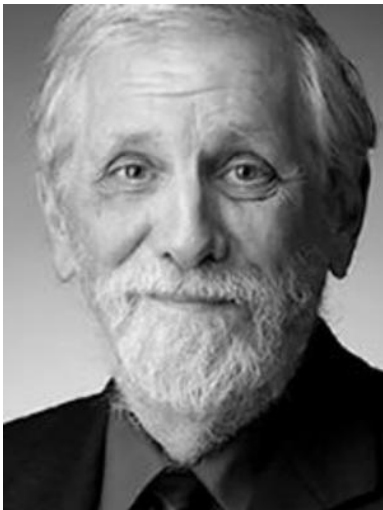


BOSTONLYRICOPERA

BLO LEADERS PAST AND PRESENT OFFER REMEMBRANCES, TRIBUTES TO JOHN CONKLIN

The celebrated scenic designer, costume designer and dramaturg, who passed away June 24, was the company's Artistic Advisor from 2009-2025.

BOSTON, Mass. – June 27, 2025 – The leaders, former leaders and affiliated colleagues of Boston Lyric Opera have offered personal reminiscences and tribute to Artistic Advisor John Conklin, who passed away in Cooperstown, New York on June 24. The veteran scenic designer, costume designer and dramaturg was 88.



A widely respected and in-demand designer for many decades, Conklin (l.) became affiliated with Boston Lyric Opera in 1992 when he designed a production of *La bohème* for the company. Fittingly, 20 years later, John's final production design at BLO was for 2022's so-called "Backwards" *Bohème*. During his tenure with the company, he worked on dozens of productions including *Macbeth*, *Madama Butterfly*, *Così fan tutte*, *The Flying Dutchman*, *Rigoletto*, *I puritani*, *Werther*, *The Merry Widow*, *Greek*, *Le Nozze di Figaro*, *Beatrice and Benedict*, *Don Carlos*, *La rondine*, *Lucia de Lammermoor*, *Carmen*, *Agrippina*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and more. In 2009, under then-General and Artistic Director Esther Nelson, Conklin was appointed as Artistic Advisor for the company, a role he held until his passing.

In addition to being a talented designer Conklin also served as a mentor, not only for the students he taught at NYU's Tisch School of the Arts for more than four decades, but also for countless artists and professionals at the companies where he worked.

"John was one of the first people I met when I arrived at BLO in 2013, and he helped lay the foundation of my tenure with the company," says **BLO Stanford Calderwood General Director and CEO Bradley Vernatter**. "Only recently did we realize our artistic paths had crossed many years earlier. While going through our work together, we discovered that he designed the first professional opera I worked on as a college intern at New York City Opera. He helped shape my career from the very beginning, and his fierce curiosity and artistic vision will have a lasting impact.

"Over the years—and I know this is true for many of us—John became more than a colleague and collaborator. He was a mentor, a generous and thought-provoking guide, and in many

ways, a wise and steady presence—like family. He will be remembered as a prolific designer, dramaturg, storyteller, luminary and friend,” Vernatter says.

Esther Nelson, former General and Artistic Director at BLO noted that Conklin had been part of her life for three decades. “John was uncompromising in his commitment to artistic integrity,” Nelson says. “He pushed all of his colleagues to constantly question their artistic decisions. He was inspired to find solutions to the most challenging problems, and never lost his childlike curiosity or his thirst for knowledge. John’s legacy will continue with the next generations of designers and stage directors whom he inspired to always stretch their horizons.”

BLO Music Director David Angus, who met and worked with Conklin first at Glimmerglass Opera then for years at BLO. “John was the power behind the throne when I began at Glimmerglass—a quiet, distant figure—but I soon realised that he was masterminding the majority of what appeared on the stage, and supervising the shows that he hadn’t designed himself. His encyclopaedic knowledge of opera, and everything around opera, was both inspiring and rather terrifying! We owe him so much for his creativity, his teaching, his knowledge, and his ability to create a brand new show from repurposed parts of his own former scenery—almost every show was a new creation! We will miss him greatly, both for his guidance and his practical help. He was a great man!”

OPERA CREDITS

Conklin’s work was seen on theater and opera stages around the world. He made his professional debut in 1958 at Williamstown Theatre Festival, where he designed more than 30 shows. A 1966 production of *Dialogues of the Carmelites* for New York City Opera was his first opportunity to work in an artform that had captivated him since childhood. He designed two



Conklin, lower left, took pride in the detailed nature of his work. He’s seen here making adjustments to the set of BLO’s 2015 production of *La bohème*. (Courtesy BLO)

complete “Ring” Cycles (for San Francisco Opera and Lyric Opera of Chicago) and many productions at The Metropolitan Opera, including the world premiere of *The Ghosts of Versailles*. In the U.S., his credits include San Francisco Opera, Lyric Opera of Chicago, The Kennedy Center, New York City Opera, Houston Grand Opera, Opera Theatre of Saint Louis, Seattle Opera, Santa Fe Opera, Dallas Opera, San Diego Opera, and Washington National Opera. In Europe, Conklin’s designs were seen at the English National Opera (London), the Royal Opera (in Stockholm), the Bastille Opera (Paris), and the opera companies of Munich, Amsterdam, and Bologna.

THEATER CREDITS

His regional theater credits include American Repertory Theatre, the Goodman Theatre, the Long Wharf Theatre, Hartford Stage, Arena Stage, the Guthrie Theatre, Center Stage (Baltimore), and Actors Theatre of Louisville. His work on Broadway included several Circle in the Square productions, and he was nominated for a Tony Award in 1974 for set design for *The Au Pair Man*. Conklin was the recipient of the 2008 Robert L.B. Tobin Award for Lifetime Achievement in Theatrical Design from the Theatre Development Fund and the 2011 NEA Opera Honors.

When Conklin was selected for the NEA Opera Honors in 2011, he spoke at length about his life's work. "I started out, as so many people in opera do, based on the Saturday afternoon Met broadcasts. I got Opera News, with pictures of the productions, and I would make little sets based on those, little models taken from those photographs. So it was always a kind of combination of theater, which I loved, music, which I loved, and architecture ... Unlike architecture or painting, it all gets thrown away at the end, which I think is so wonderful. People say, oh, isn't it terrible? Don't you feel terrible when the scenery or the costumes are taken away? I say no, no! It does not exist without the performance ... the fact that it can exist so strongly and then it only exists in memory is to me kind of fascinating, and puts it all in the right perspective."

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MEDIA INFORMATION

- BLO leaders and affiliated artists are available to talk about John Conklin's contributions over 30 years to the company's success.
- A full biography of Conklin, additional remembrances and tributes, and production photos of his designs of several BLO shows are [available here](#).
- Portions of this press release were made available by Glimmerglass Opera and its dramaturg Kelley Rourke.
- For additional photos and other information, contact John Michael Kennedy at jmk@jmkpr.com or 212-842-1752.