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# Cultural World

## Bilingual

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## IN MEMORIAM

**By Iride Aparicio**

**Photos Courtesy: Ópera San José**

**SAN JOSÉ, CA – How could one memorialize a legend of the magnitude of IRENE DALIS? Since words alone are not capable to describe her, we will do it by associating our memories with the musical sounds that, as chords, harmonized every stage of her life.**

**She described her family as a “musical family,” where PADASKIVAS NICOLAS THELYIS her father, a Greek hat cleaner and hat maker, who had arrived as an immigrant in Elis Island in 1903, and later anglicized his name to Peter N. Dalis, was always singing. He had never studied music but had a pleasant voice. And music must have been in the heart of her mother, ROSE**

**BOITANO**, born in Sacramento, California, from Italian parents, because she required that each one of her five children, two girls and three boys, learned to play a musical instrument. So, Marge, the oldest, who was 15 years older than **YVONNE** (as **IRENE** was called before becoming a professional Diva) played the piano, one of her brothers the violin, another the drums, and she sang to entertain their guests. And without her knowing it at that time, it was Marge who determined her destiny by teaching her how to read musical notes, before she learned to read words.

Because she had studied piano through grade school and high school, **YVONNE** was proficient in music and wanted to be a music teacher. She studied Music Education at San Jose State College (now University). But her life took a different turn after the school's Vocal Department's Chair heard her sing and suggested that she added voice to her Major field. After getting her BA, in 1946, Marge encouraged **YVONNE** to enroll at Columbia University Teachers College in New York and pursue a Master Degree. She went to study in New York with the plan to return to teach in San José.

But when **YVONNE** was learning to teach voice, Dr. **WILSON**, one of her teachers, heard the Mezzo-Soprano sing a song, and encouraged her to study voice professionally. She did not know it at the time, but her purpose in life had been defined.

Helped financially by Marge, she took classes with **EDYTH WALKER**, one of the best voice teachers in New York City. In 1951 she got a Fulbright scholarship to go to Milan, Italy, for a year staying for a month at the University of Stranieri in Perugia, and for another month at the Verdi Conservatory in Milan. While in Italy, **YVONNE** got an agent in Munich and a Fest contract in Oldenburg, Germany as a resident artist.

She made her Operatic debut in Oldenburg, in 1953, singing the role of princess Eboli in **GIUSEPPE VERDI**'s "Don Carlo" at the Oldenburgischer Stadts Theatre. While in Europe, she also sang at the Stadtische Opera in Berlin where she was advised to change her name, from **YVONNE** to **IRENE**. Diva **IRENE DALIS** was born on that day.

In 1957, **RUDOLF BING**, the Metropolitan Opera, General Director brought her to sing for the Metropolitan Opera in New York where she made her debut on march 16Th in the role of Eboli in "Don Carlo" with Swedish tenor **JUSSI BJORLING** in the role of Prince and Italian Bass **CESARE SIEPI** as King Phillip II, his father.

In his New York Times' review of the evening, **HOWARD TAUBMAN** the music critic called it: *"One of the most exciting nights of the season"* describing **DALIS**' voice as *"A voice with color, that has range, security and brilliant top notes."* Her style, as: *singing with fire*" and her aria "O don Fatale" with *"winning her an ovation of several minutes"* Her debut was described with the adjective: *"Magnificent."*

On that night and to celebrate her sensational Met debut, **GEORGE LOINAZ**, a Cuban socialite and McGraw Hill Book Editor, who was a friend of the Diva, hosted her a post-performance reception on Park Avenue.



*IRENE DALIS playing the role of Eboli in “DON CARLOS”*

On July of the same year, Diva **IRENE DALIS** and **GEORGE LOINAZ** got married at the Carmel Mission in Monterey California. The marriage, that produced a daughter, lasted until his death in 1990.

Already established at the Met, where she sang for two decades, **IRENE DALIS** toured Europe, where in 1961, she became the first American Mezzo-Soprano to sing the role of Kindry in Wagner’s Parsifal at Bayreuth, Germany. She also sang at Covent Garden, the Hollywood Bowl in Los Angeles, and other theaters in the West Coast including the War Memorial, where she debuted at The San Francisco Opera in 1958, with her now famous role of Eboli in “Don Carlo,” and returned to sing for 15 more seasons after that.



*IRENE DALIS as Ameris in Aida*

Because of her singing, virtually, every major Mezzo-Soprano role written by composers like VERDI, RICHARD SRAUSS and RICHARD WAGNER among others, IRENE DALIS was the most admired Mezzo-Soprano singer in the world of opera for many years.

But all those years of performing began to take a toll in her voice, described by the critics as: *“dark with a luscious timbre, a seductive shimmer, and a dramatic sound”* and being the perfectionist she was, IRENE DALIS decided that since she could no longer deliver her best it was time to do something else.

She was now a wife, and mother to Alida, her only daughter, so she ended her career in the city where it all had started: San José, California, with a Concert at the old St. Joseph Cathedral in downtown.

But twenty years of fame had not fulfilled her basic need. IRENE still wanted to do something else to pay back all the good she had received from so many people in her life, and she saw a way to do it, by going back to her other profession: teaching.

