



Toni Morrison delivers the Keynote Address at *Opera Conference 2005: Diverse Voices* in Detroit, MI. Photo by Katherine L. Ehle/OPERA America.

*Opera Conference 2005: Diverse Voices* was cited by the National MultiCultural Institute for “its visionary leadership in creating a national dialogue... to promote and value diversity in the performing arts and encourage outreach to culturally diverse communities.”

The 2005 conference, held in Detroit, featured the world premiere of Richard Danielpour and Toni Morrison’s *Margaret Garner*. “We always try to capitalize and promote what is unique about the company that is hosting, and Michigan Opera Theatre had always done a really good job of engaging with the various communities,” says Diana Hossack, who was OPERA America’s managing director at the time. “In some ways the theme was a natural. However, it really challenged all of us as we put the conference together, because so much of the material was new to us, both as an industry and as a service organization. At one point there was almost a revolt among the staff because we didn’t feel comfortable calling our networks to ask about issues of diversity when we knew nothing ourselves.” OPERA America brought in a consultant to lead a staff retreat and made connections with other national organizations to assist with planning. The result was a conference like no other. “As we asked questions we realized diversity and inclusion touched us in a number of ways. It’s the one conference where we did breakout sessions not by specialty, budget level or region, but by random groups. We felt it was important to look at our own views and biases.”

“I’ve always believed that the arts can bring people together,” says Michigan Opera Theatre General Director David DiChiera. “We always have to see our work in the context of making our community stronger, more connected, and a better place to live. The moment I started the company I was always looking for African American artists. I wanted the audience to see themselves on the stage. But that’s only the beginning. It saddens me that such a large proportion of our resources goes into getting things on the mainstage. I’d like to see the same amount go toward our work in the schools, in the community. That’s what will determine how we develop as a culture, as an art form.”