

VDC Interview Transcript
Subject: Cincinnati Ballet
Informant: Scott Altman

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Key:

Green highlighting: indicates (other) organizations and individuals that might be useful in mapping connections within and outside of the state.

Blue highlighting: titles of works referenced in interview

CF: Candace Feck

SA: Scott Altman

JD: Jane D'Angelo, Exec. Director OhioDance

JC: Jessica Cavender: videographer and media manager

MDB: Megan Davis Bushway: videographer

JC: We are ready whenever you're ready.

CF: I'm ready!

I'm Candace Feck, and I'm speaking with Scott Altman, and it is August 18th, the 100th anniversary of the signing of the 19th amendment!

SA: It is!

CF: And we're at Cincinnati Ballet.
It's great to meet you.

SA: Thank you. You, too.

CF: You seem to be kind of a magician, in what you do for institutions for whom you work. So maybe I'll learn some of your magic as we talk...not that I'm a fundraiser!

SA: (He laughs) I don't know if I've ever been called a magician. I like it.

CF: Well, I'm telling you, everywhere you go, "Oh, subscription sales, are up, and..."
Well, would you mind just telling us where you were born and educated?

SA: Sure. So I come from a town on Long Island called Northport, and was born and raised until I went off to undergraduate school out on Long Island. So I'm a born and bred New Yorker and spent most of my childhood going in and out of New York, because my grandparents, my grandfather specifically, was a really wonderful arts and culture lover. As a youngster, I would go to museums and cultural sites for years. Every other Saturday, I was in there, doing that. And what a great

way to grow up. So born and raised on Long Island in New York. And then I did my undergraduate work in voice, actually, at State University at Purchase, which is a conservatory in the State University setting and a really magnificent place to learn because you have a great blend of conservatory training and also liberal arts.

So I did that. I was a graduate, after which I began quickly performing as a young bass. There are basses in every opera. You may not remember them at the end, but they were there. So you have very long careers and you played an old guy, or a father, or a God, or anyway. So I was very fortunate that even out of undergraduate [school], I began performing and singing and started making a living as an opera singer.

I took a few years off from education and then moved into New York, moved into Manhattan after living at school, just outside of White Plains, New York. Moved into Manhattan and went to graduate school at Manhattan School of Music. So my Master's is, for all intents and purposes, future conservatory training, and graduated from Manhattan School of Music and continued being a performer. And did that for nearly close to twenty years in opera if you count my singing and undergrad, and continued on.

So that's kind of where I was born and raised. And, [during my] formative years, I sang in many apprentice programs around the country, the great opera companies, and learned how to do our trade. And it was a remarkable path and great to get to see the country and great to experience many different environments in many different cities and many different cultural institutions. And from being on one side of the stage to now having transitioned to administration has been a really important learning and life experience that helps educate everything I do.

CF: I can imagine. And good practice for traveling the country because you've been almost everywhere until you got here.

SA: I've certainly been around.

CF: Would you talk about how you came to that decision to go from performing to admin work?

SA: Sure. So again, as a young bass, we are the last of the vocal categories to really mature. Sopranos and tenors may mature a little earlier, and for maybe every one hundred sopranos, there's maybe one bass. So my career was moving along. And then in my early thirties, I met my soon-to-be wife in New York. And I was also teaching at that time, I was doing some adjunct voice teaching while performing. So I was teaching at Princeton University in the music department there, and my wife was doing administration and she got a position out in Princeton at Opera Festival of New Jersey, where I had previously sung. So I was teaching there and we said, "Hey, why don't we just move out from the city, which would be a great place to start our lives together." So we moved from Manhattan out to the Princeton area while I was still performing actively and singing at New York City Opera and Opera Company of Philadelphia.

By that time I'd sung at... I was very lucky as a young man, actually. I did two Carnegie Hall debuts. One was a debut, and then another followup, and Lincoln Center, and my career was blossoming as a bass. And we decided in the early two thousands that when this company, Opera Festival in New Jersey, closed that there was a great opportunity and a gap for running opera, and in particular community outreach education in opera and the fine and performing arts between New York and

Philadelphia. If you were in central New Jersey then you are at *least* an hour away from either city, you had no choice but to go either direction for culture in the arts. And Princeton, with a vibrant nominally cultural, but obviously world renowned educational community, was a fantastic place to continue that trajectory. So we started an opera company in our basement, and that was Opera New Jersey, and it blossomed and grew very, very and was thriving.