Dr. JACK BRENZEL then President at San José State, had offered her a full Professorship in the music department of her Alma Mater; she seized the opportunity. In 1970, the famous Diva said goodbye to the world's stages to walk in the classrooms of a University.

While teaching, she was put in charge of “the Opera workshop” of their Music Department, a class where the advanced Voice Majors could learn to sing short scenes of different operas. The scenes were performed in class, or on a stage without any costumes or sets.

And it was observing all these young talented voice students at San José State, that she remembered the program at the Oldenburg theatre in Northern Germany, which allowed young inexperienced singers to learn to sing and perform important operatic roles early in their careers.

After years of fund raisers, of sending Grants applications, of talking to people and with the help of professors like Dr. DAVID ROHRBAUGH a voice teacher and later her Orchestra Director, KIM PLOW, an accompanist, BARBARA BARRETT, an School teacher, and the help of many students who helped her build the sets, paint them, sew the costumes and encourage her in her dream, (one of them, LARRY HANCOCK, now Opera San José's Director) in 1984, OPERA SAN JOSE, the only Opera Company in the United States entirely dedicated to developing the careers of emerging young Opera singers, was born.



*IRENE DALIS called OPERA SAN JOSE “My real Career”*

After its founding IRENE DALIS served as its General Director for thirty years. Those years were a mix of happy and unhappy events for her as a person.

Perhaps the happiest event during that time, was the renovation of the California Theatre, which she did with the help of Mr. DAVID PACKARD, a professor of Classics at UCLA, and his

foundation. He wanted a restoration that was true to the original theater, which included Spanish Renaissance foyer with painted ceiling and Art Deco gold colors trimmings on its walls and lamps hanging for the ceiling, so after months of meeting with members of the San José Redevelopment agency, the city planners, building historians, and construction firms the renovation began. The renovation of the building, also included the renovation of its old Wurlitzer Organ, that was installed on the lobby. The renovation improved the acoustics, Enlarged the pit, created backstage rehearsal rooms for the artists, added dressing rooms back stage, and toilets for the audience. It also gave Opera San José its own theatre. The California Theatre re-opened on September 2004 with a production of MOZART's "The Marriage of Figaro." The theatre is now also Symphony Silicon Valley performing home.



*IRENE DALIS at the California Theatre*

The year 1990, was a mixture of happy and sad moments into the life of IRENE DALIS. As an Impresaria, she joined the City of San José in the celebration of the 25th Anniversary of the founding of Opera San José. In her personal life, however, 1990 was the year when her house burned down destroying many of her long treasured mementos. A month after the fire, her GEORGE LOINAZ, her husband died.





*Vocal Competition (2014)*

*Photo by Antonio Gadong*

**In 2007, with the support of an anonymous donor The "IRENE DALIS Vocal Competition" was established. The competition allows 10 young singers to compete for \$50,000 in cash prizes.**

**Tragedy struck OSJ's Director when in October of the year 2011, on her way to work, a white SUV spun out of control on the rain-soaked pavement, and smashed into her car. IRENE DALIS was left with shattered bones above her right ankle and many broken ribs. Her spirit, however, was intact.**

**A few months later, she went back to work. First using a wheel chair, and later a walker, and spend months trying to learn to operate an "special" car that would allow her to drive using only her hands. She retired in July of 2014, leaving Mr. LARRY HANCOCK as her successor. Her Farewell Tribute Dinner in July at the Sainte Claire Hotel in S.J. was attended by 250 guests which included many celebrities, and dignataries in different fields, including a former President of Peru.**



*IRENE DALIS showing her award (2014) Photo By Antonio Gadong*

The list of Honors and Awards given to IRENE DALIS during her life is too long to publish in this article in its totality. Some are:: RICHARD WAGNER MEDALLION, Bayreuth, West Germany (1963) Honored Citizen of The City of San José (1986). Irene Dalis Day in San José (9/24/86) proclaimed by the Mayor Tom McEnery. Lifetime Achievement Award from the Arts Council Silicon Valley (2002) Cornerstone of the Arts, City of San José, (2014). There is also a book about her life: "Irene Dalis, Diva, Impresaria, Legend. How a Metropolitan Opera Star created America's Unique Opera Company" written by Linda Riebel.

I met IRENE DALIS 19 years ago when as Cultural Critic of the Newspaper LA OFERTA I went to her office to interview her. I interviewed her many times after that, and every year to discuss with her her new Opera Season. She described each new work, in detail, and some of her singers with pride, as a mother, describing her own children. We talked many times at the dinners on Opening over the phone and every time she wanted to discuss with me something in my reviews of the Operas wanted me to meet and interview one of her "new" singers. During all those years our education and passion from music built between us a very strong bond. She said that I was "her soul mate."

I saw her for the last time in November when I went to visit her at her house after Thanks Giving. She looked well, and she was walking around in her walker. She told me that on that morning she have had a meeting with the workers of the Main Library who had gone to her office at OSJ, to gather all her documents. She showed me the stack of cardboard boxes piled against her dinning room wall. She was happy, she was planning to learn to drive her "special Car." so she could move around. I promised her to come back before Christmas. Standing by her kitchen's door, we hugged, she looked into my eyes and said smiling: "Good bye, Love"