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**PAR
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BOX**

New York's Underground Queer Opera Newsletter

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We hear that...

Dolora Zajick will take a one-year sabbatical from her burgeoning opera career to tour in *Gertrude Stein*, *Gertrude Stein*, *Gertrude Stein*. Break a leg, Dolora!

Peter Sellars will bring his production of Haydn's *Il mondo della luna* to BAM later this year. The aging wunderkind has, as usual, revised the libretto, setting the opera on the Earth.

"The Melee in Mycenae" is how Don King bills his pay-per-view showing of *Elektra* starring Gwyneth Jones and Leonie Rysanek. According to the controversial boxing promoter, "Gwyn and Leni are the only real heavyweights left."

Michael, an autobiographical "popera" with music and lyrics by Michael Jackson, will open the Metropolitan Opera's 1997-98 season. The title part is at yet uncast, but Kathleen Battle has been chosen to sing the cameo role of "LaToya." James Levine, currently the Met's Artistic Director, says, "*Michael*'s a great piece. We're both really excited about doing it."

THE MET

Adriana Lecouvreur (3/7). I am shocked to say, did not sell out, the way, say, a mediocre *Bohème* does. And the tragedy is that Mirella Freni is still damned good. No, I don't care for her pushing so hard at F and G at the top of the staff, but in general the tone is still sweet and almost as warm as thirty years ago. She looks an attractive forty, and is still charming in that slightly goofy way we all love. She lacks only the whip-crack temperament Adriana must have (you feel she'd leave the Princess's party quietly to avoid a scene): that's where Scotto was superb. Act 4 was Freni's long suit; "Poveri fiori" was more than the usual three minutes of self-pity as despair gave way to resignation. She is a precious artist; don't wait until she's gone to appreciate her.

I haven't done the research, but it seems like Freni and Sherrill Milnes must have shared the stage of the Old Met their debut year. In *Bohème*, maybe, or *Faust*? Anyway, after almost thirty seasons the big guy just keeps rolling along; I swear he sounds better now than ten years ago. And he's a mellower, more giving performer, too, which means he has few rivals and no equals.

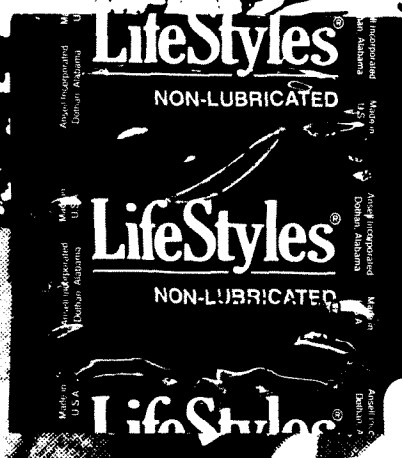
For the rest, Stefania Toczyska was generous of voice and feine of movement-- and looking like the young Anouk Aimee doesn't hurt. Luis Lima is edibly cute, but his voice and his acting are about equally constricted. Of the supporting singers, let me single out Yvonne Gonzales and simply say she should be shot.

Perhaps a ballet or two should be reserved for Robert LaFosse and Lesley Koenig for his xerox-of-a-xerox-of-Balanchine choreography and her clueless staging. Should the Judgement of Paris ballet really be camped that way? Would a dancer of the period really dare give the Princess of Bouillon such attitude (look what happened to La Lecouvreur, the biggest star of the time)? Did actors at the Comédie Francaise really swish around behind feather fans and throw laundry at their stage manager? And if a director insists on altering the traditional business in an opera, shouldn't the reason be an attempt to heighten the drama, rather than, as was apparently the case here, an inability to read stage directions in Italian?

Adriana has a lot in common with *Les Liaisons dangereuses*-- and a staging in that mode might shut up once and for all those whiners who still turn up their noses at this show, if only the Met would lose their "Mikey-he'll-eat-anything" attitude toward the audience. Maurizio, we know, was a gigolo who paid for his invasion of Poland by turning tricks. The Princess and La Duclos, according to some sources, were much more than just close friends. And, as you can read elsewhere in *Parterre Box*, Michonnet is more Thelma Ritter than Gary Merrill.

SHITELO (3/9) suffers from the "Crying Game syndrome"-- the reviews and word-of-mouth have built up audience expectations to the point that disappointment is inevitable. Let's face it-- the show's no *Traviata*, or as Dan O'Herlihy says in *Imitation of Life*, it's "all high ideals and low heels." But the Giancarlo Del Monaco production is handsome and moving-- would that the Met's cheezoid *Trovatore* looked one-quarter as good! Sharon Sweet is a puzzlement-- she wields a large, exciting sound with temperament but little musical imagination. Her face and hands are beautifully expressive-- why not her voice? Vladimir Chernov, on the other hand, creates flair and rhythmic excitement through the aggressive use of a Figaro-sized instrument. I look forward to hearing him in *Balko* (another show that could profit from the Del Monaco touch).

si je t'aime



prends garde à toi

-litt

A Boy and His Diva

"She was like a schoolgirl around him. One with a terrible crush," says Franco Zeffirelli. He's talking about Maria Callas, of course. That's who "she" means (to Zeffirelli, anyway. To Michael Musto, "She" means Madonna. Chacun à son diva) But who is this "him"? Aristotle Onassis? Giovanni Battista Meneghini? Franco Corelli? Rudolph Bing? No, no, no, and are you kidding?



