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# What kind of mother blindfolds her two-year-old and leaves him on a swing unattended?

And what kind of production of *Madama Butterfly* leaves you wondering what kind of mother Butterfly is? It's been a week since I saw the *prima* of the new Giancarlo del Monaco production at the Met (12/1), and I'm still working on it. Is Del Monaco trying to say that Butterfly is an unfit mother? Is she subconsciously trying to hurt the kid to get back at Pinkerton? Is she so maddened by grief that she is unaware of her actions? Or are we to assume the Trouble is so precocious he can take care of himself?

Or is Del Monaco more interested in striking a visual image than plausible dramatic action?

Well, our first four guesses are either absurd, irrelevant, or too ultra-beyondo to get past Joseph Volpe (he wouldn't let Del Monaco put sunglasses on Pinkerton, for God's sake. You think he's gonna let Butterfly hurt her kid?) So what's left is an idea that looked like it occurred to Trevor Nunn at 3 in the morning while *Miss Saigon* was out of town. All directors get 3 AM ideas, and they always look lousy the next morning once the fatigue products get flushed from the brain. The problem is, sometimes you can't think of anything better to take the place of the idea that you now know sucks.

I cannot read the hearts of men, but the kid on the swing looks like a 3 AM idea to me. And it's neither the only one nor the worst one in this staging.

And I was so looking forward to this new production. Del Monaco's *Fanciulla* was great. (So Minnie's first entrance is a little weak. Put Gwyneth Jones into a revival and you'll notice her kicking the saloon doors open, don't worry.) And his *Stiffelio* was a well-thought-out solution to a very problematic opera. So what the fuck happened to *Butterfly*?

Del Monaco's intent seems clear enough — he wanted a

naturalistic, earthy, "un-pretty" show. Fair enough. *Butterfly* has a long history of cute: *mise-en-scene* by, apparently, Kate Pinkerton ("May I kiss you? You...toy!") or at least by her "artistic" brother Karl who's recycling those ideas they all thought were so cunning in *Mikado* in St. Louis last season. ("Now, ladies in the peach kimonos, twirl your parasols! Bonze, where's your purple scarf with the calligraphy? Fireflies! Cue the fireflies!")

But that kind of windowdresserie is the exception these days. Think of the dark, harrowing productions directed by Corsaro, Vick, Russell, Prince. Even Scotto's shoestringer Met revival in '87 (the source of many a critical snicker) made a number of telling points — I will never forget Cio-cio-san practically beating a *tornera* out of Suzuki, then collapsing, spent ("sicura fede" is great, but it eats energy). So taking the story seriously is nothing new; these days it's to be expected.

What's tough is finding poetry in the squalor. But del Monaco wastes time hitting us on the head with points that are clear enough already. Who out there misses the point that Pinkerton is thoughtless and shallow? Listen to "Amore o grillo." A rich kid talking about his ethnic baby doll in the sing-songiest of operetta tunes. He's a brat. A lightweight. The kind who gives white boys a bad name. But that's not enough for Del Monaco. He has to make Pinkerton a drunken thug and turn the love duet into date rape. All praise to Richard Leech for doing the collegial thing and trying to be Stanley Kowalski (even though he knows as well as we do he's really Jay Gatsby), but can you imagine waiting three years for that? Tell me he's lazy, tell me he's slow, great! But tell me he's brutal and alcoholic? If Cio-cio-san is that desperate, that masochistic, she's material for Jerry Springer or an ABC movie of the week. But who wants to sit through an opera about her?

At least the treatment of Pinkerton seems thought-out

and consistent (more later on just how big an asshole he is!), but a lot of the ideas seem entirely arbitrary.

Now, when a director varies a traditional piece of staging, it's his way of making the audience re-examine that dramatic moment. Like, say, when Frank Corsaro has Violetta tear the crucifix from her neck, he makes us realize the utter desperation of "Gran Dio! morir si giovane." One idea of Del Monaco's that works this way is his first image of Act Two: Butterfly barefoot, washing clothes in her back yard. We think...she's not a doll. She's a tough, realistic woman. It's a brilliant touch. But what are we to make of Suzuki sneaking out of the house during the humming chorus and bedding down in the garden? It sets up "Gia il sole," sure, but at the cost of making Suzuki look like a slacker.

