

Interview



Wig Making for the San Francisco Opera

Jeanna Parham

The head of the San Francisco Opera hair and makeup shop talks about her background and what goes on in the wig shop of this venerable opera company.

The San Francisco Opera is the second largest opera company in North America and among the most prominent companies in the world. Its famous costume shop produces lavish wardrobes worn for nearly a dozen productions each year. [see “San Francisco Opera Costume Sale,” [Virtual Costumer volume 9 issue 4](#)] Equally well known is its wig and makeup shop, which creates the many wigs and makeup designs for its productions.

In this interview, Jeanna Parham, who runs the wig and makeup shop, talks about her background, the operation of the wig and makeup shop, and what goes in to creating the wigs for its productions.

Tell us a bit about your interest in hair and wig making, and your experience in the field.

The craft of hair, wigs, and makeup has been my passion now for over half my life. I actually got started by creating makeup for theatrical productions when I was 17 years old. It was after a wig internship with the American Musical Theater of San Jose that I finally decided to pursue a full time career in hair and makeup artistry.

Since then, I’ve had a chance to work as a makeup artist and hair stylist for many theatres throughout the San Francisco Bay Area, including Theatreworks, Opera San Jose, Opera Parallele, Broadway by the Bay, and the Magic Theater. I eventually became the Wig Master for the American

Conservatory Theater (ACT) in San Francisco, and held that position for over a decade, while also freelancing for the San Francisco Opera and the San Francisco Ballet. In 2014, I became the Head of Hair and Makeup for the San Francisco Opera.

What production are you currently working on?

We’re currently finishing work on a production of *Andrea Chénier* by Umberto Giordano. It’s set in the French Revolution, so there’s a lot to do for both wigs and makeup. It’s just getting ready to open, so things are pretty hectic right now.



Production of *Andrea Chénier* by San Francisco Opera needs many wigs. Photo: Royal Opera House / Bill Cooper.



Watch [2009 SF Opera video](#) on the wig and makeup shop, and some of the procedures used.

How many productions a year do you and others in the wig shop typically work on?

Since I started at SF Opera I have down sized my freelance design work. I continue to work with Opera Parallele in my off season. The SF Opera does 10-12 productions a season. This year we are doing seven in the fall and three in the spring. We typically work on three shows at a time.

How many people work with you on wigs for a production? Where do you find them?

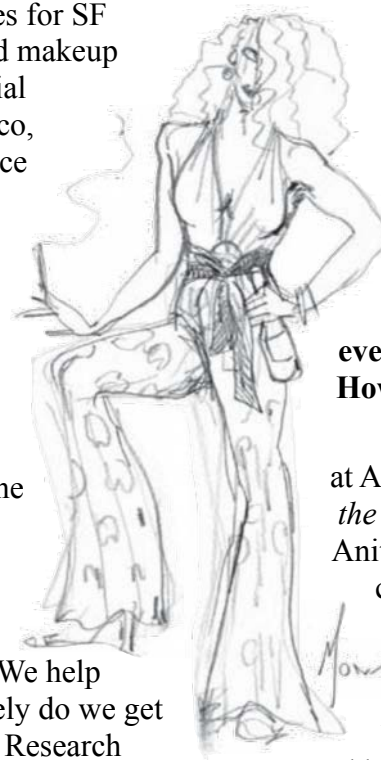
I have five full time people to help create the shows. We also have a 20 hour a week person who also works many of the productions. Our show calls are anywhere from 16-22 people per show. We are members of local 706 Hollywood's Hair and Makeup Union. We hold hire tests every few years to recruit new members, but also hire people based off of referrals.

Describe the wig shop at SF Opera. Do you do most of your work there, or do you also work in your own studio?

The production facilities for SF Opera, including the wig and makeup shop, are in the War Memorial Opera House in San Francisco, and all of the work takes place there.

Describe the process of working with the production designer and costumer to design the wigs for a production.

At the SF Opera, We work in collaboration with the production designer or costume designer but each show is different. Some designers know exactly what they want head to toe. We help bring that image to life. Rarely do we get specific designs for the hair. Research and test styles help guide what it needs to be. On many shows, I work with the director and artistic team to come up with the most appropriate look for our production.



Costume design sketch from the 2011 [ACT production of *Tales of the City*](#) by D.B. Bauer.

As a freelance designer, I work with the costume designer, director and performers to create a cohesive design for each production.

What is the most elaborate man's or woman's wig that you have ever had to create for a production? How long did it take to make?

In 2011, while I was their wig master at A.C.T., we did a production of *Tales of the City*. I had to create an exaggerated Anita Bryant wig. The Drag character was called "Manita." I brought in a specialist to build a buckram base and create a wig on top. We redressed this wig at least 12 times. The final took over 100 hours and held a mic pack and element in it.

How much time do you typically have to make the wigs and hairpieces for a production? How long does each man's and woman's wig typically take to make?

