Peter Gelb: It is true that I did start as an usher at the Metropolitan Opera, but I haven’t been there ever since; I’ve done other things in between. When I walked into the doors of the Met in my newly appointed position as general manager, I did recognize one of my fellow ushers from 30 years ago. And he remembered me, and we say hello to each other every day.

I’m very honored to be asked to speak to you, a distinguished group of theatre producers, because for me, when I came to the Met, I wanted to prove that opera is a complete theatrical experience—because that’s of course what opera is. And unfortunately the Metropolitan Opera House had somewhat lost its sense of itself as a theatre. I regard it as the greatest theatre in the world, certainly one of the biggest theatres in the world: It has 3,800 seats, it has an extraordinary capacity for a stage, it has a symphony orchestra, it has a chorus, it has 200 stage hands, and it has probably the greatest workforce, just in terms of size, of any theatre in this country, if not in the world. And yet when I was appointed in 2004—I only became the general manager about a year and three months ago; I completed my first season last spring and we’ve just now begun our second season—when I was appointed, the Met was in serious trouble. I’m not even sure to what extent the Met knew it was in serious trouble, but I was actually a very unlikely choice to become the head of the Metropolitan Opera. I had been running a classical record label for the previous 12 years; I’d never run an opera house. I was an usher, but somehow I don’t think that qualified me. I had worked extensively all my life, since being an usher, as somebody who had marketed classical music. I was a producer for a number of years: I managed some of the most extraordinary talents and some of the most difficult talents in the classical music industry, ranging from Vladimir Horowitz to Kathleen Battle. In fact, I was the producer—some people thought, the masochistic producer—who came up with the idea of putting Kathleen Battle and Jessye Norman in concert together. [Laughter.] But we all survived.

But because of my background as a producer, the search committee of the Met in 2004 realized that they needed something more dramatic in terms of how to deal with this art form, which has one of the most loyal constituencies—opera lovers are, I think, the most passionate performing arts lovers around. And yet the problem at the Met when I was appointed, which I discovered only after I signed my contract, was that the average age of our audience was 65 years old. And perhaps even more alarming, according to the marketing survey I was shown, five years earlier the average age of our audience had been 60. [Laughter.] You may laugh—but at the time I was not laughing when I saw this study!

In a way, the innovations, if I’m allowed to use that word, that have taken place at the Met were much easier to accomplish, because once I identified how dire the situation was, I was given the mandate to move forward. In fact, it was the basis on which I was hired. Even though the Met had been looking for a new general manager for a period of over a year, because I was the last candidate, I quickly negotiated and signed my
contract within a matter of 48 hours. I met with the search committee of the board, and I told them—although I was running a classical record label—I was ready to leave the classical music industry, which I realized was heading downward, as many of you may know. It’s in far worse shape today even than when I was there. But when I met with the search committee of the board, I spoke with them about the fact that the Metropolitan Opera seemed to me to have become disconnected, had become culturally isolated, had become an island, really. Where it had once been a leader in the performing arts, a place where great directors like John Dexter flourished, where Rudolf Bing brought great Broadway directors to the Met in the ‘50s and ‘60s. Where when Franco Zeffirelli was a kid his great shows were breaking ground. Where artists like Marc Chagall and David Hockney symbolized the connection between the visual arts and the performing arts world. All that had been somehow abandoned over the past 20 years.

And the result was that there was a core audience of music lovers but an audience that no longer was growing. And it was not surprising, because the Met had lost touch with the mainstream culture that it once had at least been at least firmly on the edge of. There’s no kidding—you can’t mistake grand opera as anything other than high art, and I don’t make the mistake of thinking it is anything other than high art. But as a high art form, it also has the possibility of being produced and presented in the most popular fashion. And that begins with what goes on the stage and it continues with how it’s communicated with the public. In a way, I was lucky the Met was in bad shape. Because if it was not in bad shape, I would not have been given the freedom to make the changes I put into place.

In fact, the person who hired me, who actually called me, was Beverly Sills, who was then the chairman of the board of the Met, who herself was a very clever—besides being one of the great singers and communicators as a singer of all time—had very successfully run the New York City Opera in the ‘70s. She called me after the search firm had been trying to get in touch with me—I guess I thought they were some junk phone call, so I never called them back—so Beverly called me herself and persuaded me to come to speak to the search committee of the board. And shortly after I was hired, she came into my office and said, “So, what’s your vision?” I’d only been there about three days. I realized—I mean, I had a lot of ideas—but she made me realize I had to have a really strong, articulate vision for what the change of the Met would be.