Or Butterfly's reaction to Sharpless's suggestion that Pinkerton may never return. Wham! goes the kettledrum. And thud! goes Cathy Malfitano, who falls forward out of her chair and lands on her face in the dirt. And Sharpless just sits there and looks at her. (Scotto at this point simply dropped the pillow she was holding. A shock, yes. But not a heart attack.) Besides making Sharpless look like an insensitive boob, this bit of business defies the laws of physics. A woman can't fall forward from a relaxed seated position — her center of gravity is too low. (Try it, ladies.) Again, brava to the singer, but even Malfitano, one of the two or three finest singing actresses in the world today, can't pull the fall off without getting a laugh. It's clumsy, and, worse, it's unmotivated.

These are details. But there's one choice of Del Monaco's that's lethal. He sets Act Two/Three (no intermission, arrgh!) as an exterior — in the garden. It's an enormous overgrown back yard in the Universal Studios Theme Park style so beloved of Met audiences. It's impressive to look at, I guess. You really can shake a tree and have flowers fall down. But the various comings and goings look stacy and illogical. Del Monaco even blows the *coup de theatre* of the appearance of Kate (first Suzuki realizes who *that woman* is, then Butterfly — "Who is she? Don't tell me, I know.") If the dame with the parasol is loitering onstage through the whole third act, there's no suspense — and poor Suzuki has to yell "It's his wife! This will kill poor Butterfly!" right in Mrs. P's face! But there Kate is, there's no place to send her, so (I'm blushing as I type this, it's as horribly embarrassing as that) she even has to listen to her husband sing "Addio fiorito asil." Even in 1904 that must count as mental cruelty. We're left wondering if poor Trouble isn't entering a very dysfunctional family indeed. And all because of an insoluble blocking problem!

(While we're at it, there are more than purely technical reasons for leaving Act Two indoors. Butterfly is symbolically trapped in this little box. She can't get out. Like the Butterfly on the table. Belasco and Puccini weren't fools, you know.)

And so on to the (attempted) applause-grabber final curtain — Butterfly, dripping with gore, crashes through the *shoshi* and tumbles down the stairs to her death. (If only a helicopter could land to take away the Pinkertons!) It's cheap and ugly. What the fuck does Del Monaco think "Con onor muore" means? It's about having a choice. Butterfly chooses honor. She must die with dignity or else her life is meaningless. Wasted. Pointless. And, to be brutally practical — uninteresting.

What is tragedy? Tragedy is theater that says, "Life may be hard, even unbearable. But it has meaning." Tragedy says, "You are not just an animal."

What does the Met Butterfly say?

It says, "You are just meat."

♪ ♪ ♪ ♪ ♪ ♪ ♪ ♪

Highest praise to Catherine Malfitano. She is an artist (we knew that already from her Violetta, Mimi, and Lulu, to name just a few) and the voice is in fine fettle. She is a versatile singer and a credit to any opera house. Keep her here! Don't let her get away! Could I request the *Trinco* girls as a logical next step? And she'd be wicked in the Met's kinkorama *Salome*.

Ricky Leech is still adorable. He can even make looking roly-poly in a t-shirt look cute. I'd love to see him teamed up with La Malfitano in *Manon* or *Faust*. Or perhaps even in some opera for which the Met has an acceptable physical production. If Levine and Volpe had a brain between them, we'd have a Cathy/Ricky *Pelléas* this year. Ah, well.

The rest of the cast was nothing special — Dwayne Croft is sort of like Thomas Hampson without Hampson's looks (i.e., not much of anything).

I would not call the conducting "amateurish," because that word implies love for one's art. "Incompetent" is closer.

Prediction: a restaging by a staff stage director. del Monaco takes his name off the production. Routine triumphs.

With political correctness at its height, it was only a matter of time before a similar form of revisionism made its way into the performance of classical music. The symphonies of Mozart, Beethoven and even Brahms are routinely "rescued" from the philistine practices of 19th century Romanticism by period instrument specialists. Musicologists now enjoy a vogue usually reserved for select maestros. Operas are slavishly performed today in the native tongue of the composer -- regardless of whether the singers or their audiences are versed in that language. In short, received tradition of any sort has become suspect.

