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Innovative Risk-Taker

Tomer Zvulun is bringing change to The Atlanta Opera.

By Fred Cohn



Tomer Zvulun at Atlanta's Cobb Energy Performing Arts Centre

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THE BOARD OF THE ATLANTA OPERA took a leap of faith in 2013, when it hired Tomer Zvulun as its general and artistic director. Although the Israel-born stage director had established a rock-solid reputation in seven years on the Met's directing staff, as well as through his own productions in Dallas, Seattle, Cincinnati and elsewhere, he had never held an administrative post. Zvulun, a distinctly self-confident man, was acutely aware of the risks involved. "Only crazy people are sure of success," he says.

The gamble has paid off. When Zvulun started in Atlanta, the company's condition was precarious. It had spent a year without a general director in place. It was bleeding red ink, and in order to stay afloat, it had nibbled away at its endowment. Its entire season schedule consisted of twelve performances of three standard-repertory works. Under Zvulun, the Atlanta Opera has expanded the range and number of its offerings; in its 2019–20 season, it will stage productions of six diverse operas, along with special events and a family-friendly *Barber of Seville*, for a total of thirty-two performances. Most significantly, the company has balanced its budget for the past four seasons while significantly increasing its endowment.



Zvulun staging of *Dead Man Walking* at the Atlanta Opera, 2019
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Developing a more robust slate of productions was Zvulun's first order of business. "One thing I knew for sure is that you can't continue to do three productions a year and pray that one of them isn't going to be a flop that can throw you out of business," he says. In 2014–15, the first season he planned, the company launched its second-stage Discoveries Series of small-scale operas. "I convinced my board by repeating a mantra—'You're going to increase your artistic risk while lowering your financial risk,'" Zvulun says. "When you do a chamber opera with three people and an orchestra of fifteen, it allows you to perform in different parts of town to different audiences. In a large organization like an opera company, you can leverage your competencies to spin off different products that will appeal to different communities. Those communities have ticket-buyers, and they have donors."



Silent Night for Glimmerglass Festival, 2018

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Jake Heggie's *Three Decembers*, the first Discoveries offering, drew an audience of 1,600 to three performances. In subsequent years, the series slowly but surely attracted bigger crowds. David T. Little's *Soldier Songs*, in Zvulun's second season, initially sold so poorly that the company's marketing director advised canceling the production, but after Zvulun spoke to the Atlanta Vietnam Veteran's Bureau, talking about his experience in the Israeli army, he attracted local veterans to the performances. The relationship developed through the 2016 production of Keven Puts's *Silent Night*, as well as a veterans' ticketing program funded by the Atlanta-based Home Depot. "Now 3,000 veterans a year come to see our shows," Zvulun says. The current season's Discoveries Series consists of Tom Cipullo's *Glory Denied*—another opera with built-in appeal to veterans—and Robert Xavier Rodriguez's *Frida*.



Der Fliegende Holländer for Houston Grand Opera, 2018
© Lynn Lane

Another innovation was a mainstage production of *The Pirates of Penzance* in Zvulun's second season. "I did the unthinkable and programmed an operetta, to the wrath of many people," he says. "It ended up selling more tickets than any show we've ever done." The company's subsequent crossover projects have included *Sweeney Todd* and last season's *West Side Story*, which created such a rush at the box office—\$621,000 in ticket sales—that the company added an extra performance.

From the start, Zvulun felt that his backstage experience could translate into front-office acumen. "As a stage director, you have to reach different constituents, from singers to intendants to stage managers," he says. "When I took over in Atlanta, I used those skills to communicate my vision." In 2015–16, urged on by his board, he honed his managerial skills at the Harvard Business School's Executive Education program, spending the school year commuting between Atlanta and Cambridge. "I was surrounded by 200 executives from full profits—Google, Microsoft, you name it," he says. "It was all about the idea of innovation—taking a business model and figuring out how to adapt it to changes in the world." In 2018, Zvulun's work in Atlanta served as the basis for an HBS case study.



Dinner at Eight for the Wexford Festival, 2018

© Clive Bara

Zvulun and his wife, Susanna Eiland, a former singer who works in human resources at Cox Enterprises, live in Atlanta with their two small daughters, the younger born just this winter. His company is in the midst of formulating a strategic plan, which makes him imagine how his children might experience opera as they grow up. “What’s going to make my daughters choose to see opera twenty years from now?” he says. “We need to ask ourselves not just ‘What are we doing next season?’ but ‘Where is this 400-year-old art form—the most exciting art form in the world—heading?’

“You look at Blockbuster, at Sears, at Blackberry—where are they now?” Zvulun says. “But the companies, like Netflix and Amazon, that innovate, that think about the future, are the ones that are surviving. If you don’t come up with new products, you’re out of business.” ■