So I set out, I guess much the way a politician would, establishing planks and a platform, and laid out a plan for how the Met was going to change. And it was a plan that crossed all areas. This was an institution that had had, as I said before, very little change. In fact, when I walked in the first day—the Met’s a huge building, and it takes years to understand your way around, it’s sort of like the modern version of the labyrinth—and I remember walking to my office and one of the assistant stagehands grabbed me aside as I was walking by and said, “You know, here we work in a feudal system.” As in the F-E-U-D-A-L system. [Laughter.] Which also was futile. [Laughter.] But he made it very clear to me and it sort of rung home. The other moment was one of the arts officers said to me, as I started explaining some of my ideas for change, he said, “You know, you’re my fifth general manager.” That’s not always a good thing to say to a general manager. [Laughter.]

So I set out to make a very strong plan of what I was going to change and how I was going to change it. Because I felt that there had to be a way to have a striking program for change but at the same time honor the audience. And I’m sure many of you have this
problem as well, which is that this is an audience that is so conservative and old that it was necessary to come up with a plan that would be non-threatening to them, while at the same time would be appealing to a new audience. And in fact, the new audience I targeted was the theatre audience. Because I do believe, as the advertising slogan this year said: Great opera is great theatre.

So I made speeches to our patrons and to our audience. We have an annual operating budget, which this year will be about $260 million to $270 million. [Laughter and murmurs.] We gain about 40 percent of that revenue through ticket sales. And the rest of it comes from board members, opera lovers, ticket buyers—ticket buyers who are very wealthy and who give us lots of money. I’m sure you’ve heard about some of our donors who have given us lavish gifts. Part of my job in trying to formulate, to navigate this new policy, was to encourage them to continue to give their money, without having to necessarily follow their artistic advice, [Laughter.] which had perhaps gotten us into this predicament in the first place. [Laughter.] So luckily the Met board members understand how important it is to support their favorite art form, but not to interfere. I mean, the way they can interfere is getting rid of me—which they can do any time they like—but not by micromanaging me.

Very shortly after I arrived, I held a press conference on the stage of the Met and announced the plans for the Met’s recovery. And I announced a seven-point plan. And the seven points were, number one: to dramatically increase the number of new productions from the current new productions of four to eight; double the number of new productions, with the world’s greatest theatre directors, to prove that opera can be a rewarding theatrical experience as well as a musical one. Two: to remove the veil of elitism and formality that surrounded, enveloped the Met, through audience outreach and education programs. Number three: to secure even more performances from the world’s greatest singers, partly by luring them to the Met with the opportunity to work with the world’s greatest directors, who up until then were not working there with any kind of regularity. Four: to produce contemporary work and expand the repertory on an annual basis, and in doing so I announced a new commissioning program with the Lincoln Center Theater, which is the first collaborative effort between two institutions at Lincoln Center in the history of Lincoln Center. Number five: to present annual holiday entertainment programs for family audiences, which began last year with our English-language adaptation of Julie Taymor’s Magic Flute and which continues this holiday season with Richard Jones’s Hansel and Gretel.

Many of the directors I’m bringing to the Met, like Richard Jones, have never worked at the Met before. And part of how I convinced these directors to come and work at the Met was that I traveled around in my first year before I took over as general manager to persuade them. I remember it was Richard Jones, when I first started speaking to him in London, who was extremely skeptical about being able to work at the Met. He said, “Oh, the Metropolitan Opera, that’s the place where singers park and bark.” [Laughter.] And I had to persuade him that in fact it was possible for a great director to have a satisfying theatrical experience at the Met, and that the new generation of opera singers are ones who are interested in acting and are dying to work with great directors. There is a whole new generation of opera singers, ranging from Renee Fleming, who has a beautiful voice and is totally interested in acting, to the great young Anna Netrebko, to Natalie Dessay, who adorned the sides of all the New York buses for the month of September—she became the symbol of our new season and of the theatricality we hope to fill our season with in the title role of Lucia, which was directed in her debut by your own Mary
Zimmerman. These directors, like Mary Zimmerman, like Bart Sher, who I brought to the Met last year—Bart you all know from Intiman Theatre—are the directors who are persuading audiences both old and new that theatricality in opera is possible.