As with most well-intentioned causes, fanatical forces seem determined to hijack the authenticity movement. Lyric Opera of Chicago's opening night production of Mussorgsky's *Boris Godunov* is a case in point. Having already mounted both the thoroughly discredited Rimsky-Korsakov edition and the composer's own 1872 revision of the opera, Lyric has now opted to perform Mussorgsky's 1869 original -- a decision prompted by the rigid scholarship of the times rather than a careful assessment of strengths and weaknesses among all the available materials.

Mussorgsky's original is little more than a glorified rough draft, lacking the contrasts and epic dimension of the work it would later become. Although the composer was pressured to undertake an extensive rewrite of *Boris*, it is presumptuous of today's revisionists to cast

Mussorgsky in the role of unappreciated artist and his critics as reactionary conservatives. Mussorgsky's later version of *Boris* has rightly been hailed as a groundbreaking composition of barbaric splendor, but his original is not so much primitive as it is amateurish.

Seen September 27, Samuel Ramey was in characteristically exasperating form as Czar Boris. Blessed with prodigious vocal resources, Ramey evinced none of the interpretative imagination and insight that used to be considered a *sine qua non* of any bass performing the title role. Ramey's cantabile phrasing illuminated many of the domestic episodes, but his by now customary flaunting of a well-developed chest was no substitute for regal charisma. Perhaps the restraint of Ramey's characterization was part of the evening's corrective mission, but it was impossible to take the megastar seriously as a larger-than-life ruler driven mad by guilt and self-recrimination.

In an interview with the *Chicago Tribune*, Ramey stated that he had been turned off by the "screaming" of the late Martti Talvela's in his frequent traversals of the role at the Met. Well, I heard many of Talvela's performances of *Boris* in the 1970s and 80s and recall nothing in his work that would qualify as screaming. What I do remember is Talvela's frighteningly intense depiction of the dementia that eventually overwhelms Boris, a graphically convincing piece of acting that was splendidly offset by the Finnish bass' tender farewell to his son. As high priest

## Mud will be flung

of the modern Cult of Facelessness, Ramey has no right to criticize his great predecessor for histrionic talents he himself lacks.

Undeterred by the presence of his more-famous colleague, bass Dimitri Kavrakos walked off with the evening's honors by supplying an idiomatic, resplendently sung account of Pimen's narratives. Also noteworthy in a large cast were Patrick Denniston, a promising new tenor, as the Pretender Dimitri and Vladimir Ognovenko, outrageously lewd, as Varlaam. Glamour queens doubtlessly missed the Polish act with its primping mezzo-soprano (remember delicate Mignon Dunn?) and hunky ballet boys in the polonaise but Catherine Cook's earthy Mistress of the Inn was some compensation.

Stein Winge's stage direction was unnecessarily busy: having the Simpleton privy to everything that transpired onstage ruined the concentrated effect Mussorgsky intended this prophetic character to have. Bruno Bartoletti's conducting was attentive to pacing and mood. Ultimately misguided, Lyric's *Boris* scores a hollow victory for musical correctness.

One of the more delightful bits of trivia associated with Stravinsky's *The Rake's Progress* is that the composer saw the Hogarth originals on which the opera is based while visiting Chicago's very own Art Institute. Although few operas can be said to have been inspired by paintings or engravings, many works have used as their source the medieval

Faust legend. *The Rake's Progress* draws freely from this cautionary tale of the frustrated scholar who sells his soul to the Devil in hopes of learning the meaning of spiritual fulfillment.

Avoiding the sharply delineated view of Christian good and evil that characterizes earlier versions of the legend, Stravinsky says something quite unique about the need for striking Satanic wagers. Wisely compassionate, Stravinsky's view of mortal folly is exquisitely mirrored in W. H. Auden's haunting text. Seen October 19, Lyric Opera's production of *The Rake's Progress* splendidly captured its creators' insight into the sadness of the human condition.

