

Event Report



San Francisco Opera Costume Sale *Philip Gust**

For only the fourth time in its history, the San Francisco Opera held a blowout sale of costumes from previous productions.

It was one of the wildest and craziest events ever. On Saturday October 24th and Sunday the 25th 2009 the San Francisco Opera held a costume sale at its warehouse in San Francisco, their first since 2005. While the economy may be bad elsewhere, you wouldn't know it here.

More than 2000 people turned out on Saturday, and completely overwhelmed the Opera staff running the sale. They expected as many again on Sunday.



The sale included high-end costumes worn by opera luminaries like Luciano Pavarotti and Beverly Sills that were selling for thousands of dollars, to assorted hats, scarves, and armor pieces that went for as little as one dollar.

The sale was scheduled to open at 11am on Saturday, and my wife, Kathe, and I arrived at 9am to find the line already running down the side of one warehouse. A shorter line for Opera company employees gave them early access to the sale at 9.30am.



We were happy to meet several costumer friends there, including, Lindsay Tallman, Mariellen Cottman, Jade Falcon and Erik Anderson, who arrived at about the same time.

From the start, this event had a party atmosphere: some people ahead of us

juggled and practiced acrobatics, and some behind us were in fancy costumes and carried parasols trimmed with silk roses. A colorful rolling cart was doing a brisk business up and down the line in pastries, coffee, organic juices and bottled water

The first person in line was there at 3.30am. He said that by 6am there were already 100 people waiting. When we arrived, the line had grown to nearly 500. He told me that he just wanted to be first, and that he's returning on Sunday at 3.30am.

As Opera employees came out after shopping, they stopped to show off their purchases. Applause went up as they put on an impromptu fashion show, including a turban from "Seraglio", angel wings from "St Francis of Assisi", gowns from "Macbeth", robes from "Otello", and they told us all about what we would find inside.





It took us until nearly 1pm to get in. We heard later that they had to cut off the line at around 3pm and ask those still waiting to come back tomorrow. Needless to say, the people who came late were not happy.

Inside we discovered boxes and boxes, and racks and racks of costumes as far as the eye can see, like Indiana Jones' warehouse.



At 11am, they started letting in 20 people at a time, waiting about five minutes, and then letting in 20 more. Each group that went in let out a small cheer and walked quickly to the entrance.



The media interviewed staff and customers to get their reaction. The person in charge of the sale gave a passable

impression of a deer in the headlights as he realized that they were way under-prepared for the number of people who showed up.



Fortunately, almost everyone kept their sense of humor, and genuinely enjoyed trying on costumes and mugging for friends and strangers alike.



“Veterans” brought large cardboard boxes or rolling carts for their purchases, while novices like us brought a few paltry canvas tote bags. As cardboard boxes of accessories that ran the length of every aisle emptied, people quickly snapped them up. A few who were buying large lots of costumes brought their own rolling racks.



Sometimes it was hard to tell which boxes of costumes were for sale and which belonged to someone. Most people who poached did so innocently and quickly apologized, but as the day wore on and people grew tired, there were a few less innocent encounters. The crowd meted out its own form of “prairie justice” on those caught poaching deliberately.

The high-end costumes were in a special roped off area. Most were on racks, but a few of the more spectacular ones were displayed on mannequins so everyone could enjoy getting a close look at the high level of workmanship.





Checkout stretched to over two hours, as tired shoppers chatted, took turns looking through more racks, napped, or read.



Long checkout lines snaked up and down the aisles almost from the beginning.



We finally checked out just before 6pm, and headed home with a regency man's suit, a hand-painted kimono from "Madame Butterfly", a costume that opera star Qian Yi wore as "Precious Auntie" in "Bone Setter's Daughter" (right), several bolts of fabric, and a few accessories.

If you decide to attend the next sale, here are a few tips from our experience:



Photo courtesy San Francisco Opera

- Arrive early and plan to stay all day.
- Don't go alone: shop with a friend
- Bring non-messy snacks and water
- Bring your own large cardboard boxes
- Bring "spoken for" signs to lay on top
- Leave your modesty at home; men and women may strip as bare as they dare
- Remember, there are no restrooms
- Know how you'll decide what *not* to buy
- Make a budget and stick to it

Philip Gust enjoys sci-fi and fantasy costuming, and has particular interest in props, special effects, and prosthetic makeup.