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Questo e quello

by La Cieca

Overheard behind the scenes at Sybil's Barn:
"Liù this season, *Mahagonny* next year, and then that's it!"

What happens when you phone in a performance? Well, for one thing, you miss the point of what you're singing about. Ask Cheryl Studer about it. She sight-read Floyd's *Susannah* to a six-month old playback and, boy does the CD sound it. But, even worse, Cheryl paid no attention to the important lesson the opera teaches: Don't fight authority; authority always wins. And this spring she learned her lesson: while Joe Volpe presumably would not object to a soprano's skinnydipping (in this case, it would require a pond the size of Lake Michigan), he sure as hell kicks up a fuss when she refuses to commit to rehearsals and performances of *Simon Boccanegra*.

Cheryl's torn it now-- she's approximately as employable as Kathy Battle. Who's gonna be dumb enough to hire her? Vienna? Not after she fucked up *Trovatore* and their new *Hoffman*. Covent Garden? Please! Have you seen the video of her *Aida*? (Talk about your travesty roles! Her only saving grace was that the Moshinsky staging was even more of a mess than she was!)

So it's back to the studio for Ms. Strudel. May she and her friend Mr. Microphone be very happy together. Me, I don't buy a whole lot of new studio recordings (zzzzz), but I wouldn't mind hearing Studer in well-prepared recordings of *Ariadne auf Naxos*, *Daphne*, *Freischütz*, or *Clemenza di Tito*. But only if she'll freaking stop with the once-over-lightly bullshit. (Have you heard that *Otello*???)

(And let's not forget Cheryl's ghost-singing for Madonna in Neil Jordan's film of *Die Tote Stadt*. Ben Heppner has already laid down the vocal tracks for Jeremy Irons.)

This spring's hottest ticket: Renata Scotto's first Marschallin at Spoleto USA. I know I'd give my right nut. Attention, whoever's in charge down there: how about La Scottissima in Schoenberg's *L'attesa* next year?

And, speaking of debuts, we hear that dear Albert Innaurato is making his Gran Scena bow next season under the singularly appropriate name of Regina Amara-Vecchia.

Somebody, please, take those Callas videos away from Carol Vaness! *Hommage* is one thing, but this is starting to look like:

Carol Vaness is Maria Callas

in

The Belle of Mykonos

Based on an idea by
Charles Nelson Reilly and John Ardoin

Joseph Volpe in *The Bad and the Beautiful*? Maybe not, but he is a take-charge guy, you bet, you bet. Reliable sources say Mr. V finished staging the Met's floperoo *Boccanegra* after Giancarlo del Monaco flew the coop. Ticket-holding invited guests to the dress rehearsal were turned away at the door, so we've no witnesses to that event...

Or how about the Wolf guy in the Billy Mumy role on the *Twilight Zone* episode about the bad little boy with the weird mental powers: "I don't like those sunglasses on Ricky Leech. They're BAD! I'll make them GO AWAY away under the cornfield!"

But you can't make Licia Albanese go away. We say brava to you, Licia, for having the courage to boo that lousy *Butterfly*. We say, let's cast her in Barab's *Little Red Riding Hood* and let nature take its course. (However, should the revered diva deign to return to *Butterfly* this spring, she may well find that the stage business she objected to has quietly disappeared. If you're curious, grab a shovel and head for the cornfield.)

And three Licia-esque boos to Mr. V for his feeble attempts to stonewall in the pages of *Opera Snooze*. Welcome to the Met in the 21st century... knee-jerk defenses instead of honest admissions of error. (Joe Volpe in *All the President's Men*?)

Did anyone catch any of **Renee Fleming's** words in *Peter Grimes*? She came off especially badly in contrast to **Anthony Rolfe Johnson**, **Greer Grimsley** (smashing debut!), and **Ann Howard**, all of whom made their words not only clear, but meaningful, too. And who told Renee that the very proper **Ellen Orford** would go wandering around town without a hat? (Perhaps the same stage director who chose a kid taller than **Rolfe Johnson** to play the apprentice.) But **ARJ** was an excellent **Grimes**-- in his own way as valid as **Jon Vickers**. Pity we won't hear his **Aschenbach** this year, but I'll bet his **Herodes** is super. Could we please find out?

That cute guy with the nose-ring I met at *Grimes* (sorry, didn't catch the name, but if you see this, call me soon, baby!) tells me he was at a *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* performance when **Maria Ewing's** body mike conked out. Well, wouldn't you?