I plan four weeks for the build of a show. Each hand tied wig takes 40- 60 hours to build and complete. Facial hair is about 12 hours for a beard and mustache build. We do reuse wigs with alterations.

Do you have stock wigs and hairpieces that you can draw on for productions? Are they used only for chorus and minor roles, or for principals as well?

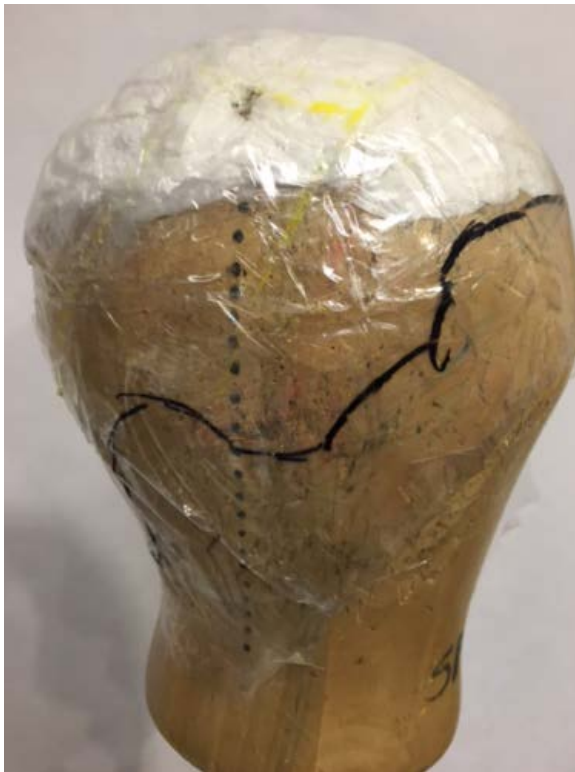


Work station in the SF Opera makeup and wig shop.

We have a large stock of wigs we pull from. Our Chorus has stock wigs that we maintain. All we have to do is restyle them if it will fit for the production. We build about half of the principal wigs new per show. This depends on time and style of show.

Do the singers come in to the shop for you to make a wig cap template, or do they do this remotely and mail it to you?

I prefer to take our own measurements and make the wig cap templates in our shop. It's important for us to create a relationship with the singers, and measurement fittings are a good time to get to know someone. If a



Wooden wig block, padded to shape of actor's plastic wrap cap pattern, takes 3-8 hours to make.

particular principal's schedule simply does not permit them to come to our shop for their wig cap template when we need it, we will work with the principal or with another company to make their wig cap template and send it to us.

Do you have a library of wig cap templates for making wigs for regulars?

Yes we save their hair line tracings and measurement. For some artists, we keep their wigs set aside so the wig is available next time they sing with us.

What is your process for creating a template for a particular actor?

To get the best measurements, we first prep the actor's hair the way that it will be done for the show. Most often, we use pin curls, or flatly wrap the hair evenly around the head. Once that is done, we wrap the head in cellophane and cover it with tape to create a clear cap over the hair, and use a permanent marker to trace the exact hairline around the head. This is the pattern we use to build the wig foundation.

We put the cap tracing on a wooden or canvas wig block that is closest in size to the actor's head. Then we pad the block under the cap tracing to conform to the particular shape of the actor's head, using the tracing as a guide. Finally, we secure the cap tracing to the block. The foundation is built on the block, directly on top of the the cap tracing.

What supplies and tools do you use to make the wig cap and add the hair?



Grades of nylon laces used for wig foundations.

The foundation is made of fine mesh lace that is hand-sewn to closely conform to the shape of the cap pattern, and is often finished with binding tape. It can take us from 3 to 8 hours to build, depending on the detail of the cap.



Finished wig foundation ready to attach hair.



Wig needle is similar to a latch hook.

The wig building supplies and tools we use are specially created for our art. The lace, needles and even binding tape are manufactured for specialized wig building. Some products have not changed since the early days of wig making, while other materials have evolved to create stronger, lighter-weight products. Wig blocks are now available in both fabric and wood.

Describe the process of attaching the hair to the foundation.

The process of knotting or tying hairs to the foundation mesh is called *ventilation*. It is much like latch hooking, only with a much smaller, sharper needle. In fact some people speculate that a toupee is sometimes



Watch [video](#) demonstrating wig ventilation by tying hairs to nylon mesh foundation.



Left: Finished wig built on foundation with a lace front to ensure natural hairline. **Right:** Lace front disappears when placed against the skin.



called a “rug” because the process of make the two has similarities. The back of a wig is double knotted to ensure the knots won’t pull out over time, whereas the top and front of the wig is single hair- single knotted. This will create softness to the hairline making the wig appear more natural.

Are most of the wigs built with lace fronts?

Almost all our wigs have a lace front unless it's a period piece and we need a hard front "wig" look. A lace front provides a natural hairline, and the lace disappears when placed against the skin.

How long does a wig typically take to complete?