As the hapless rake Tom, tenor Jerry Hadley demonstrated why he has become so renowned in this role. Although not fully recovered from a sinus ailment that plagued him on the opening night of this performance, Hadley was admirable in every way. Rich in dynamic variety, his singing never sacrificed diction to gratuitous displays of tonal splendor. Most importantly, Hadley made the rake's progress toward ruin and death deeply moving, not simply titillating. The audience, obviously spellbound by the depth of his portrayal, sat motionless throughout the Bedlam scene. Any artist capable of quelling the fidgety gaucheries of Lyric audiences is deserving of every accolade.

As Anne Trulove, soprano Ruth Ann Swenson made something memorable of her every utterance. Blessed with the same engaging vulnerability as the young Victoria

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de los Angeles or Mirella Freni, Swenson was just as home in the lyrical sentiment of her final lullaby as the coloratura fireworks of the show-stopping cabaletta, I go to him. A word to the wise, though, Ruth Ann: lay off the Taco Bell. (Can y'all believe that recent CD cover for EMI? "Positively Golden"? It should have been called "Positively Divine." The only thing lacking was the Meyerbeer arrangement of "These hips were made for blissin'.")

While ultimately unvaried, bass Samuel Ramey's characterization of the demonic agent Nick Shadow was arresting for its world-weary dimension and deadpan humor. As Baba the Turk, Felicity Palmer's pungent mezzo-soprano riveted attention almost as much as her flowing beard.

Graham Vick's direction, abetted by designer Richard Hudson's riotous color schemes and provocative costume choices, sometimes encouraged an unnecessary vulgarity in both performers and audience. On the other hand, who would want to forego to sight of Gweneth Bean as Mother Goose sauntering out in merry widow, pink feather miniskirt and stiletto heels? (For the first time in Lyric history, cries of "Big and beautiful, girl!" and "Work it!" resounded through the Civic Opera House.) Overall, Vick moved the action along with clarity and simplicity. The decision to transfer the Bedlam scene from the notorious madhouse to the pastoral landscapes of Tom's demented mind was a telling one. Playing the important keyboard solos from the podium, conductor Dennis Russell Davies elicited the requisite crispness of attack from

his chamber-sized ensemble.

In returning Stravinsky's masterpiece to the city that gave it birth, Lyric Opera scored its first unqualified triumph of the season.

Egad! Is a verismo opera revival upon us? Giordano's *Fedora*, a prime representative of the "slice of life" movement in late Italian opera, a work loathed by critics for its melodramatic excesses and loved by audiences for its well-spring of melody, has resurfaced at Lyric Opera after an almost 35-year hiatus. At that time, vocal giants Renata Tebaldi, Giuseppe di Stefano and Tito Gobbi were on hand to breathe life into an opera, like Puccini's *Tosca*, based on a "well-made" play by Victorien Sardou for his favorite faghag, Sarah Bernhardt. Crammed full of historical detail, cloak-and-dagger intrigue, and extravagant plot developments worked out with almost mechanical efficiency, *Fedora* requires interpreters capable of life-or-death commitment to make sense of its high-octane theatricality.

It is precisely this need for performers blessed with distinctive and individual dramatic gifts that has kept interest in the verismo operas on low-flame since the heyday of Tebaldi and company. Fortunately, after a depressing reign of faceless, plastic and drab divas (you know who they are), the emergence of a number of volatile *veristas* (Agnes Baltsa, Maria Guleghina, Diana Soviero) has made the prospect of encountering *Fedora* in opera houses throughout the world a reality again. Lyric's choice for its recent production was the ever-adorable Mirella Freni. At 60, Freni demonstrated once more that age cannot wither her well-known and rightly

beloved charms.

Heard November 7, Freni's astoundingly well-preserved soprano caressed the ear with the same warm, sunny, thoroughly idiomatic sound that has delighted Chicago audiences for three generations. Always a sympathetic and touching figure on stage, Freni was surprisingly effective in her embodiment of the virago aspects of the princess Fedora, who pursues her fiancé's murderer with ferocious zeal. Given the dearth of quality sopranos emerging from Italy in recent years, Freni's portrayal glowed like unearthed treasure from a long-dead culture. Indeed, nothing quite so authentic and glamorous as the autumnal Freni has graced the Lyric stage in a long time. A stupendous performance.

