

Meet
Carole Charnow '79,
CEO and president of
the 100-year-old
Boston Children's
Museum



After producing more than 50 operas as general director of Opera Boston, Carole Charnow '79 enjoys her latest role producing shows seven days a week—as president and chief executive officer of Boston Children's Museum, the fourth-largest museum in New England.



"It really wasn't that much of a leap, if you think about it," said Charnow, who began overseeing the Boston institution in 2010. "The museum is open 363 days a year, so now I'm doing a show every single day as opposed to three to seven shows a year."

Charnow, who spent the 1980s working as an actor in England before managing a theater company and Opera Boston, says the skills involved in producing theater and museum events are strikingly similar.

"What we do as theater professionals is we take content, whether it's a play, a piece of music, or a poem, and we bring it to life in the most evocative and engaging way," she said. "At the Children's Museum, that's exactly what we're doing. It's sort of like the biggest production job anyone could possibly imagine. It's so much broader than just a children's museum."

Admittedly, she said being comfortable with nonprofit leadership and fundraising doesn't hurt. And those are good skills to have as the Children's Museum celebrates its 100th anniversary this year.

In April, the museum convened the Early Childhood Summit with 400 top educators, scientists, pediatricians, and politicians—including Massachusetts Governor Deval Patrick—who talked about the importance of investing in children.

"We'd never done anything of this stature before," said Charnow.

The mother of two college-age sons, who lives in Bedford, Massachusetts, says she is steering the museum into "more of an urban meeting place" in the up-and-coming Seaport District, where it has been located since 1979.

"Last year, we had 583,000 visitors—half of them adults," Charnow said. "It's a microcosm of society."

After graduating from Emerson with a self-made degree called Creative Service, which focused on theater education, performance, and psychology, Charnow worked as a drama therapist and educator at a state mental health facility in Newton, Massachusetts.

Two years later, the Detroit native moved to London to launch an acting career.

Early on, she was cast for a role in a British Broadcasting Corporation drama but couldn't carry out the job because her immigration status was not finalized.

"I was so amazed that I was able to get that far," Charnow said. "I decided I would maybe try to stay in London longer to see if I could iron out the paperwork."

After working in a community center in London and taking roles in several plays—and being introduced to a stage manager who later became her husband, Clive Granger, in 1984—Charnow joined the Moving Target Theatre Company, and eventually became a partner.

"I took on smaller and smaller parts," she said, "and I began to realize my real passion and interest was less in acting and more in bringing all the creative forces to the table."

Charnow fondly remembers meeting Howard Zinn, the well-known radical historian and playwright who she recalled as "a wonderful, warm person," at his summer home on Cape Cod in 1986. She asked his permission to re-produce his play, *Emma*, in London. The story was about Emma Goldman, a Jewish-American anarchist.

"It was performed in Boston when I was at Emerson, and I thought it was such a

great play," Charnow said. "It was a great, gripping narrative."

She said being a student at Emerson has helped her stay true to herself, but allowed her to be unafraid to take risks.

"The faculty treated me as a creative adult and put their confidence in me ... Emerson changed my life," she said. "It gave me the courage to take risks, believe in myself, search for deeper meaning in the work I was doing, and connect with people and the community."

After receiving a master of arts from the University of London in 1993, Charnow moved back to the Boston area with her family in 1995.

At Opera Boston, Charnow increased the organization's budget from \$100,000, when she joined in 1996, to \$2.8 million upon her departure in 2010, staging its shows at Emerson's Cutler Majestic Theatre.

"It's the most beautiful theater on earth," she said. "It will always be a place I feel connected to."

She produced 50 operas and collaborated with some of the country's greatest artists, including Dawn Upshaw, Stephanie Blythe, Osvaldo Golijov, Daniel Pelzig, and Robert Woodruff. Charnow oversaw the 2010 Opera Boston premiere of *Madame White Snake* that was jointly produced with the Beijing Music Festival.

The decision to leave Opera Boston was "heart-wrenching," Charnow said, but she calls her current position at the Children's Museum, "the world's greatest job."

"If I ever feel discouraged," she said, "I go out on the floor and see the amazing, joyful discovery that all these kids are enjoying."

Charnow said that she learned one of her most important life lessons at Emerson: "If you have confidence in yourself, and you really believe you have something to offer the world and you've figured out what you're good at and what you love, you can do that anywhere at any time."

Dan O'Brien



Photos by Bethany Acheson