So a couple of years into that evolution, when I was still singing, I made a decision to speak with my artist manager and I was being represented by Columbia Artist Management in New York. And the next step as a young bass in my early thirties was to be much more international, which would have brought me *away* from home. And by that point we'd been married for a couple of years. My eldest son had been born in 2002 and I couldn't see myself going away as frequently. So I spoke to my manager and I said, "Hey, can I take a *pause* on the career, because I want to see how administration goes and see if this opera company really blossoms into something because I'm receiving and feel as much joy and fulfillment of giving back from *this* side of being a producer as I was being a performer."

And he said, "Absolutely." Long story short, "You're a young bass still, you can take 10 years off and come back and you'll just be more mature as a bass." So the reason I give all that context as my voice category is I was very fortunate. I *could* take a pause and then go back, had I chosen to. Never went back. Didn't *need* to go back. Fell in love with running the company, and growing the company, and then realized probably seven, eight years into Opera New Jersey that it was blossoming. It was huge. And by that time, our second son was born and it was all-encompassing. So we decided that for the health and wellbeing of our family, that *one* of us should probably take a pause so that we can be a family.

The sound of a blower returns...

CF: *Should we pause?*

MDB: Yes.

CF: *I'm sorry. This is some kind of blower issue in the building, and it will severely impact our ability to use your interview...*

JC: *It seems to blow for less than five minutes...*

SA: *Oh, okay. We can probably control some of that if we need to.*

(He makes a call): "Hey there! Is there any way to turn off the fan blower in the HVAC system here in the basement? Okay...because it goes on, and they have to stop their recording until it dies down...Okay! Thanks. They'll send someone down."

JD: (exploring) *I don't see any kind of switch...*

SA: *Let me take a look...*

An employee comes downstairs to help.

SA: (to us): *He's on it.*

CF: *We've tried, early on, filming over the top of things like this, but it doesn't work out well...*

The blower stops.

SA: *Thanks, Gene! Do you want us to turn it back on somehow after?*

Okay. If it gets warm in here, we'll just go upstairs and tell them and they'll ...

Okay. So, yes.

CF: You were saying that you had come to the decision that one of you would have to ...

SA: Yes, yes. So in the sequence of Opera New Jersey, it was that one of us should really consider pausing. And so my wife Lisa and I decided that since I had the connections and had been a performer in the opera world, that it was okay for me to say, "I'm ready to move on to another opportunity." And we told the Opera New Jersey that we, simply as founders, felt the best thing for the company was for us to let go and to move on.

So at that point I was recruited to go out and run Arizona Opera. I went from Princeton, New Jersey to the Phoenix area, so that was quite a shift. We moved the whole family out there, and I was General Director at Arizona Opera for almost five years, where we built the Arizona Opera Center in downtown Phoenix, which is a really beautiful building, directly across from the Phoenix Art Museum. And that was a great collaboration with the ... So I went out to run Arizona Opera as their general director, which was a fantastic experience. And as I was mentioning, we built the Arizona Opera Center, we closed down some operations in Tucson, consolidated in Phoenix. The company was on its 40th anniversary at that time. We reinvigorated audiences, brought grand opera back to the stages. Terrific experience. And then same situation, where after having been through the exhaustive process of building the Arizona Opera Center, I told the board, "Hey, I'm delighted to have brought us to this point, but you're going to need somebody to take the organization forward to the *next* stage of Arizona Opera." I'd become very good friends with multiple arts leaders in the greater Phoenix area, one of whom was at Ballet Arizona. And he said, "Scott, you're simply not finished with this path. Would you be interested, if it should happen, in jumping disciplines to ballet?" And I said, "That sounds fantastic. I would *love* that opportunity." And he said, "Well, I think there's a great position."

CF: I have a question to ask you before we continue. And that is, when you told the board at Arizona, time for you to move on, what were you *thinking* you were going to do?