Who edited the **Tucker** gala for PBS? Why leave in that infinite *Susannah* scene at the expense of dropping **Caballe's** "O ma lyre immortelle?" Haven't we all had enough **Sam Ramey** to last several lifetimes? And why make the whole affair look dull as yesterday's dishwater by including that dazzling *Carmen* kinescope? (Remember when singers could sing and act simultaneously?) Even **Jennifer Larmore** looked a little dowdy by comparison, and she's the real thing. Somebody write a *Gone with the Wind* opera for her now! (**Dawn Upshaw** as **Melanie**?)

The only point I could grasp at the Met's revival of *Turandot*: **Gwyneth Jones** and **Teresa Stratas** demonstrating in Act 3 what happens when you put two real stars on the same stage at the same time. It's called electricity and it don't happen much any more. As for **Lando Bartolini**, he's like a straight guy with a really big dick-- it's impressive, it's gorgeous, it's massive, but he hasn't a clue how to use it. His voice, I mean.

An ex-hustler buddy tells me *Rondine* is far and away the definitive whore opera; every working boy alive wants to meet a cute college guy in a bar and pretend to be eighteen again. City Opera's staging of the **Puccini** was still in fine shape as of last weekend... it's reviewed elsewhere in this issue.

Uh-oh. It looks like the **Arkel** family lives in one of those Eurotrash houses with the gnarled tree in the middle of the living room. No wonder the poor girl's not happy here!

Death on the Aile

Sad to say, but a moratorium is long overdue for works like *Aida*. Gone are the endless reserves of talent that queens of yore took for granted in this once bread-and-butter piece. The same wishful thinking that gave us a **Studer-Merritt Vespi Siciliani** at La Scala¹--and **Muti** wondered why the Milanese were volleying boos at this gruesome twosome!--has reached heights of folly with the more frequently played works of **Verdi**. Indeed, whole areas of the operatic repertoire, formerly indestructible, have been rendered impotent by the current dearth of first-class voices. Lyric Opera's December 10th performance of *Aida* sounded the death knell for **Verdian** singing in an opera house that routinely showcased **Callas**, **Tebaldi**, **Cerquetti**, **L. Price**, **Stignani**, **Simionato**, **Cossotto**, **Bjoerling**, **Di Stefano**, **Del Monaco**, **Tucker**, **Bergonzi**, **Corelli**, **Gobbi**, **Bastianini**, **Merrill**, **Christoff**, **Rossi-Lemeni**, **Ghiaurov** and others in this repertoire. Or to quote my neighboring operagoers: "Who?"

In the title role, **Aprile Millo** demonstrated why the Met has turned its back on her quicker than you can say **Susan Dunn**. Lyric management announced that the "Divine" **Miss M.** was suffering from a "severe" bronchial ailment. A more likely scenario is that **April** is currently in the throes of a "severe" vocal crisis and Lyric Opera, desperate for the drawing power of star names, allowed the soprano to hammer a few more nails into her professional coffin.

A sleepy presence in the first two acts, **Millo** entered the temple of **Isis** with a panther-like stealth more appropriate for the Queen of the Night's raid on **Sarastro's** palace. Justification for this silent-screen pantomime presented itself in the famous "O patria mia": the soprano apparently required a diversion to keep the audience from noticing her sour high notes and suspect pitch. She was a mile wide of that infamous "money note" high C. Before the third act was finished, **Millo** had rewritten entire passages and edited herself out of several key phrases in order to accommodate these deficiencies. The audience was so dismayed that the usually *de rigueur* curtain calls for this act were halted by a uniform absence of applause².

Substituting for the originally announced **Michael Sylvester** (what a loss), tenor **Lando Bartolini** produced credible *spinto* sound as **Radames** but displayed no hint of animation or even involvement in his character's situation. Planting himself beside **Millo** like a long-embalmed mummy, **Bartolini** managed to flail his arms before a few vulgarly sustained high notes but communicated no interest in the heroine whose allure causes his character's

¹ And while we're on the subject, where does **Muti** get off performing the music of *Les Vêpres Siciliennes* (not one note more or less) to the libretto of *Giovanna de Guzman*? Does he really believe performing this bowdlerized and clumsy Italian "translation" (really an adaptation) represents anything like **Verdi's** true intentions? --JJ