Alas, Freni was on her own for most of the evening, receiving precious little support from her colleagues. Overly hyped, Domingo-protégé Jose Cura revealed an underwhelming tenor afflicted with all sorts of vocal deficiencies, the most annoying of which was a recurring tendency to sing off-pitch. Tall, dark and handsome, Cura has an ass that could melt butter but it did not dispel the stolid impression made by his acting. Too bad the opera was not reset in the Renaissance: tenors in tights often reveal sizable endowments of a different kind.

Cynthia Lawrence had the daft brilliance required for the flighty Countess Olga but seemed hellbent on upstaging Freni--a tasteless display of dubious artistic intentions and poorly contained ego. No one expected Jonathan Summers as De Sirieux to be another Gobbi but his persistent tastefulness was as

wrong-headed as Lawrence's Eve Harrington act. Worst of all, Bruno Bartoletti's conducting was an embarrassingly senile affair: tempos were set and maintained with appalling inconsistency. Still, Freni, beautifully framed by a *fin de siècle* production borrowed from La Scala, redeemed all. May she and others of her calibre continue to bring us the best of verismo.

Speaking of the best of verismo, a weekend jaunt to Washington, D.C. allowed me to hear Giordano's better-known *Andrea Chenier* in a concert version by the Washington Concert Opera. Modelled on Eve Queler's Opera Orchestra of New York, this organization currently presents two operas a season in the intimate Lisner Auditorium on the George Washington University campus. This season began with Bellini's *Norma* (starring Nelly Miricioiu) and concluded in October with two performances of Giordano's *Andrea Chenier*. Heard October 9, the Giordano was made notable by the first-ever appearances of Ben Heppner in the title role and Diana Soviero as Maddalena di Coigny.

To record collectors weaned on Gigli, Del Monaco and Corelli, Heppner's poet may have lacked idiomatic flavor but he never relied on stock sobbing and macho strutting to make his points. Using Bjoerling and Gedda as his models, Heppner sang with intelligence, his vocal line clean yet ardent. Heppner's tenor is not all of a piece, being comprised of a beautifully compact and ringing upper register and an unsupported, nasal bottom. Nevertheless, Heppner commanded the sweeping phrases of his famous arias and suggested

the rarely encountered sexual ambiguity that underscores this character (just what is the scoop between Chenier and his clinging buddy, Roucher, anyway? As Chenier tells Maddalena, "Ours is a love of souls." Hmmm.)

Soviero's Maddalena served notice that the red-hot mamma species is not yet extinct. Olivero and Scotto queens chattered gleefully at intermission about this new verismo goddess and Soviero, already renowned for her Puccini heroines, seems destined to join the ranks of those legendary divas who specialize in *angoscia* and *disperata*. After carefully nurturing her lyric voice on countless Violettas and Mimis, Soviero now possesses the interpretative maturity and amplitude of voice to undertake heavier repertoire. In the famous *La mamma morta*, her phrasing was glorious, the words drenched with feeling, with the movement of Maddalena's narrative shaped by an innate gift for *rubato*. In the big duets with Heppner, Soviero alternated *pianissimo* phrases of heartstopping loveliness with outpourings of firm richness in *forte* climaxes. Unlike the risibly elephantine (if well-sung) portrayals of Milanov, Farrell and Caballe, Soviero made the character's progression from callous girl to generous woman deeply moving.

Italian baritone Michele Porcelli tried valiantly as Gerard to compete with these two heavyweights, but relentless forcing of his basically attractive instrument left him almost voiceless by the opera's end. The others, including Metropolitan Opera  *comprimaria* Margaret Lattimore as Bersi, were a competent lot. General director Stephen Crout was sensitive to

his singer's needs but allowed too many indulgent tempos. Washington Concert Opera is a fascinating company and I will follow their future progress with interest.

-- ENZO BORDELLO

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# If Art is a lie that reveals the truth,

that makes the mendacity of La Gran Scena Opera di New York nothing less than a revelation. In what is rumored to be their New York farewell, those darn divas celebrated their thirteenth(!) year with an evening of delightful subversion.

And subvert they did. At the November 27 performance, the comedy was sharper and harder than I ever saw it before. Some very serious messages indeed lurk behind these girls' slapstick.