SA: That's a good question. Essentially, I said I was going to hang around until such time as something came along, but that they needed to start thinking that a transition, I didn't want to spring it on them in any way, shape or form that I wasn't going to ... And so in the conversation with the board, I said, "I'm not going to be able to stay." And then I began opening up to other opportunities, and they completely understood. And had nothing come along, I probably would've changed direction. I don't know ... I could be in business in marketing or something, I don't know where I would have landed. But to stay would not have been good for Arizona Opera, and it was the best. It was another one of those transition moments in life. And every one of these moments in time, you tend to ... particularly the Arizona Opera one, you tend to age *double time*. So what was five years certainly felt like ten. And there was an unraveling of a lot of important things. The company was failing when I arrived. I learned *after* I arrived that they actually discussed dissolution. And I said, "Well, it would've

been *wonderful* information to have earlier." But it was a great path. And I certainly got my "MBA in non-profit arts management" while there. So anyway, having done what *I* could for the organization, it was great. It was fine. It was just that a transition happened.

So then I said to my colleague, "Sure I'd be interested in that conversation." And next thing I knew I was on the phone with the search firm that was looking for the leadership at *Ballet West*. And it was exciting. I had some really terrific conversations with the artistic director there, Adam Sklute and the board, and it seemed like a wonderful next opportunity. The business models are almost identical. The difference in the opera and ballet, the real core difference, is that in the opera world you are constantly reinventing the artistic product. So the structure is different in opera. You almost *always* have a general director who's responsible for not only artistic programming, but also the business model. So I was both. In the dance world, you have a partnership that is artistic and administrative. At the end of the day, the resources need to be available for the artistic to do what needs to happen. But the other pieces of the model, as far as the support streams, the revenue streams from contributed revenue and earned revenue are identical. The large production scale was identical. You're also involved in theatrical relations and schedules, and you deal with orchestras, and you deal with vendors, which are scenic. And so everything was very, very similar. But the other difference with opera and ballet, as I was mentioning, in ballet, you often have a troupe or a company that is with you for a period of time, for a year. And oftentimes you have dancers in that company that are with you for many, many years. In the opera world, you'll have multiple operas, depending on the size of your company. And each time you produce an opera, you are bringing an entirely new group of individuals together to collaborate, to make that happen. Which is exciting and thrilling, but you have much larger ebbs and flows with operations and your work product. You can do small operas, you can do large operas, grand scale, you have different size orchestras. You almost invariably have different singers doing *every* different opera. So the peaks and valleys of running an opera company are much greater. You go up and down, depending on the opera. And in a ballet situation, you just have little road bumps, I would say. So the business models are supported very similarly, but the *management* of those models is a little bit different.

So I was able to take some of the skill-sets that I'd learned in opera and help translate them over to ballet, which was *really* exciting. So I was at Ballet West for a little more than three years, and there too, I guess it was entrepreneurialism that kicked in, and we eradicated some long-term debt. They were holding debt for thirty years, and we ran a campaign and got rid of the debt, released some funds that were locked up in the endowment. There was a little bit of money that was liened on that we were able to release because we had no more debt. It was a very complex unraveling that we were able to achieve. And I entered Ballet West right at the very tail end of their capital campaign, which had been going on forever — at least ten years. So the financing mechanisms surrounding how they were going to actually build a facility were not yet in place. I was able to help with the mechanism of actually getting funded, built the capital stack and began construction on the ballet center in Salt Lake, which was built directly adjacent to the Capitol Theater. Matter of fact, the buildings touch: the lobby is one grand lobby. So we wound up finishing the funding and building the Ballet Center in Downtown Salt Lake. Very beautiful, phenomenal ballet company, a lot of history in Salt Lake.

Built the building, finished that off, and then again, I guess I have an itch, maybe. At that point, the company was stabilized, in great condition to move forward. And then I got a call from Cincinnati, the group that was working to find the next leader here. And originally here at Cincinnati Ballet, I think they were looking for someone more like a general manager, because Victoria was, at that time, still a CEO position. And then they, after speaking with me, realized that the structure should be

more conventional to what ballet has. And the opportunity here was just fantastic. Cincinnati Ballet — also very, very deep history, great artistic direction, but had what I saw as untapped potential. And so I jumped at the opportunity. A great move for my family, educationally, in particular. Salt Lake is a beautiful, beautiful place. Some of the institutional education that my very intellectually precocious boys were able to take advantage of was simply not there.

