Standing on the Shoulders of Management Giants

The position of executive director is readily compared to the captain of the massive ship that is OSF. Working in cooperation with the artistic director, the executive director is responsible for maintaining a stable environment in which the creative work of the company may flourish. Throughout decades of major expansion and change, the steady guidance of OSF’s executive director at the helm has ultimately kept this ship afloat and increasingly able to serve the OSF community and its audiences. In the organization’s 78-year history, Cynthia Rider is only the third person to take on this hefty role. She is in good company, following in the footsteps of two leaders known for their ability to maintain an even keel—while keeping an eye on the horizon and preparing for the journey forward.

OSF’s first executive director, William Patton, was hired in 1953. He had spent five previous seasons with the company as lighting director, acting in small roles and lending a hand with publicity and public relations. Founder Angus L. Bowmer recognized Bill’s artistic and administrative skills and saw the potential his relationship with the local community held for the future of the Festival. Bowmer recommended to the Board of Directors that Patton be hired as general manager—the position later known as executive director—making him the Festival’s first full-time paid employee.

At the start of his tenure, Patton managed OSF’s operations with a $30,000 annual budget. In his 42 years of leadership, OSF went from occupying a single performance space to three, from producing 4 plays a season to 11, and from 31 total performances in a season to 750. He navigated the company through the burgeoning decades of the 1950s and 1960s as the Festival gained increasing nationwide acclaim. When the Elizabethan Stage was suddenly condemned by the Fire Marshal in 1958, he swiftly handled the demolition of the old structure and the funding and construction of the current Elizabethan Stage before the 1959 opening. In the 1960s, the demand for a longer season—and therefore an indoor venue—became overwhelmingly evident. Patton saw the company through its expansion into the winter months with the opening of the Angus Bowmer Theatre in 1970 and the opening of a third theatre, the Black Swan, in 1977.

Upon his retirement in 1995, Bill Patton was able to confidently pass the executive director reins to Paul Nicholson. A native of New Zealand, Paul had relocated to the United States 15 years earlier to work alongside Patton in 1980. As general manager from 1980 to 1995 and then executive director until December of 2012, Paul solidified OSF’s ability to support the careers of hundreds of theatre artists year after year—something he acknowledges as his proudest professional achievement.

Nicholson spearheaded the introduction of computers into the management of the Festival in the 1980s, allowing memberships and donations to surge from 4,000 members and $140,000 annually, to 15,000 and $1 million annually. In 1984 he sparked the initiative to establish an ongoing contract between OSF and the Actors’ Equity Association union. Paul managed negotiations between the two sides, resulting in a contract that forever increased the company’s dedication to artistic excellence and professionalism. With acclaimed skill in strategic planning and diplomacy, Paul led the ever-growing company through the funding, construction, and opening of the Allen Pavilion in 1991 and the Thomas Theatre in 2001. His management throughout 33 years of leadership allowed audiences to nearly double from 240,000 to 410,000 annually.

Fresh from serving Kansas City Repertory Theatre as executive director, Cynthia Rider is the first OSF executive director to step into the role directly from an outside organization. Like her predecessors, impressive management skills and a commitment to the arts make her well-equipped to steer the company on the next leg of its voyage. Responsible for today’s annual budget of more than $30 million, Cynthia is truly standing on the shoulders of the OSF leaders who have come before her.

Welcome, Cynthia—wishing you fair seas full of adventure and success ahead!