A full hand-tied wig will take between 40 and 50 hours from the start of the foundation build to the final knot. Once the wig is finished, the wig is ready to be washed, cut and styled.

Do you typically use human hair for the wigs you create for productions?

We use mostly human hair but also use yak hair as needed for specialty wigs. Synthetic wigs are not commonly used but sometimes are the best for the production.



Vicky Martinez trimming a wig built for Nian Wang for a SF Opera production of *Les Troyens*.

Do you get the hair for a single supplier or do you use multiple vendors?

We use multiple vendors. Many places sell hair – few sell good quality hair.

How far in advance do you typically need order the hair to create wigs for a production?

We generally build a show in two to five weeks. We keep a large stock of hair because ordering can take a few days or a few months depending on the supply of the vendors. We buy in bulk so we have what we need. Last minute orders are kept to a minimum.

Are you able to get hair in all the colors you need, or do you need to dye the hair for certain wigs?

We can buy most colors we need. We blend multiple colors to achieve the ideal color, and dye only as needed. Dying of processed hair can be tricky.

Do you typically need to make adjustments to wigs and hairpieces once



Tying in highlights and lowlights to achieve ideal color.



Wig for "Papageno" in 2007 SF Opera production of *The Magic Flute* was made of yak hair and feathers, and was heavily lacquered to hold its shape.

they are finished? What fitting technique do you employ for a finished wig?

Once the wig is done we usually don't need to do many adjustments to fit. We do take tucks in the back or add gussets to allow extra room. I know basic sewing techniques which allows me to make quick adjustments as one would with a costume.

Describe the process of styling a wig for a particular production.

Knowing an idea of what the end product needs to look like is the first step in the styling process. Once the style is known and the wig is built we can decide to set the wig in rollers or style with irons. The roller set of a wig depends on the final look it needs. Wet setting the wig and drying it in a wig dryer creates a look that will hold up to time and sweat better than a curling iron. But a curling iron will help make the wig

look more modern and soft. The end product must be envisioned before the wig is finished being built.

Is it like setting someone's own hair?

Totally different. Setting someone's own hair only has to hold for a few hours. The styling of a wigs has to hold for many performances.

Do you often radically restyle a wig for use in an opera set in a different period? Is the styling done by the wigmaker or a specialist hairstylist?

All the wig shop employees build and style. But that does not mean you get to style the wig you build. We don't change the styles of the wigs during the shows. We would just have a second wig.



Wet setting wig and drying in wig dryer creates a look that holds up better than with a curling iron.

Does the the company ever purchase commercial wigs?

We sometimes use a commercial wig, which may be “wefted,” which is knotted hair on strings. We’ll disassemble the front part of that wig, and add a new crown and lace front. It’s a less expensive process, in that the labor is sometimes only three days, versus six to ten days. It’s a big difference.

Do the singers apply their own wigs and hairpieces, or do you and members of the wig shop do that?

It is company policy for our staff to apply the wig and remove it. Other companies I have worked with require the performer to put their own wig on.

What adhesives does SF Opera use to apply wigs and hairpieces?

We use many different brands. Kryolan spirit glue, WM creation Matte glue. Ben Nye spirit glue. All of these are made for wig lace. The different glues have different



SF Opera staff apply wigs and makeup for each performance.

strengths. We do have options if someone has sensitive skin, or is a heavy sweater.

How do you maintain the wigs during a production?

We clean the lace between each show. Maintenance depends on the wig and the show. It can be as simple as cleaning the lace and combing stray hairs into place, to completely resetting the wig each time. All wigs get touched.

What do you do to the wigs after each performance?

We clean and block the lace and place a huge hairnet the over the wig to keep it from sagging until we can redress it.

Does SF Opera store wigs used in previous productions?

We don't usually store wigs by their productions. Unlike costumes, wigs don't get rented with a production. We start new with each production. There are exceptions. We built a huge chorus of dreadlock wigs for a production of *Norma*. Those can be rented with the costumes of that show. We store the wigs dry in cardboard boxes in a dry store. No moisture is key.

We also have road boxes that can hold wigs. We knew we were doing *Madame Butterfly* two years after it was built, so I closed up the road box at the end of the run and had it put with costume storage. All I have to do it open the box and all the wigs will be ready to be washed and redressed.



Inventory tags with numbers help keep track of wigs.

How do you locate a suitable wig that is in storage if you need it again for another production?

All usable wigs are kept in house with inventory tags on the inside with inventory numbers. We catalog all shows and artists with the inventory numbers of the wigs that were worn.

Jeanna Parham started creating makeup for theatrical productions when she was 17. She interned with American Musical Theatre Of San Jose, and has worked as makeup artist and hair stylist for many theatres throughout the San Francisco Bay area. She was the Wig Master for The American Conservatory Theater of San Francisco for over a decade, while also freelancing for the SF Opera and SF Ballet. In 2014, Jeanna became the Head of Hair and Makeup for the San Francisco Opera. When not working, Jeanna spends her time with her three kids and loving husband.