So coming here to Cincinnati offered those great opportunities for family. So then left from Salt Lake to here. So I guess my path is New York with a career in opera, Princeton area, starting an opera company, jumping to Phoenix, Arizona. From Phoenix to Salt Lake, from Salt Lake to Cincinnati. But before all that, I'd sung all over the country from San Francisco, to Chicago, and Texas, and Philadelphia, and Florida and Israel. And all over the place! So that brought me to Cincinnati Ballet. I am at the top of my fifth year at Cincinnati Ballet. We've done a few things. It's been exciting.

CF: According to the website, you've done some big things!

SA: Yeah. We're not quite done.

CF: According to the website, you've erased some debt here, I think...

SA: We did. Yeah. So Cincinnati Ballet, as I mentioned, was just a little sleepy and not quite fully realizing its great potential. It had nothing to do with the way things had been operated. It just needed to be given a little poker and look at some strategies for production, and growth, and investing in infrastructure, and elevating the culture of administration, and bringing on some remarkable talents. And then *my* role, my job is really to find great people, and it's my job not to tell them how and what to do, but essentially to give them the tools *they* need to be successful and empower them to do that, which is what we've done.

So I think upon my arrival, there was already conversation that we needed to grow. The building wasn't sufficient — the one that we're sitting in today, and that they'd run some studies, but really hadn't taken off. So I began proposing pretty quickly what I call a “foundation for the future.” And that foundation for the future really was core, surrounding growth and improved facilities. So over the course of a *very* short period of time, we put together the structure for what a capital campaign needed to be. We spent almost a year looking at various sites. Realized very quickly that trying to take an existing building and converting it *into* what we needed — very, very difficult for a ballet company, particularly because of the *unique*, very unique attributes of what you need. Very *large* open spaces without poles in the middle. You can't have load-bearing structure and run a ballet studio.

So we were looking for a really strong, identifiable connective location to downtown and realized that converting an old building was going to cost just as much and never quite be what we needed it to be. So we found a location, purchased the land, and we are *well* on our way to launching and being ready to move into the new Valentine Center for Dance in about ten months — less than ten months.

What's *really* remarkable is we are almost completely funded with the building. So that, too, happened *very*, very, very quickly. Certainly different from the scenario that had been in Salt Lake, where I came in at the *end* of a campaign that had really gone on for almost a decade or so. This was all wrapped up and continues to be almost *fully* wrapped up in a year — a little more than a year, eighteen months. So it's a \$30.8 million campaign. And as of today, I think we are *just* over a million dollars remaining to be raised. So it's off and running and really exciting. So almost 56,000 square feet

of ballet and nine full studios, an outdoor performance plaza and a rooftop terrace for entertaining. And we have a premier studio where we will be able to feature run-throughs of ballet or new works, or it can be converted into a space to hold a wedding and they can become anything we need it to be. So state-of-the-art and a *fantastic* location, really a gateway to the arts for Cincinnati, right at the foothill of the art museum and the Playhouse in the Park is there, WCPO is there. It's *extremely* visible. The access to the ballet center is really, really perfect. We've more than doubled our parking. The academy should double, if not triple, in the first three to five years. So we hope to be serving closer to 1500, 1800 families pretty soon. Yeah, I think it's going to be an iconic location for the ballet and certainly taking it out of that sleepy position that it had been in.

And on the production side, we've added a full production and we've really expanded the *number* of performances. We were at maybe thirty or so performances and gone up to 55 and so on, over the past few years, just by maneuvering the way we approach our production schedule. So I think I've answered a lot of questions.

CF: Well, you confirmed the fact that you are a magician of sorts!

SA: It's really assembling people. It's not Scott-magic. If there's anything that I do, it's helping put the combinations of people together and helping to steer the conversation between them, and then empowering people to do things. I mean, we're having conversations today about how we're going to deal with the unusual circumstances that we're in. And essentially, I've just asked the team to be ready to *pivot*. If that plan is not ready and can't work because of something out of our control, what are we going to back up and do? It doesn't mean we cancel, it means, oh, instead of A, we're going to B. So that you don't feel a sense of loss or a sense of anything but *direction change*. A lot of unfortunate situations are causing people to retreat and shut down.