My sixth point was to rebuild ties to the contemporary visual arts world. We created a new gallery space at the Met and set about commissioning all kinds of artists who create works inspired by opera in the Met, in this gallery space, which has led also to the commissioning of major visual artists who will be working at the Met in the future, just as Hockney and Chagall did years ago. William Kentridge, for example, the great South African artist, who’s going to design and direct an opera for us in 2009–10. And recently, the brilliantly gifted Swiss architects Jacques Herzog and Pierre de Meuron agreed to design the scenery for a new opera in our 2009–10 season as well. And finally, I announced the plans—even before we had any union agreements negotiated—that we were going to completely transform the way the Met worked with its unions when it came to media. And that we were going to find ways with the unions to enable us to take control of the intellectual property that we could create through capturing live performances and disseminating them on every possible platform that existed or will exist in the future. And it was a bit of a risk to make this statement without the union agreements in place, but in fact it actually aided and abetted the process of getting those agreements in place.

Somewhat miraculously, this seven-point plan actually took place. All these things came to pass. And over the course of the first year, we had enormous success. I know those of you who are producers know as well as I do that producers rely on luck sometimes, as well as on being in the right place or choosing the right talent. My producer’s luck was extremely strong when I needed it to be the most, which was at the beginning. So it created a kind of—at least for the time being—an extended honeymoon period for me with the board, with the public, with the people who work in the theatre.

I thought it would be interesting to actually show you as an example one of the points in this platform. From the very first morning of the opening night of the Met season, and we did the same thing this year, we took our opening night gala performance—in this case it was the opening night of Lucia—and not only had it play for an audience paying some obscene amount of money for it, that scalped ticket you’ve sold for $65...I’ll look the other way over that. [Laughter.] But for the opening night gala of the Met, people pay for center boxes up to $50,000 or $60,000. It’s quite remarkable. But to counterbalance that, and to demonstrate that the Met is not interested just in having this elite audience, we instituted a whole bunch of other programs. I was able to persuade one of our donors to buy $2 million worth of hundred-dollar side orchestra seats, some as close as the fourth row, which began a rush-ticket program. Every night, Monday through Thursday, we offer 200 of these $100 seats for $20 on a first-come, first-served basis. I lowered the lowest price ticket from $25 to $15 in the Family Circle, which, even though it’s very far up, also happens to have—if you’re a music lover—the best acoustics. I began a program of open rehearsals—this year we have three of them—where the general public is invited to the final dress rehearsal of a performance on a first-come, first-served basis. And the very opening night, this ritzy, glamorous opening night with the red carpet and paparazzi shooting, also was extended to the general public for free, by virtue of a giant screen that we installed in front of the Metropolitan Opera House with speakers and seats. And we had about three or four thousand people sitting out there. And it was also, most dramatically, transmitted onto giant screens in Times Square, with the agreement
of the city and the mayor, where several thousand people sat in seats in the island between 43rd and 44th Streets, with speakers and so forth.

So I thought just to give you a flavor, a sense of what this event was like, there’s a little video of our opening night.

[Video plays]

It’s not often you get to take a curtain call for the same performance in so many different locations! [Laughter.] That was Natalie Dessay, one of the great singing actresses, and if only we had more of her, all of our challenges would be met. And that was the production directed by Mary Zimmerman in her debut at the Met. It was such a successful collaboration that they are going to be reunited next year at the Met in a new production of La Sonnambula, another opera in which a woman goes mad. [Laughter.]

I think I’ve taken up my allotted time, and I have to actually go to work at the opera house. And there are questions I would be happy to entertain. I would just like to say before I do that, there is another video which I’m going to leave behind, and it was suggested perhaps you might watch it if you feel like it at dessert. It’s a highlight reel of the transmissions—that was shot in HD, but this is not one of our HD transmissions that has really kind of revolutionized the opera world this year that we’re transmitting into movie theatres. This season, our first one takes place on December 15. We have 600 movie theatres in North America that are part of a network that takes these eight matinees live, and there are another hundred or so in Europe. And this has really completely changed the way communities and opera lovers can be connected to the Met, and has helped local opera companies as well, many of which work with local movie theatre showings to co-present them. It’s quite amazing because the audiences in these movie theatres, knowing it’s coming live from the Met—these are theatres that have satellite dishes on their roofs and high-definition digital projectors—the audiences applaud as if they were sitting in the opera house. So when they hear a good aria, they’ll burst into applause as if they were sitting right in the Metropolitan Opera House. What’s really remarkable about it is that we anticipate, based upon our advance sales and what we expect with a number of theatres, that we will have over a million paying customers this year who will have purchased movie theatre tickets for $22, which is a larger paying audience than will go to the Met itself in the course of the season. Our house seats 3,800 people and during the course of the season, if we sell out, we’ll have about 900,000 people there. So we basically doubled our audience through these movie theatre transmissions and at the same time we have created the greatest audience development tool we could ever have dreamt of. Because as interesting as these productions are—and they include everything from backstage cameras to moving cameras inside the house to make it a very exciting visual experience—it still is just as the New York Yankees and other sports franchises who are in direct contact with their audiences through television and the radio and the Internet on a regular basis have proven: It’s no substitute for being in the theatre in person. So it’s actually an incentive for audiences to come to the Met.