"We are in Babylon," announced Sylvia Bills in introducing "Serbami ognor" from *Semiramide*. Are we ever! Here's a guy pretending to be a diva pretending to be a Queen in love with a guy pretending to be a woman pretending to be her son. The casting alone is a primer on gender confusion.

And Babylonian indeed was Philene Wannelle and Mirella Frenzi's excursion into fabulousness via Rossini's endless roudades. Just when you think the Queen has nothing more to say, she restates her case once more, with even more elaborate decoration. Eventually we realize she had nothing much to say in the first case. She just loves to hear herself talk (sing). At great length she comes to a full cadence (as if to say, "But, enough about me..."). But the train of musical thought has ground to a halt; as far as she's concerned, if Arsace has something to say, he can start

his verse from scratch. Because she doesn't care what he has to say. ("But enough about you!")

Now, when "real" singers do this duet, they try to play the meaning of the text-- flirtation, avoidance, consummation. But this Semiramide and Arsace play the subtext inherent in the music: this pair don't--can't feel anything for each other. Self-love is all these two chunks of cardboard can muster. "He" is confidently clueless; "she" impetuously calculating (and you could cut yourself on her jawline!) It's as much fun as a Keanu Reeves/Valentina Cortese *Sweet Bird of Youth*, and somehow uplifting: if an airhead like her can get a job as Queen of Babylon, there's hope for all of us.

Or consider Gabriella Tonnzotti-Cassaruola's decisive evidence that beautiful voice and beautiful singing aren't at all the same thing. Keith Jurosko mimics the cracked tone and hit-or-miss breath support of the elderly diva, but what music he makes of *The Last Rose of Summer*! Could even Adelina Patti (obviously one of Jurosko's role models) ever have sung with such a combination of exquisite control and natural expression? And who living today can give such lovely shape to a simple turn or mordent?

No, not everything was perfect... surely the massively self-confident Carmelita della Vacca-Browne in full grovel as Amneris

should have been a scream, but the scene fizzled, despite a few good gags. Her costume was no help-- this broad cries out for eau-de-nil chiffon. She made up for it in the *Rosenkavalier* trio, though-- the Maltese falcon could give Crespino lessons in singing and Dietrich lessons in *blasée*. Oh, what an Ortrud she would make!

Manon worked better. It was all about La Gran Scena's first and best gag-- the tension between performance and portrayal. (What interests Manon more: luring Des Grieux with promises of sex or bewitching her public with endless *pianissimi*?)

And Vera Galupe-Borszk does nothing less than epitomize the dichotomy that is diva. Ira Siff has seen and heard it all (well, almost-- he was in bed with flu the night of Fremstad's Met farewell); he knows more than Leyla Gencer's therapist does about the burden of expectation we opera queens heap upon our idols. Vera is physically teeny and her voice

is, well, it is what it is. But who has better understood Tosca's utter horror at the discovery that her art is a lie-- that real life has no real shape or meaning. Vera/Ira doesn't spare us. When else have you seen a Tosca literally bargaining with God?

Vera's idiosyncratic phrasing is oddly heroic; it's like she's the composer of "Vissi d'arte," not Puccini. Like Scotto and Olivero before her, La Dementia understands that life is just raw material until style gives it shape. It's a purely vocal message: murder is easy, *pianissimo* high G is hard.

A final word: thank you, Gran Scena, for slipping a little more out of the closet. Whatever the sexual preferences of the artists involved (I believe they are all happily married family men), their attitude is queerer than queer-- tough, sassy, confrontational.

Please, Gran Scena, let this be only your first farewell. We need you now more than ever.

## parasite seeks host organism

It's tough producing a newsletter without a word processor. Won't you help me? Let me use your computer and laser printer for a few hours each month and together we can reform the world of opera. Beep me anytime:

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# I NEVER WILL FORGET

SAN FRANCISCO, CA -- Each autumn, those opera queens who live in the Central States must decide which coast to fly to for their opera clusters. Sometimes, we splurge and do both coasts, but this year, the little coven we travel with voted to eschew Lincoln Center completely and go to San Francisco twice: once in late September and again in early November. We saw seven operas and did we ever have a lark!

