

# Giving the Wright Way

by Kimberley Fehr

**J**ames Wright wanted to do the right thing with his philanthropic dollars. As General Director of the Vancouver Opera, he knows the arts world well and gives generously to many arts organizations. But those aren't the only causes he cares about.

As an avid birder, he cares about the environment and animals. As a citizen of our community, he also wants to support education and literacy.

But as the man who makes the opera sing, the man who oversees a \$9 million annual budget and spurs innovation by taking on daring projects like their new opera *Lillian Alling* and last spring's *Nixon in China*, he is a really busy guy.

"I don't have the time or the resources to do all the homework that I want to do about where my philanthropic dollars should go," he says. "But I feel good about targeting my philanthropic dollars to the environment and trusting Vancouver Foundation to decide which projects and organizations to support."

When it comes the business of opera, Wright understands it's important not just to produce the classics that everyone loves, but to rise to the task of creating new works – works that could potentially become legacies, not just in this city but to opera companies everywhere.

With a budget of \$1.6 million (including a \$100,000 grant from Vancouver Foundation), *Lillian Alling* was the biggest and most expensive production Vancouver Opera has ever taken on, a huge risk for Wright. It's loosely based on the story of a young immigrant named Lillian Alling who came to New York City in the early 1920s and ended up struggling in menial jobs just to survive. She became disillusioned and decided to walk home... to Russia.

Lillian made it to northern BC before her trail turned cold. Her story ends in a mystery, but comes to life again in this new opera, with a few artistic liberties, a lavish set and original music.

"You always wonder if anyone's going to show up at a party like that..." says Wright.

But people did, and the reviews were excellent at the world premiere in Vancouver this past October.

"Anytime you do new work it's a risk because people don't know what it's going to sound like," says Wright. "New work is more expensive without the guarantee of the same audience size as the classics. We bit off a lot of risk in 2010 and it turned out to be in a downturn economy on top of it all. But both *Lillian Alling* and *Nixon in China* were very, very successful for us."

In the way Wright strives to create a legacy with his work, he also aspires to do the same with his community. When it comes to philanthropy, he understands the difference between a one-time dona-



PHOTO: JASON LANG

Wright photographed in the Vancouver Opera's costume department.

tion and investing in his community.

That's why Wright established a Start-up Fund at Vancouver Foundation, which has the potential to grow, and to keep giving to his community forever.

"I was able to start a fund at Vancouver Foundation without having to put in \$10,000, \$15,000 or \$100,000 dollars because I don't have that. To be able to start a fund with just \$1,000 was very, very important to me," he says.

Wright created his fund in August 2007, and has 10 years to build his fund to the \$10,000 mark. When that happens he will be able to start providing annual gifts to environmental projects that have been rigorously vetted by Vancouver Foundation staff and an advisory committee of environmental experts.

Thanks to Vancouver Foundation's matching program, Wright's gift to the environment effectively doubled. Until December 31, 2010, the Foundation is matching all donations to the Foundation's Community Impact and Field of Interest funds. For example, while Wright chose to focus his fund on the environment, he could also choose to target his gift towards any of the other areas where Vancouver Foundation works: animal welfare; arts and culture; children, youth and families; education; health and social development; health and medical education/research; youth homelessness or youth philanthropy.

"I'm actually ahead of schedule in my contributions to my fund, because I want it to start paying out," he says. "That's motivating me to build it. I think it's important for people to know that you don't have to be wealthy to start a meaningful fund at Vancouver Foundation."

It might seem strange that Wright would just hand over his money and let some-

one else make the decisions. But Wright is very familiar with the process, having volunteered on Vancouver Foundation's Arts and Culture Committee for six years.

"I know the high standards that everyone is held to, and that grant applicants are held to," says Wright. "I've served on the Foundation's Arts and Culture Advisory Committee, and I know there is real rigour to their process. If the other committees work as well as Arts and Culture, I trust them to give my money wisely."

With the world premiere of *Lillian* over, Wright is looking forward to its remount next summer at the Banff Centre for Performing Arts in Alberta, who co-produced the show.

"It's a piece that really deserves lots of performances so one of my jobs over the next year is to market it to other opera companies in Canada," says Wright, who adds that the donation from Vancouver Foundation was crucial to the project.

"It came early enough in the process that it gave us more confidence about this work," says Wright. "It's a real stamp of approval from a very respected organization. I'm not pandering to the Foundation. It signals a lot when you get a large grant from the Vancouver Foundation."

What goes around, comes around. Wright has been on the receiving end. He knows what a difference philanthropy can make, and soon it will be his time to give. ♦

For more information about creating a fund at Vancouver Foundation, contact Development and Donor Services at 604-688-2204 or visit [www.vancouverfoundation.ca](http://www.vancouverfoundation.ca).