As you can see, I’ve got my plate full with all kinds of activities, but I enjoy every minute of it because it’s very exciting to be able to actually see how the results of these efforts are changing an art form that’s a very old art form but that can be approached with youthful energy. And I have a great team helping me do this and we’re achieving results so far. So I’m happy to share that with you. Thank you very much. [Applause.]
Russell Willis Taylor:
I'm Russell Willis Taylor, and I'm the president and chief executive of National Arts Strategies. I met Peter fairly recently although I had heard much about his work. I think you described me as this when I interviewed you for a magazine—I'm a fully recovered former opera director. [Laughter.] I used to be the managing director of the English National Opera in London. And so as someone who has this experience, I have the most extraordinary respect and admiration for what you have been able to get done, because I fully understand that when you run an opera company, you go to work every day with, in my case it was close to a thousand people, who with the best will in the world try to keep you all day from getting your job done. So I think you've been amazing. This is the Q&A part. I do have some questions but if there are people here who also have questions we have time I think for about 10 minutes.

Audience:
Have you found that your senior longtime audience, are they enthusiastic about the popularizing of it, or are they skeptical, waiting to see they’re going to be pushed out the door...?

Gelb:
I can't speak for the entire audience, but I think the proof that the majority of them were happy is that the majority of them have stayed. We have not lost the core audience and in fact our contributions went up about 20 percent last year. I receive very few death threats and hate mail. [Laughter.] So far it's been pretty good. I think a number of older audience members—you can't please all the members of the audience, obviously—but many of them have been very enthusiastic, because they've seen that the musical values are respected, that scenery is built properly so it supports the acoustics, that the directors who we have engaged are very respectful of the underlying stories of the operas. The thing that all Metropolitan Opera fans of a certain age live in mortal fear of is something known as “Euro Trash.” [Laughter.] They have seen that I have not brought them any Euro Trash. I've brought them European directors, but directors who have somehow risen above the trash level. [Laughter.]

Taylor:
Someone at our table had asked a question about the union interaction. Any man who can introduce any program in New York which results in New Yorkers being told, “You have to keep walking,” is obviously an innovation, as we saw in the film. But we were talking over dinner, Peter and I, about there's a slightly different tone at the moment with regard to the unions. For example, the writers' strike, which we're all aware of. And I know, as many people behind the scenes do, how you accomplished what you accomplished with the unions. There was no magic to it: it was a relentless combination of charm, intelligence and persistence. Do you think this understanding you have with the union is at the heart of some of the changes you’ve been able to make? Do you think we’re look at maybe a shift back, generally, nationally, or not?

Gelb:
Well, it's hard for me to speak nationally. With the union changes at the Met, the best leverage I had—because you always have to have leverage when you’re negotiating with anyone, whether it’s unions or non-unions—but the best leverage I had was that I painted a picture of devastation in the future for them, [Laughter.] because in fact I believed it. I believe if the Met was not prepared to completely change the way it
presented itself to the public.... The proof of the declining years: For six years the box office had gone down. That was the ammunition I had—I won't go into all the gory details, but there were other things that I was able to say to them as well. I think that unions, certainly when things are really rough economically...if you can articulate what the problems are, I think that's when change can happen. I think it's much harder to make change when the unions feel a company, whether it's a for-profit or a nonprofit company, is doing well. Look at the car industry—they're getting concessions out of the unions right now because things are so bleak. And the Met is sort of like the General Motors of the arts world.

