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Daughter of a downtown San Jose hatmaker, Irene Dalis went on to sing on the world's great opera stages, then came home to found Opera San Jose. Now after nearly 30 years of running the company, Dalis, 87, has announced her retirement.

"It's time," she said. "It's my baby, but it's time."

Dalis tendered her resignation Thursday night to the company's board of trustees, agreeing to stay on as general director through the 2013-14 season, Opera San Jose's 30th. It begins Sept. 7 at the California Theatre with "Falstaff" by Giuseppe Verdi, a composer whose roles were a staple for Dalis from 1957 to '77, when she was a reigning mezzo-soprano at New York's Metropolitan Opera.

Because of her age, and because

she suffered serious injuries in a 2010 car accident, there has been speculation for some time about when Dalis would leave her position. Still her announcement came as something of a shock in the South Bay arts community.

"She is the iconic San Jose cultural figure; there's nobody to touch her," said Andrew Bales, general director of Symphony Silicon Valley. "She aspired to be among the world's greats and achieved it, then came back to set a standard for San Jose that had not been set before. It's a spectacular legacy."

Laurie Warner, president of Opera San Jose's board of trustees, said Dalis might serve in an advisory

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Irene Dalis, 87, founder of Opera San Jose, announced her retirement as the director, during an interview in San Jose, Calif. on Friday, January 25, 2013. As a mezzo-soprano, she sang on some of the world's greatest opera stages before returning home to San Jose where she founded Opera San Jose nearly thirty years ago. (Gary Reyes/ Staff) (Gary Reyes)

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role to the company after her retirement, which takes effect July 1, 2014. A search committee will be formed to find her successor, said Warner, who, like Bales, could not say enough about Dalis's impact: "Oh my goodness," she said, "she built a company from nothing. Her legacy is the company itself."

In 2010, Dalis said, she considered retirement but decided to stay and guide the company through the economic recession. That October, while she drove to work on Interstate 880 in San Jose, an SUV careened across three lanes and barreled into her car. Suffering severe injuries to her right ankle and leg, she underwent months of rehabilitation -- and continued to work, though "a solid team" formed behind Dalis during this period, Warner said, describing it as a trial.

These days, Dalis maneuvers in a wheelchair. But the accident "hit my ankle, not my head," she joked during a Friday interview in her office.

Smartly dressed and headed to her hair dresser, she ticked off phone numbers from memory. "I'm in perfectly good health. But I do think it's time to let this company have some new blood, some new ideas. I've accomplished what I can accomplish." Dalis conceded that she is worried about the company as the recession continues: "We're not selling tickets the way we used to, so I decided to stay another year to see what we can do. We're in the black, but we are worried. This is nationwide. All the companies are feeling it."

Raised downtown on Delmas Avenue, Dalis graduated from San Jose State in 1946 with a minor in mathematics and a major in music education, then went off to New York for more music studies.

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Trained as a performer during the '50s in German opera houses with their own resident artists, she used those houses as a model when she founded Opera San Jose in 1984. Unique among regional companies in the U.S., Opera San Jose typically allows its resident singers to stay for up to four seasons, building stage experience in major roles.

"She had a major, major international career, and she became a trailblazer," said Lotfi Mansouri, former general director of San Francisco Opera. "If you look at others who founded companies, they don't have the depth that Irene brought to San Jose. She has apartments for her singers, a scenic shop, a costume shop. It is unique, and she looks after the singers almost like her children. I admire her no end. She is unique."

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