There's a lot of re-invention going on, but I'm not trying to have our company reinvent itself into something that it's *not*. And I think that's a very important point. There are many organizations that are trying to become live-streaming video production companies. And there's a lot of resource that can be spent in that area. There's a lot of competition. Like, Hollywood has been doing it for a hundred years. You're never going to be organizations that have always *been* set up to do these things. So what can we do that maintains the integrity of who you are that doesn't take us too far off mission, and that still delivers content as best as possible during unique times? That doesn't mean we turn into a production company! It means we pivot, and we can film, but then just realize that we're not Great Performances quality. We are Cincinnati Ballet performing for *you*, our patrons — and here's a tape of what we just did, so that we remain connected.

So if we have to pivot, we'll pivot. My point is, it's really not Scott-magic. It's helping to re-invigorate the way an organization is thinking about what it can and can't do, still being true to its mission and its vision and taking a lot of entrepreneurial opportunities. What happens frequently in nonprofit arts organizations is there's a lot of talk and a lot of planning and less execution. So you have to plan and *execute*. Throw it up against the wall, and if it sticks, that's great. If it doesn't stick, that's okay — we'll pivot and move onto the next thing.

CF: Have you considered running for president? We could use a little of that reframing. (Lots of laughter in the room) Okay. We're not going to talk about that...

SA: That's a *whole* different conversation!

CF: It is occurring to me, though!

So I'm trying to think... Having created an opera company out of your basement in New Jersey gave you this ability to see what needs to be done and to do it, rather than talk about it. I'm guessing.

SA: Right. Well, and to have to be involved and learn about *every* facet, *everything*. I recall our first 990 at the end of that year where we were just meeting people and relationship-building and structure-building. I mean, it was an itty, bitty organization. Mostly we were given gifts-in-kind of printing at Staples, or whatever it was at the time — and how it grew. And I believe when we were done, there were, I think, eight or nine full-time employees, and the company was at a two and a half million dollar budget, and hundreds and hundreds of singers were being brought in, and we were producing three full ballets at the McCarter Theater Center in downtown Princeton, and another full length ballet — oops (he catches himself) opera!! See, I told you they're so similar, ballet and opera.

So full length operas in the summertime and full length opera in the winter. And our orchestra was the New Jersey Symphony Orchestra, and we were performing all over New Jersey, and we were now traveling down to Baltimore to produce because they didn't have an opera company. And we were bringing in talent from New York and Philadelphia and all over the country who were doing ... we have some major opera stars today who did their first roles at Opera New Jersey, because it was *meant* to be this place where I was able to, luckily, *identify* really great talent who were looking for an opportunity, someone give them a chance, to do a great role with fantastic directors and conductors, who were the best in the country. And so we added water and mixed, and it turned into something pretty special pretty quickly.

CF: Well, let me see. Would you mind situating us at the moment when Cincinnati calls? They called you, and you flew out here — I'm sure you had other opportunities. What compelled you about the move ... you mentioned education for your sons, but ...

SA: Yeah. I think what was really unique, in particular, about *this* company and the community, is the...I think the prioritization of sustainability and the great community support that had already been generationally established in Cincinnati for its excellent arts and culture institutions. The fact that the organization I was entering was not a situation that needed to be *fixed*, in particular, from a fiscal standpoint. Right? Nothing was necessarily broken; it just wasn't necessarily fully *realized*. So it was more an entrepreneurial opportunity to take an organization to the *next* level, rather than spend a whole bunch of time having to fix something that was broken, which had been... previous iterations required turnaround. Arizona required turnaround. Ballet West required turnaround. This wasn't necessarily turnaround. I think there might've been some *cultural* turnaround, which means changing the mindset of what we were capable of doing, but not because it was broken. Because it was *available* to us. So that was really great and attractive.

The environment of collaboration here is terrific. Our orchestra is the Cincinnati Symphony. Remarkable, when you have one of the top handful of orchestras in the country that is your orchestra. Really great.