² The opera queens here at PB (including **Mr. Bordello**), being sportsmen at heart, believe that one should retire to a neutral corner once the opponent is down for the count (call this "Addison deWitt's rule"). We see little use in reviling **La Millo** further. Any critic with half an ear could have heard her vocal problems beginning as far back as 1987; any Artistic Director who sincerely cared about vocal hygiene would have stopped throwing her on the stage several years ago. On the other hand, they're whispering around **Sybil's** Barn that **Millo** has suffered some severe financial reverses recently; thus, she may *have* to sing to pay the bills. Anyway, she's an artist and a lady and what she needs is not more dishing but rest, advice and restudy. Four out of four fags agree: from this moment on, **La Millo** is off limits in these pages. --JJ

undoing. If this duo represents the best Lyric Opera can offer in these roles, then give me the bad old days of Tucci and McCracken!

Timothy Noble made some interesting interpretative choices as Amonasro but was vocally small-scale. Rather understandably, Tiny Tim didn't look very pleased about waiting around an extra act in order to take his final curtain call. Dimitri Kavrakos recreated his capably sung if apparently Haldol-addicted Ramfis. Conductor John Fiore had his hands full following the antics of Millo and Bartolini but effectively delineated the private and public dimensions of the score.

Best of all was mezzo-soprano Dolora Zajick, who chewed up Pet Halmen's beautiful settings with her powerfully sung, forcefully acted interpretation of Amneris. The timbre of Zajick's instrument isn't very Italianate, but she stomped around in those Cossotto wedgies like a champion old-timer. Still, it can't be much fun for Zajick to function forever as an unofficial show-saver.

"It's all over" read one of the supertitles in the final moments of the opera—a foregone conclusion if ever there was one.

If the Lyric groundlings could be forgiven for taking to their heels throughout this *morte della diva*, their chilly response to the November 22 performance of Richard Strauss' *Capriccio* was less understandable. Granted, this martini-dry discourse on opera as art form is a stretch for anyone whose idea of *heilige kunst* is Pavarotti bouncing a soccer ball off his head while singing a duet with Sting. But for those of us who have watched with ever-growing incredulity the demise of opera as Strauss and his proteges Jeritza, Lehmann, Schumann and Rethberg once practiced it, this tribute to the enduring power of the lyrical muse was engaging.

As the Countess Madeleine, soprano Felicity Lott brought a an alternately bemused and bewildered charm to this once exclusive Schwarzkopf property. Lott has that endearingly goofy look and gait characteristic of so many British opera singers: *una faccia di cavallo* mounted on an ostrich's neck. Drcary

Kiri's slick characterization for San Francisco several seasons back may have been ersatz Merchant/Ivory, but Lott's Vanessa Redgrave impersonation was true sophistication. True, the conversational tessitura of the role tended to emphasize the ordinary quality of Lott's middle and lower registers. However, Lott made the most of her recycled Marshmallin opportunities in the valedictory final scene, producing singing of cultivated radiance.

Lott was surrounded by an ensemble of Swiss-watch elegance and precision. With his Errol Flynn dark looks, Gerald Finley was the essence of prowling machismo as the Count. Keep your eye on this fuckable hunkette. Slightly blowsy of voice, Emily Golden supplied a narcissistic yet sympathetic characterization of the actress Clairon, while Jan-Hendrik Rootering's plush bass limned a glorious account of La Roche's usually tedious defense of tradition.

