

DOCUMENTS OF THE GENERAL FACULTY

**REPORT OF THE MEMORIAL RESOLUTION COMMITTEE FOR
JESS WALTERS**

The special committee of the General Faculty to prepare a memorial resolution for Jess Walters, professor emeritus, music, has filed with the Secretary of the General Faculty the following report.

John R. Durbin, Secretary
The General Faculty

**IN MEMORIAM
JESS WALTERS**

Jess Walters, professor emeritus of voice at The University of Texas School of Music and one of the world's leading baritones, died Sunday, October 8, 2000, in Austin.

Jess was born Joshua Wolk in Brooklyn, New York, on November 18, 1908, the youngest of seven children of Latvian parents. His father was a portrait painter and opera buff. Growing up in New York City, Jess wanted to become an artist. At the age of 15 he was sent to the National Farm School for a three-year course in farming. At the school, he began singing for school functions.

In 1931, Jess returned to New York, at the height of the Depression, having to work such jobs as "grease monkey", gas station attendant, delivery boy, and a stint in a leather shop. During this time, he sang on Major Bowes Amateur Night with Rudy Vallee.

His first review in Broadway productions stated:

" . . . The young baritone, Jesse Wolk, of 389 E. 52nd St., who prosaically works in a women's apparel firm by day, astonished and pleased the judges. His voice lacks finish, but it has tonal qualities and ease, and who knows but he may be another Chaliapin. Dazed at the impression he had made. . . ." *Brooklyn Daily Times*, December 1931.

Walters continued singing, and even had a singing job during the lunch hour in a restaurant on 42nd Street. Another quote from 1935 reads:

"Journal's Summer Music Festival

. . . Jesse Wolk, the other gold medalist, is considered by many musicians a true vocal discovery. Among those who made this estimate was Frank LaForge, maker of great singers, who acted as one of the distinguished judges on 'baritone night' and promptly offered to undertake young Wolk's future development. Wolk will take his first lesson from the teacher of Lawrence Tibbett, Richard Crooks, and other famous artists, tomorrow morning." *New York Journal*, July 1935.

He sang into the late '30s for hotels, supper clubs, churches, and radio, always moving up the ladder. He changed his name from Jesse Wolk to Jess Walters—and even to George King in Buffalo!

Walters began studying voice with LaForge at age 25; other teachers would include Mario Pagano, Luigi Gufrida, and Hulda and Luigi Rossini. During his career, he was noted for performances in some 55 major operatic roles and was highly acclaimed as a member of a number of outstanding companies.

His operatic debut was with the New York Opera Company in 1941, singing the title role in *Macbeth*. Jess was paid \$75 for his New York Opera Company performances! Reviews include:

“*Macbeth* Review
Discovery of a Baritone

The New Opera Company has a find in Jess Walters, the baritone who sang *Macbeth* last night. If it is true that he had not been on the stage before, his showing was a remarkable one. . . . what Mr. Walters really made count was a voice of power, freedom, ample compass and rare beauty of sound. We have not had many such voices, or voices so well produced, among either our American or our imported baritones in the year immediately behind us. Moreover, the young man exhibited a fine sense of Italian style. His achievement of the aria “Sangue a me” and, in fact, the entire scene of the second interview with the witches, was of a definitely superior order. Warmth of tone and an admirable legato were to be found in his delivery of the familiar ‘Pieta, rispetto, amore.’ ” Oscar Thompson, October 25, 1941.

Emma DeFina was a voice student in New York when she heard Jess’s voice and fell in love with him. They were married in 1943 and had a son, Arnold Emil, now an actor in England.

Jess made his European debut in 1947 as Count des Grieux in *Manon* with the Royal Opera, Covent Garden. He remained with that company for 12 years, singing 684 performances. Of the approximately 25 roles he performed while in London, he was best known for his interpretations of Germont, Wozzeck, Almaviva, Rigoletto, Papageno, di Luna, Marcello, and Sharpless.

A sampling of his reviews would include:

“With Jess Walters as Papageno one could believe that his birds would be as easily bewitched as his audience.” Birmingham, England, April 1952.

“As is becoming usual at the Garden, the laurals [sic] of the evening to Jess Walters, who, as the King’s loyal secretary, Anckarstroem, who is forced by circumstances to be his friend’s assassin, gives a sensitive and wholly sincere performance. Mr. Walters has proved himself more than just a ‘good trouper,’ and it would do us all good to see him trusted with some really ‘meaty’ parts.” *The Kensington News* (London), October 31, 1952.

“It has been said that there have been only three great Rigoletto stars—Marco Rothmuller, Jess Walters, and Tom Williams.” *Merthyr Express* (Wales), October 23, 1954.

“As Renato, Jess Walters proved once again that he is a pillar of strength in the company.” *Opera News*, March 11, 1957.

“He virtually owned the roles he sang at Covent Garden, and his name was a household word,” said Robert DeSimone, UT Opera Theatre director and professor of Opera. “Jess was THE leading baritone at the Royal Opera for years.”

From 1960 to 1965, Jess sang with the Netherlands Opera in Amsterdam. He also performed with the Liege in Belgium, and the New York City, Chicago, and San Francisco Opera Companies. Walters sang with major orchestras such as the Royal Philharmonic, BBC Symphony, and London Philharmonic. He appeared internationally with Maria Callas, Jermone Hines, Dorothy Kirsten, Roberta Peters, Jan Peerce, Joan Sutherland, and Richard Tucker. Additionally, he sang with Victoria de los Angeles, Kurt Baum, Vivian Della Chiesa, Edith Coates, Eugene Conley, Mattiwilda Dobbs, Geraint Evans, Sylvia Fisher, Nicolai Gedda, Adele Leigh, George London, Pilar Lorengar, Giovanni Martinelli, Virginia Mewatrer, Zinka Milanov, Elsie Morrison, Peter Pears, Regina Resnick, Joseph Rouleau, Amy Schuard, Elizabeth Schwarzkopf, Graziella Sciutti, Giulietta Simionato, Willa Stewart, Ebe Stignani, Jenny Tourel, Jon Vickers, and Lubja Welitch.

One of Jess’s memorable recordings includes the 1953 CD of Verdi’s *Aida* with Maria Callas at Covent Garden.

He returned to London in 1997 to be honored in the celebration of the 50th anniversary of the Royal Opera’s first performance.

Jess came to the campus in 1965 and taught here for 35 years. His last lesson was on the Monday before his death. His contributions to music in Austin were enormous, and for years, Jess Walters delighted Austin audiences in productions of the UT Opera Theatre, Austin Gilbert and Sullivan Society, Capitol City Playhouse, and later in the Austin Lyric Opera. He continued to present voice recitals at UT into his nineties and was a featured soloist at many local and community fundraising presentations.

“Jess was an icon,” said DeSimone. “He inspired the love of the human voice in the community, and he gave of himself generously to his students and to Austin. The adulation and love he received from his friends, colleagues, and students was all part of the wonderful life he led here.” The Austin Gilbert and Sullivan Society honored Jess and Emma Walters in 1998 with a musical tribute.

Walters is survived by his wife Emma, son Arnold Emil, daughter-in-law Margaret, and granddaughter Gemma, of Manchester, England.

This memorial resolution was prepared by a special committee consisting of Professors Darlene Wiley (chair), Robert DeSimone, and Martha Deatherage.

Distributed to the Dean of the College of Fine Arts, the Executive Vice President and Provost, and the President on August 24, 2001. Copies are available on request from the Office of the General Faculty, FAC 22, F9500. This resolution is posted under “Memorials” at: <http://www.utexas.edu/faculty/council/>.