I think some of what I've learned since I've been here is being able to, I guess, extract more risk from the organization. I think Cincinnati is generally pretty risk-averse, which can be a little challenging. So I'm coming in and saying, "No, we can do this. We really can do this" has been a lot of fun and super collaborative among trustees and staff and community members. As you can see from the expansion, our budget grew probably 25 to 30% in the time... in the past four years. And the building, which is an almost \$31 million project, and the number of performances, and education outreach. So that *ability* to take that leap of faith has been a great joy in leading the organization, and a little bit of a challenge at times to pull people along, saying what's pos-

sible...requires a lot of explanation (he laughs). But that was *exciting* to enter here and not have to unravel. And certainly to build upon a lot of great, great work that Vic did, and others, in stabilizing the organization.

So for those reasons, it was the right thing to do. And again, taking an organization like Arizona Opera or Ballet West, you do a lot of entrepreneurial building. And then there really does need to be a period of stability and operational sustainability that might not be as rapid a path of entrepreneurial growth and expansion, et cetera. So you bring it to that point. And then, my, I guess entrepreneur bug, is ready to be able to offer that at other locations, I think. So that's what happened in Arizona. That's what happened at Ballet West. The difference here in Cincinnati is that the entrepreneurialism of this company is not only bringing us *into* the new building, but what this facility is going to be able to do has a whole *new* set of entrepreneurial opportunities. It doesn't necessarily stop. This is the midway point in being able to continue to grow. And for the future, Cincinnati Ballet really has the opportunity to become a much more national and internationally recognizable and impactful institution. Not only for Cincinnati culture in the arts, but for the art form itself. So I see *that* as the next level... is continuing to elevate and become more of the conversation in the ballet world, that "being quiet" here in the greater Cincinnati area, we've kind of nipped that in the bud. We're not that, anymore. How do we do that *beyond* our regional borders? We're knocking on that door. We are doing bits of that, but I think it's the next level.

And the structure that we've built at the organization, our great marketing team and our public relations director were *ready* to do that and they're hungry for those opportunities to talk about it. The building is going to give us a lot of that. It will attract great dancers, it'll attract great choreographers, it'll attract just a lot of attention.

CF: I can imagine — I haven't met Victoria yet, but knowing about her history and the roles she was holding down here before they got you — that there was a great synergy between the two of you in terms of ... I mean, in a way you had gone similar paths, you and opera, she in ballet, but artists doing these administrative roles and you must have sensed that when you met her or came here.

SA: Well, what's great about working with Vic is, oftentimes in the ballet world, your partner, the artistic director doesn't quite have the experience of the business side as well. So, the great relationship that Vic and I have is, it doesn't require explanation or convincing. Vic — if we say why this is happening or how this is moving — it's not a comprehension issue or an interest issue. If anything, it's taken a little bit of loving kindness to say, "It's okay, it'll be fine. We'll be okay." Because Victoria is so in-tune and sharp about many of those things; it's essentially giving her the opportunity to let go: it'll be fine. No one's going to drop the baby. Matter of fact, we're having a *bigger* family. So she's, I think, had a great, I hope, I'm sure she would say, had a great trip over these four years. And I don't know that, a capstone, she's going on almost her 25th year, pretty soon. A capstone to a career having come this far and building a building is pretty special. So I think she'll be fine. She's good.

CF: Well, I have to end with you. I had a few other things, but it's okay. They'll get covered by the next two people, perhaps.

SA: Great. And you see Carmen today! So talk about history! 50 odd years — 52 years with the company.

CF: Yeah. I left Cincinnati in 79...

SA: ...and Carmen was here!

CF: ...in 76, and he was here.

SA: Yeah. Well here he is.

CF: So I knew of him.

SA: I would encourage you to say, "Carmen, why are you so darn charming? You're just the most charming guy *ever*." (laughing)

CF: As a Cincinnati girl myself, I have to ask where are your kids in school?

SA: Oh, great question. So we live in Madeira, and my son, my youngest is a sophomore in Madeira and he's a wonderful, brilliant guy. And he's a soccer player and a tennis player. And my eldest ...I'm really proud of — I'm proud of both of them, but another reason to be proud of my eldest guy, Zachary. He has been accepted to and starts — he moves in in two days — he is going to be at University of Cincinnati in the Lindner Honors Plus Program, so he is a full-tuition scholar recipient in the Business School. There's a group of, I think it's down to twenty-five or twenty-six of them that receive that highest honor in the Business College, so he starts there in a week. Living on campus during these great and unique times...