The high point of trip number one was the Rossini *Otello* with Chris Merritt flouncing around the stage like Little Richard at the Court of Versailles, making bizarre sounds which can only be described as those a rooster must make while being castrated. Some of his Squawks above High Screech must have hurt him more than they did us. Visually, things were quite bizarre. There was a giant golden lion that came down like a piñata and dominated the stage for two acts. When we went to Desdemona's bedroom for Act 3, the audience hooted in delight to find this giant lion positioned atop the enormous walk-in bed, holding parts of the mosquito netting in his mouth like thick strands of saliva. Cecilia Gasdia then tried to sing the Willow Song, but the wrong mood had already been established.

For those who may not have known the story of *Otello*, there were mime characters on stilts acting out the story during any non-vocal interludes. For these excesses, the production team got booed during the final curtain call. One local wag was quoted accurately as saying, "If this had been the Verdi *Otello*, it would have been OJ and Nicole, but since it's the Rossini, they turned it into Michael Jackson and Lisa Marie." We laughed.

That trip also involved a Verdi *Macbeth* with the witches doing slo-mo hungee jumping into the most minimal of sets. James Morris, who would have been better cast as Banquo, instead made an attempt at the title role, without comfortable high notes or much success. Dame Gwyneth Jones was in such dreadful voice that what applause she did receive must have been out of pity. The Banquo was Robert Lloyd.

You know it's a bad night at *Macbeth* when the most the most applause and the only cheers go to Macduff, sung by Li.

*Trovatore* was of the same level. In fact, for a moment I thought I was at the Met. Millo had been indisposed for the first three performances, but showed up at the fourth, which we attended. She tried Milanov Grand Posturing at the footlights, but did not have the Milanov Grand Vocalism to accompany it. She cheated during her first cadenza and omitted the high notes, remaining tentative for the subsequent hour. She did the standard butchered version of the role: one verse of the first cabaletta, neither verse of the Act IV cabaletta. However, during the middle of the *Miserere*, everything suddenly clicked for her and she started giving us great voice, temperament, fire, and presentation. The duet with haritone Gavanelli was actually exciting. I found myself applauding.

The show was stolen, however, by Miss Zajick, who was so loud, strong and domineering that she blew everyone else off the stage. I kept telling people she had to be miked in order to sound that loud. But they correctly reasoned that, if miking were involved, it would have been attached to Mr. Armiliato, whose Manrico was weak and often inaudible. During the single intermission, we buzzed excitedly about the low-lying white clouds with giant brown chopsticks in them which dominated the Convent Scene. I'm still waiting for an explanation.

The most interesting part of the first trip was Conrad Susa's *Dangerous Liaisons*, which locals wanted to cheer about. Unfortunately, it merely made me want to go out and rent the Glenn Close video as soon as I got back home.

Although sung in English, supertitles were projected to let us know what the characters were saying, and -- boy! -- did we need them! You couldn't even tell what language (if any) Renée Fleming and Mary Mills

is going to sing. Hampson did a little bit better. But it was von Stade who turned the night into a total personal triumph. Amazingly, you could understand every word she sang. It was possible, whenever it was her turn, to look down from the supertitles and watch her.

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Trip #2 was much better.

We saw the first performance of Massenet's rare *Hérodiade*, with Domingo as John the Baptist sounding better than I've heard him sound in 15 years. It made me long to hear him do *La Juive* as soon as possible. Miss Zajick was even louder and stronger as *Hérodiade*, although, like Verdi's *Don Carlo*, she suffers the fate of being a title character whose music is weaker than all of the co-stars', so its easy for her to get lost in the shuffle.

Miss Fleming was back as Salomé, and was quite good, especially in the fabulous love duet that ends Act I, but I kept wishing I could hear a more voluptuous voice sing the role. Juan Pons, as *Hérod*, did not have the best of nights. He was under-voiced and pallid, which was a shame because *Hérod* seems to have the opera's most gorgeous music to sing. I kept wishing Milnes (circa 1978) was singing the role.