**Audience:**
I'm wondering how the community of artists has embraced or not embraced this change?

**Gelb:**
The community of artists, meaning the soloists?...Well, I think the artistic community has in general embraced these changes, not only the artists but the stagehands, everybody at the Met in general, is very excited and energized by these changes. They realize that it's a lot more work than they've had before, but it's also a lot more stimulating. And the singers who sing on the stage of the Met are much more excited about singing at the Met than they have been previously because now they know that when they sing on the stage of the Met, not only are they singing to an audience of 4,000 people in the house, if it's a sold-out performance, but to a global audience as well. And that's very stimulating and certainly is stimulating for the members of the orchestra as well.

I remember the first open house we had, with the general public admitted at no charge, there was such excitement, and standing ovations. Several members of the orchestra said to me, “You know, we feel like rock stars.” So I don't think any institution can feel bad about that.

I should also point out one other thing, which is that in the area of education we're trying to make big changes as well. We're using these HD programs this year, we've entered into an agreement with the New York City Public School System, where each one of these transmissions is going into a designated public school in each of the five boroughs and teachers and students will see these programs, hear these programs, at no admission price at all.

**Taylor:**
One of the things that was made possible for you—which was unusual, which you made possible for yourself, possibly—was that you had quite a long period of time before you took the helm to be there as an observer and a thinker. How crucial do you think that was to you being able to implement some of the things you brought into being?

**Gelb:**
There's no question that having a year to train for the position helped me enormously. Interestingly, in Europe, when a new intendant of an opera house takes over, they have a lot more time. I basically inherited artistic programming that my predecessor had set up, which I then had to navigate around and make changes where I could. My first season that I have fully programmed in collaboration with James Levine, the great music director of the Met, is the 2009–10 season. So this season, the season before, even the next season, there are a lot of changes in it that I did institute, but most of it was in
place. Certainly having a year before I took over gave me some breathing room. And also gave me a chance, in that year, to renegotiate these media portions of our union agreement.

Teresa Eyring:
I wondered if you could talk about your board’s involvement as you made changes. Did you encounter any resistance?

Gelb:
The Met has a very complicated board structure. There are different levels depending upon the contributing level of the board member. The core group of the board was, I would say, fairly unanimously in favor of what I was doing, because it started off strong, as I said before, and succeeded, so it’s hard to argue with success. I can’t say honestly that they necessarily would have supported me so positively if the opening night production last year of Anthony Minghella’s Madama Butterfly had bombed instead of being a hit. Who knows?

Audience:
Can you tell us a little about the commissioning program and how successful you’ve been with that?

Gelb:
Well, our commitment to contemporary opera is threefold. In the short term we are presenting—before these commissions that we’re working on getting produced—we’re presenting some major contemporary masterpieces that the Met had never produced before. For example, this season we have a new production created by the Improbable Theater Company of Satyagraha, Philip Glass’s masterpiece, which is being presented in the spring. Next season we’re producing a new production of John Adams’s latest opera, Doctor Atomic, which had its premiere in San Francisco a year ago. We’re doing a completely new production that will debut in the fall. We’re bringing back a work by John Corigliano called Ghosts of Versailles, which had its debut at the Met in 1990.

Separate from our commissioning program, we’ve commissioned one of the great composers of today, Osvaldo Golijov, from Argentina. One of the things I believe in very strongly about new music is that in order to give it the maximum chance of success, great composers need to be teamed with great dramatists. Far too often composers, because they don’t know any better or because someone isn’t helping them, feel that they can just go off and write a piece on their own, which is like telling a composer of a musical to go write a musical without a book. And it does not increase the chances or likelihood of success. So one of things I’ve tried to do, and one of the reasons underlying motives behind the Lincoln Center Theater co-commissioning program, is to act as marriage brokers between great dramatists and composers. So in the case of Osvaldo Golijov, we’ve teamed him with Anthony Minghella, who is most famous as a film director, but was a playwright before he became a film director. And he’s very musical, and he’s a great dramatist. So they are working together now, in fact, on a new opera.

In the Lincoln Center Commissioning Program, there are 10 or 11 teams of composers and librettists who have started work. Some have started work....There’s one thing composers like to do more than write new works, which is procrastinating. And unfortunately a lot of the composers we’ve chosen are very successful composers, who have multiple projects they’re already procrastinating on. So we have, I would say, within
the next two or three years, we’ll start workshopping some of these new works. And
hopefully by 2012, 2013...I know it sounds far, far in the future in theatre terms, but these
works will hopefully start finding their way to the Met stage.

[Applause]