Verwandler du!

Ariadne auf Naxos is about... yes? The dangers of producing an opera with grant money? No, but thanks for playing. The right answer is "*Ariadne* is about transformation." (And for the bonus points, *Moby Dick* is about this whale.) Yeah, so? *Ariadne* thinks she's dying, see. But she's really coming back to life, just transformed, that's all: not a woman any more, but a... goddess. Or "diva" as they say in Milan. What a miracle that is. It takes a "transformer" to turn a woman into a diva. (Another function of a transformer is to convert AC to DC and vice versa. But let's not go too far afield.)

See, nobody in the prologue cares about the Tenor or Harlekin. They're on their own. But walk into that greenroom in a skirt and the "transformers" are as thick as flies. And a bunch of queer ducks they are too.

The relationship between the Music Master and the Composer could best be described as "Socratic," even though neither one of them is a philosopher.

parterre box is about remembering when opera was queer and dangerous and exciting and making it that way again.

It's Luchino Visconti, that's who, the man who taught Callas how to move on stage, who directed her in her greatest triumphs: *Sonnambula*, *Traviata*, *Vestale*, *Iphigénie*, *Anna Bolena*. He didn't exactly create her, but he did the last couple of revisions. Visconti is a good catch, too... distinguished, aristocratic, charming. And the Zef is right. On this kinescope of a French talk show, (late 60's, to judge by La Divina's Pairido) Callas is relaxed, giggly, adorable for once. She's Maria. She interrupts his you-had-to-be-there story ("They were throwing vegetables at Maria... "Radishes and celery!") exactly as if they were the Burtons. They're delightful together. A perfect match. A fun couple. And Visconti is gayer than I am.

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Verwandler

Then again, the kid is at least deep ("She is the Symbol of Mankind in its Isolation", he offers the Prima Donna by way of direction. Yes, of course, but would you mind giving me something I can play?) The Music Master has his hands full trying to contact whatever planet his protégé's on, but he too gets a chance to direct the Prima Donna. More wise in the ways of the theater, he translates his criticism into her own charming native tongue, Divaspeak: "The contrast between you and that tacky Zerbinetta will make you look even more wonderful than you do already." Well. She'd never looked at it that way.

The Zerbinetta/Composer scene is usually explicated as a sexual awakening and nothing else. Che noia. "Onstage I mostly play comedy, but I'm much deeper than people realize." That gets his dick hard? More likely our little Amadeus clone is thinking,

"The voice is tiny, but it carries. And she's been around the block. The contrast between that silvery sound and that knowing face is so full of dramatic tension! And she can handle props, too. I've got it! Susanna! Now I can write *Nozze di Figaro!*"

Whether he gets into bed with her or not is moot: his first reaction to her is aesthetic, not sexual. And that's what I call queer.

And speaking of what I call queer, let's talk about the Dancing Master for a moment. Honey! "A desert island is sooo tasteless!" If the Composer is going to make Zerbinetta an artist, the Dancing Master is going to make her a STAR! "Why is the charming Zerbinetta at home in any plot? Because she always plays herself!" He's the kind of stage director who gives Musetta a fire-engine red wig and a coach and four white horses. (In one of his final opera stagings, Visconti inserted a nude scene into *Manon Lescaut*.) The Dancing Master even comes up with billing for his vedette-to-be: in the unintentionally hilarious standard translation, he predicts the audience will remember nothing but "The Charming Zerbinetta and her Dancing Tricks." Well, it's at least as good as "Dainty June and Her Newsboys."

The Phantom of the Opera is Queer Inside His Mind

Yes, he's deformed and evil. Yes, he locks me up in a cage. Yes, his studio smells like a sewer. And yes, he does depraved things I don't even like to think about.

But I feel I'm really singing for the first time in my life!

And the lessons are free...

Casta Diva

I was talking to a très gay chorister who performed under the baton (as they say) of a noted conductor who is married to one of the century's greatest sopranos. He told me the maestro always travels with his boyfriend, even when the diva stays home. The chorister was pensive: "She wouldn't have become a star without him, of course, and I'm sure they have great affection for each other. But I feel sorry for her. He'll never love her the way a man loves a woman."

Magnificently Devoted

The Prince

And what are you searching for?

Adriana

Truth.

The Abbé

You were guided by great artists.

Adriana

No, by no one.

(Noticing Michonnet) How ungrateful! I have one single counsellor.

a devoted, humble soul, my only friend, Michonnet.

Poor closeted Michonnet (the name is derived from an old French word meaning "a rug placed on one's front step") is the kind of faggot every girl needs for a friend. He's Adriana's number one fan. Her director, manager and costume designer (did you think she came up with that "Oriental" getup all by herself?) He blows his inheritance to bail out that boyfriend of hers (more about Maurizio the rent boy in the Adriana review.) He escorts her to that cast party from hell at the Prince's house even though it starts at midnight, and you know Michonnet has an understudy rehearsal at 10 AM. Christ, he even yells at the audience when they fail to applaud *La Laccouvreur!*

And what's his thanks? She bends his ear about how mean and unkind Maurizio is. Sigh. Their scene together at the top of Act 4 is like an outtake from *Outrageous*: they exchange heartbreak stories, ending with...

Diva: It hurts so much you want to die.

Queer: And yet you go on living.

Diva: How?

Queer: Force of habit.

He's broke and miserable. His career is wrecked. But it's worth it. She's his masterpiece.