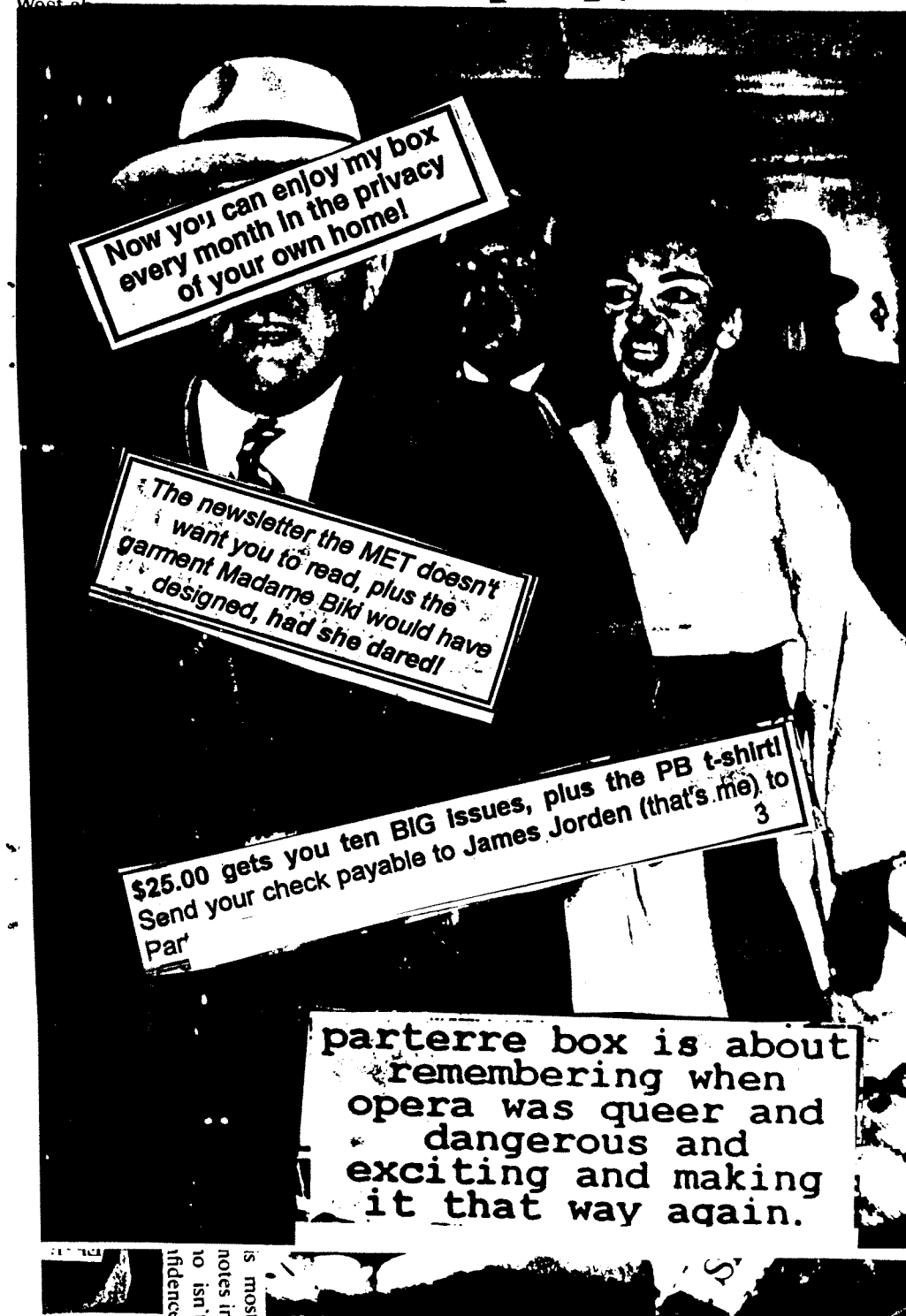
Best of all were the sincere and touching performances of Kurt Streit and Rodney Gilfrey as the Countess' respective suitors, Flamand and Olivier. Streit's honey-voiced rendering of the harpsichord-accompanied "Kein andres" left little doubt that music would emerge victorious in this salon battle between poet and composer.

Only the outrageous overacting of Bonaventura Bottone and Cynthia Lawrence (substituting for the originally announced Gianna Rolandi) as the Italian singers marred an otherwise well-matched cast. Bottone and Lawrence nearly elbowed themselves into the orchestra pit vying for the audiences' attention to their coarse mugging. Thank goodness the tea-sipping Lott read these two to filth with a devastating "ugly Americans" expression.

John Cox reassembled his 1920's, Noel Coward-inspired staging from Glyndebourne in Mauro Pagano's glamorous drawing room set. Conductor Andrew Davis coaxed a wonderfully luminous and resonant sound from the reduced orchestra. This fine presentation of Strauss' final opera finished to enthusiastic applause—from myself and the six other people remaining in the audience.

—Enzo Bordello

ex is going to be involved in the arts. Even the West of



KISS MY

God, it must have been twenty years ago (I was still living at home, I remember that), but your favorite opera aficionado and mine, Tony Randall, was holding forth on the Tonight show with one of those shaggy dog opera stories that nobody but he and Charles Nelson Reilly could get away with (and Randall's are better organized); this one concerned a *Salome* he'd just seen at the Met on New Year's Day when, according to Tony, subscribers always send their children to the opera (is this quaint custom still observed?)

Isn't it a cool idea-- four thousand adolescents (and Tony) watching Grace Bumbry in her bra and g-string frenching a papier-mache replica of William Dooley's head? Wouldn't Oscar Wilde have been pleased?

And that's when I got the idea *Salome* must be the queerest opera of all. Not just the words, but the music too. (Question: how did Richard Strauss write such idiomatic kink? According to all reports, he was a dull straight guy in real life. Maybe he used up all his perversity in his work. Pity. Anyway.)

Anyone reading this grew up in what we might call the post-DeMille era, so we all expect our Bible stories to be laced with a dollop or two of sex. Example: as a kid I couldn't make head nor tail emotionally of *The Ten Commandments* because I thought I was supposed to be rooting for Yul Brynner. He must be the hero! He's so hot. (Charlton Heston wasn't bad, but he wasn't the platonic ideal of a skinhead daddy, either. Besides, as soon as he got religion, he covered up his pecs.)

But back in the 1890's, the idea of using sex as a motivation for a Bibli-

cal character was way radical. And Wilde didn't leave it alone, either. He made the focus of the sexual theme a fourteen-year-old princess, thus violating three more taboos-- as we all know, sex is just not done by kids, women and royalty (just ask Princess Stephanie.)

Okay. Let's assume an audience could accept that this little flower of Judea can get turned on. But the contemporary concept of erotic expression was still *Tristan und Isolde*-- the paradigm of wild/abandoned/I want to kiss you all over/animal noise/I felt the earth move/I ceased to exist type sex. (It's still not bad as a change of pace.) But that's not what the daughter of Herodias is after, is it? She doesn't want intercourse. She's weird.

No "nameless, never to part, newly knowing, newly glowing" bullshit for her."

She sees him. And she says,

**He's ugly!
He's really ugly!**

And here's where Mr. Strauss takes over. There are lots of ways to speak the words "Er ist schrecklich." You might even make them sound tender. But there's only one way to sing an arpeggio that plunges from high G# to low C#. Even if your name is Nilsson, you squeal and grunt like a pig.

She describes him as "a column of ivory."

Yes. He looks like a penis.

Strauss's comment: at the moment she describes him thus, Salome is

MOUTH!

singing his theme-- the religioso "tell him to come to me" motif. In her mouth, the hymn sounds like "Lazy Afternoon." But it doesn't sound disgusting. It sounds like boy-meets-girl. (compare it to the moment after the Presentation of the Rose when Sophie finally speaks to Octavian. Or Daphne's love song to the trees. How chaste can you get?)

But she warms up soon enough. First climax of the score: Salome cries "Jokanaan!" to a big, slow, slurpy brass cadence. It's a climax, but not an orgasm. As the Princess realizes she is in love with the Prophet's body, the orchestra demonstrates in sound what a hole feels like when something really big slides in. What a hole feels like opening to accept a "column of ivory."

So far, so straight. Perverse, but straight. I mean, women have holes too. But then the little princess starts talking dirty. And it's a particularly queer kind of slutpatter: all lists.

Why do queers make list? Beats the fuck out of me, but everybody from Susan Sontag to John Simon to Wayne Koestenbaum have noted this predilection. Ask me-- half the stuff people submit to Parterre Box is Lists¹

This torrent of similes has the effect of isolating Jokanaan's mouth from the rest of his body, of highlighting it. All he is, is a mouth. And Strauss crops the image once more by exploiting Wagner's "idée fixe" technique: repeat the same melodic or

Top Ten Things that Salome Compares Jokanaan's Mouth To

10. a band of scarlet on a tower of ivory
9. a pomegranate cut in twain with a knife of silver
8. the pomegranate flowers that blossom in the gardens of Tyre
7. roses
6. the blasts of trumpets that herald the approach of kings and make afraid the enemy
5. the feet of those who tread the wine in the wine-press
4. the feet of the doves who haunt the temples
3. a branch of coral that fishers have found in the twilight of the sea
2. the vermillion found in the mines of Moab
1. the vermillion of kings

rhythmic figure four or five hundred times, or until somebody screams, whichever comes last.²

And Strauss's word-setting is pure kinesthesia. Compare it to other fin de siecle yakking like Manon's or Cio-Cio-San's. They're aroused virgins, too, but they sure as hell don't sound this pressured, this hyper. On the other hand, their chatter is meant, more or less, for public consumption. Salome's is meant to be hissed into a sex partner's ear.

1 Coming soon in *Parterre Box*: 20 Roles Renata Scotto Never Sang But Would Have Been Great In.

2 A fixed idea to chew on: did Wagner invent this technique, or did he steal it from Rossini?

She wants to perform one particular action on one particular part of Jokanaan's body.

**I want to kiss your mouth.
I want to kiss your mouth.
I want to kiss your mouth.**

And straight people (especially straight *women*) don't harp on one isolated body part like this, do they? Queers do: the rest of you doesn't matter. Just that one piece.

**mouth.
mouth.
mouth.**

From here it's only 75 years to Mapplethorpe's *Man in Polyester Suit*.

But one perverse sexual relationship in a show seems like short weight, doesn't it? I mean, by the time you pay for parking and a babysitter...

Wilde gives us our money's worth:

SALOME AND JOKANAAN: "I WANT TO KISS YOUR MOUTH. I WANT TO KISS YOUR MOUTH. I WANT TO KISS YOUR MOUTH." (GLORY HOLE SEX)



NARRABOTH AND SALOME: "DO THIS THING FOR ME AND TOMORROW I MIGHT SMILE AT YOU." (DOMINATRIX INTO PUBLIC HUMILIATION)

HEROD AND SALOME: "YOUR FEET WILL LOOK LIKE LITTLE WHITE DOVES WHEN YOU DANCE BAREFOOT." (SHRIMPER)

HEROD AND HERODIAS: "MY DAUGHTER AND I ARE OF ROYAL STOCK. YOUR FATHER WAS A CAMEL DRIVER!" "SHUT UP! SHUT UP! SHUT UP!" (CODEPENDENCY)

Tasty, eh? Notice anything in common about our four couples? Yes, they're all male-female. And they're all perverse.

The only tenderness in the show is the Page's crush on Narraboth. Sad, true (he doesn't know I'm alive...), but all too recognizably human. (I only wish I didn't recognize the feeling of falling for a straight guy!)

It's too bad Strauss didn't set the Page's little lament over the body of his beloved Young Syrian ("...I should have hidden him from the moon. She was jealous of his beauty...")³

Who's normal now, him or Salome? The little queer, of course. He reminds me of the two boys who dance together at the end of Pasolini's *Salò*: after all that horror, the blessed relief of a moment of simple tender affection.

Salome became popular by grossing people out. It remains a hit because it is a triumph of style. Or, let's face it, folks, a triumph of camp.

³ I know, it would have held up the action, plus giving the kid an aria would have made the part tricky to cast--you'd need a Cherubino-quality voice. But, on the other hand, "Der junge Syrier ist tot...Er war mein Freund" would have made a nice audition piece for mezzos not quite ready for the Komponist.

The collision of the exotic and the banal is the soul of camp. In the gambling scene of Charles Ludlam's *Camille*, someone describes a dress as "just a *grand bateau mouche* tricked out with Punch-and-Judy orchids." It's funny because it's just too much.

And nobody understood "too much" better than Richard Strauss--*Salome* offers more "too much" per minute than any other opera going.⁴

Strauss' orchestra just won't stop. It's like the aural equivalent of Joe Orton's notorious bed-sitter rendered Byzantine when he and Ken Halliwell papered the walls with a collage of clippings from library books. The proliferation of detail numbs the brain.

Strauss's father once said the score sounded "exactly as if one had ants crawling in one's pants." Well, maybe. All's I know is, my coach once recommended taking two Tylenol before going to *Salome*, to fend off the inevitable tension headache. (P.S., it works.)

Invite a queer to *Salome*. Before he answers, he'll ask who's doing Herodias. *Salome's* mom is a really short role with nothing even vaguely resembling a solo (I guess that's why Regina Resnik hated the part so), but every other line is a camp showstopper:

*You and your peacocks
are ridiculous.*

*My daughter has done a
nice job. I'll stay.*

⁴ Though *Ghosts at Versailles* is certainly in there swinging.

*I don't believe in
miracles.
I've seen too many.*

*The moon is like the
moon. That is all.
Let's go in.*

(Or, in other words, "God, that moon is bright!" She's the Vera Charles of opera. Where's Bea Arthur when we **really** need her?)

One reason I just adore Nikolaus Lehnhoff's Met *Salome* is that he gives Herodias so much to do. She even gets to go home with Naaman. A reliable source told me that Lehnhoff even wanted **Herodias** killed instead of Salome at the end of the show ("Not **that** woman, **this** woman!") Even without that chunk of bizarre, she stays busy. Remember Helga Dernesch slithering on-stage through what looks like the back door of the Spike? She peered at Salome, then at the corpse of Narraboth, then at Salome again, while the Heckelphone echoed her peevish expression, as if to say, "I leave you alone for five minutes..."

But that's what camp is all about--the sadder the situation, the funnier the gag. In this show, everybody's a comic:

Salome: I want, on silver platter...

Herod: On a silver platter? Of course, on a silver platter. Isn't she adorable? What do you want on a silver platter, my sweet, lovely Salome, the fairest of all the daughters of Judea? What would you have them bring you on a silver platter? Tell me. Anything you want, you shall have. Every treasure in my kingdom is yours. What would you have, Salome?

Salome: The... head... of...
Jokanaan.

Herod: (does take)

I am indebted to that zany comedienne Teresa Stratas for revealing to me the camp highlight and the best laugh of the show. In Friedrich's film (the one that was shot on a leftover *Star Trek* set), she asks to see "this prophet." The guard tells her it's forbidden. She stamps her foot and jerks her chin and screams, "Hab ihr's nicht gehört?" Or, as the subtitle says,

Maybe you didn't hear me!

It's so obvious.

Salome is a Jewish princess.

If I were casting a film of *Salome*? (assuming ghosts to do the singing):
Tori Spelling, Keanu Reeves, Christine Baranski, Harvey Keitel.

(You know, Eartha Kitt played *Salome* (the play) for Omnibus or something in the 50's. What fun that must have been! Unfortunately, it was in English, so posterity was robbed of the opportunity of hearing Eartha say the magic word "Scharlachnatter."



The life of an outsider is inclusive. Being queer means finding nothing strange except normality.

Salome is opera's clearest vision of this essential tenet of queer life. Strauss and Wilde fascinate us with the disgusting, knowing we want to be forced to stare even though we know we should turn away.

Remember, in *Blue Velvet*, Kyle MacLachlan in the closet (yes) watching Dennis Hopper having rough sex with Isabella Rossellini? He can't look away because he knows some part of him finds what's happening exciting. And somehow beautiful.

That's how I feel when I hear *Salome*.

- James Jorden

fishbone goes home

The only opera performance I attended during my recent trip back home to Italy was the premiere of Handel's *Serse* in the beautiful Teatro Comunale in Bologna. First of all, let me say that whenever I enter one of those old Italian theatres I feel a completely different atmosphere from the grey cement modern architectural structures of most American "opera houses," including the Met. All that glittering gold! All that luxurious red velvet! All those lovely *putti*! And, especially, those boxes with their private little anterooms where you have the privacy to do **anything** you please! I call no one an opera queen until she has rested her royal buttocks on the soft Fenice *platea* chairs or segregated herself in the San Carlo *palco reale* at least once.

Serse, alas, was a wasted opportunity. The theatre assembled a fine belcanto cast (not a very easy task), then sabotaged the production with an insipid and often stupid staging and (even worse) an evidently incompetent conductor. This malefactor (Bruno Weill is his name) didn't have the slightest idea of what a late baroque opera is all about, conducting the arias telling of gallant flirtation and frivolous piques and transforming them into funeral marches.

The production was imported from the English National Opera. One had a sinister and inasupicious presentiment of what the audience would be asked to endure as soon as one entered the hall. In front of the lowered curtain were some modern deck chairs on a green grass mat that looked borrowed from the Met's *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*. The singers evidently were left to resort to their own individual interpretative skills in order to bring credibility to their characters.

A few strong points of the cast:

- None of them belonged to the "specialized" Baroque companies of British, Dutch or French provenance who have recently assailed us with tiny-tiny weak feeble little voices shorn of overtones and vibrato. (These "early music" specialists believe that the great singers of the Baroque period used this insipid method of vocal production. It is sufficient to read the famous 1723 treatise of Tosi to disavow them.) The Bologna singers were belcanto "specialists." While each has an affinity for a certain repertoire, they all sang with a tone that was round and full, never "fissa."
- With the exception of José Fardilha, they were all Italian, which assured clear, idiomatic and authentic diction.

- The roles Handel wrote for castrati were assigned to women *en travesti*. Italians have never much cared for the counter-tenor voice and have always believed that a mezzo-soprano or contralto is much better suited to overcome the terrifying demands of castrato music. (Handel himself used to choose women for male roles when he couldn't dispose of castrati.) A "counter-tenor" (even the terminology is wrong-- these men should be called what they are: *falsesttists*) simply cannot cope with the monstrous agility and especially the *canto di sbalzo* of baroque opera. (I refer to the style of performance that demands accurate and equalized singing of wide intervallic leaps as, for example, in "Come scoglio." The outstanding modern exponent of this style is, of course, "La Sbalzatrice" herself, Marilyn Horne.) Fans of the counter-tenor claim they find women in drag unconvincing. But, in all frankness, counter-tenors active nowadays on stage are such ladies that a Horne or a Valentini Terrani appears a prototype of masculinity compared to them.

The Bologna cast featured Adelina Scarabelli as Romilda, Carmela Remigio as Atalanta, Michele Pertusi as Ariodate, José Fardilha as Elviro (the only buffo role), but I would like to single out for praise Bernadette Manca di Nissa as Amastre and Anna Caterina Antonacci in the title role. Manca di Nissa is a contralto (a real one) who spends most of her time singing Baroque and Rossini roles with impressive low notes and wonderful agility (what an astonishing Tancredi!)

Anna Caterina Antonacci is one of the finest artists to emerge in recent years. She made her debut in the late 1980's after winning the prestigious Callas, Verdi and Pavarotti competitions and has since made her name tackling forgotten or rarely performed operas of the early nineteenth centuries, including Rossini's *Elisabetta Regina d'Inghilterra*, *La donna del lago*, *Semiramide*, *Mosè in Egitto*, *Zelmira*, *Torvaldo e Doriska* and especially the very difficult *Ermione*. Hers is a flexible, suave and velvety soprano with an unusual low extension which makes her particularly well suited for the great roles Rossini wrote for Isabella Colbran who, like her contemporaries Malibran and Pasta, was more a *mezzo soprano acuto* than a high soprano. She boasts striking good looks and superb stage presence, best displayed in *furibonda* roles as betrayed, vindictive women (her *Ermione* was a once-in-a-century experience). I am sure American opera queens weary of the pre-cooked pseudostars of the Met stage would love La Antonacci at first sight. She appears frequently in Milan, London and Vienna, and lucky Philadelphia enjoyed her in *La gazza ladra*. Why the hell can't she come to New York?

- Nicholas Fishbone

easy to swallow

Phone that guy you met last week and ask him to the opera. No, don't try to bowl him over with the Met's *Turandot* ("is she supposed to sound like that?") Ask him to *Rondine* at the New York City Opera. You'll have a boyfriend, maybe a husband, by midnight.

It's the Ideal Gay Dating Opera (just as *Fried Green Tomatoes* was the Ideal Lesbian Dating Movie a couple years ago), bittersweet, pretty, and accessible. And NYCO does Puccini proud.

I saw the show opening night of the spring season (March 3): it has rightfully become one of the company's signature pieces, like *Mefistofele* or *Manon*. Lofti Mansouri did a lovely job directing when the production was new over ten years ago, and it holds up like a dream. I'm not usually a fan of his shows (*Magic Flute* is an abortion), but *Rondine* is a simple show that plays itself if you just give it room to breathe-- and that's just what Mansouri did. (Applause, too, for Laura Alley, who was in charge of the revival.)

Even more impressive was Guido Ajmone-Marsan's musical direction; he balanced the wispy and the brassy (the opening of the show sounds like the curtain is going up on *Show Boat*, at least) and dotted every i in the ultratricky Act 2 ensembles. His chorus was in tiptop form, too-- reponsive and alert.

Surely I am not the only one who thinks Stella Zambalis sounds eerily like the young Anna Moffo. Anyway, she could certainly have chosen far worse role models; Zambalis is a sexy, vulnerable Magda with the star presence necessary to make believable the elliptical Willner/Reichert plot. The morning-after smile on her face at the end of the Bullier scene spoke volumes about lost opportunities: Magda as Marschallin in miniature. Now, if Ms. Zambalis will just view the Covent Garden/Callas *Tosca* to learn how a lady removes long gloves....

Despite a liquid Italianate voice, Vladimir Grishko didn't do much for me as Ruggero; he was lacking entirely in the callow charm this role asks for. He also ducked his (written) high C in the celebrated Quartet, robbing it of a bit of muscle. Abbie Furmansky and Michael Hayes are a double handful as the comic couple. She is an artist new to me, but I look forward to her as Musetta, Susanna, Zerlina-- if Broadway doesn't grab her first.

After so many sloppy, leaden performances at the Met this season (people are actually **cheering** at their so-so *Rosenkavalier* revival!), it's good to know New York's **real** opera company is back... and doing just fine.

- Giovanni Fucina