All that delirious saxophone and clarinet obligato made me fear syphilis of the ear. The sets and costumes were lavish. Miss Zajick looked like she stepped out of a DeMille Hollywood epic. The three ballets seemed appropriate and Domingo got cheered to the rafters (or rather to that bizarre "earthquake safety netting" that keeps plaster from falling on the audience). This was a high glamour night the Met wishes it could do.

Then we saw Prokofiev's *The Fiery Angel* with Galina Gorchakova roaring her way through what must be the most difficult marathon soprano role in twentieth century opera. Her Renata was amazingly riveting and admirable. Our performance was a sell-

out because of early reviews complaining that the male gymnasts, who cavorted on jungle gyms throughout the opera, wore white bikini briefs, while the nuns that they raped during the final orgy scene were totally nude. The curious flocked to see if this was true, and the answer was "yes" and "yes."

Our final opera was the by-now-famous *Mefistofele* production with Ramey in the title role. He was loud, virile, and spectacular. Margison, although a very bulky young man, produced a big sound with good high notes that suggest maybe he can take over when Pavarotti steps down. Millo thrilled some of the house with her Prison Scene acting and singing. Carol Neblett was not in good voice, but looked stunning as Helen of Troy. The chorus was amazing, whether as angels, townsfolk, devils, or Greeks. As devils, the men wore body stockings with very realistic-looking dangling genitalia that had many an opera glass steaming up.

For some bizarre reason, during the curtain calls it was Neblett, not Millo, who went to the wings to bring out conductor Julius Rudel. I didn't understand the protocol of it all, but then I seldom do.

After this matinee, we were able to rush two blocks to the east to see Monserrat Caballé get out of a town car to enter a record shop for an autograph signing session. The small mob awaiting her cheered her more than Millo or Neblett had been cheered, which proved something about yesterday versus today.

During our second trip, we encountered other opera queens who breathlessly shared with us some rumors of next season's repertoire for War Memorial; we feel we will probably eschew the Met again next autumn, since we really want to see Thomas' *Hamlet*, Anna Bolena, *Cenerentola*, and *Russian and Ludmilla*, which I don't believe the Met will be doing next season.

— RICHARD BREATH & PETER HUNTER

JEANETTE MACDONALD...

I was often homesick and lonely at night, but that was mostly because my roommate continued to make connections with airline pilots. She wasn't the only cast member who found romance on the tour. As we went around the country, a lot of the men and women in the cast began pairing off, and I suppose I found that slightly scandalous. I was a nice Jewish girl, and in those days nice Jewish girls lived at home with their parents and remained virgins until they got married. My idea of a big evening was an occasional dinner out with my roommate and Jimmy, who sang in the chorus, and Frank, my leading man. We'd order two steak dinners and split them four ways, and then abscond with all the rolls in the bread basket.

Jimmy knew how lonely I was as a result of my roommate's nightly excursions, so he took it upon himself to inform Mama of what was going on. My mother was very grateful and wound up hiring him as my chaperone.

It didn't take me long to discover that Jimmy and Frank were gay. It was the first time I'd ever come into contact with homosexuality, which was still very much in the closet then. Nobody talked about it at all.

Jimmy and Frank trusted me, and I liked them a lot. They and their friends were very cozy people, and made a point of including me in all their parties. In those days, there was an underground network of homosexuals, and they took care of their own. Very few of the gay men stayed in hotels; wherever we went, they had friends to stay with. Jimmy never failed to invite me to their friends' houses, and boy, did they have splendid furniture. My initial impression was that homosexuals had a natural gift for finding the best places to shop.



Another landmark of Thebom career was the 1957 U.S. premiere of *Dialogues of the Carmelites* at San Francisco Opera. Thebom sang Mère Marie, and she and the rest of the cast — which included Kirsten, LEONTYNE PRICE and CLARAMAE TURNER — submerged themselves so deeply in their roles that rehearsal breaks began to resemble a group-therapy session. "We just couldn't take the tension. We were tied up in knots. At one rehearsal, I finally said, 'Girls, we've got to have a break.' So when the rehearsal was over, we hit all the clubs here in town, until three in the morning. I often think how great it would have been if we'd had somebody along with a movie camera. We were in and out of the gay clubs and had a wonderful time."

# BEVERLY SILLS AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY