

issue #14/15: "Parterre Box has risen from the grave"

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parterre box

The queer opera zine

WELCOME BACK, MON CHER PUBLIC!

With this jumbo gala issue we are back in business! Yes, it's been a long, grisly summer, but La Cieca is one tough old bird. In fact, Astrid Varnay herself once said, "She's so

Questo

tough, that Cieca, she's like a young me." But that was just like Astrid. So generous. Now, where was

I going with that? Oh, yes, La Cieca's back in the saddle again and determined to get PB back on a monthly schedule, God and the hard drive willing. We've got a lot of ground to cover since last time, so let's roll!

Late-breaking opera news includes the completely unstartling tidings that Jessye Norman has cancelled next season's *Makropolous Case* at the Met, so they're stuck doing the thing (in *English* yet)

with Maria Ewing, whose only qualification for the role is that she *sounds* 400

Quello

years old. And Enzo (Diva Butcher to the World) Bordello reports that June Anderson is scheduled for *Norma* in Chicago in '97. Quips Mr. B, "At least we'll get a chance to hear how Jane Eaglen sounds in the role."

OPERANTICS, THE NYC GAY MEN'S CHORUS called its first operatic adventure, and like most gala-type performances, this one included spots both high and low in its not-very-compact package.

These 100+ guys don't sound like an opera chorus, of course-- more like a glee club, since the bulk of them are avocational. But they sing musically and with an unusually firm grasp of language (even their Russian was acceptable). I liked their opening *Fliegende Holländer* excerpt: butch but in-tune.

They provided excellent diva/divo backup in the best moments of the evening. Chief among these was Frederica von Stade's sultry reading of *La Grande Duchesse* of Offenbach. Chorus Director Gary Miller balanced

his forces well, never overwhelming his lyric-voiced soloist. Have you noticed that Flicka has become one hot babe in recent years (remember her *Liaisons Dangereuses*?); her chest register warms the cockles of this queer heart.

Looks like something about being a man in uniform brings out the best in NYCGMC's men: in *The Student Prince*'s "Overhead the moon is beaming" they followed Jerry Hadley's rapturous rubato everywhere he led. Hadley was born for this repertoire: he sounds like Mario Lanza with taste. The Serenade was passionate, ballsy, seemingly spun out on a single breath. La Cieca has always believed singing, whatever the venue, must be a way of venting emotion too intense for speech. In this Romberg selection, Hadley delivered a dazzling example of what that kind of singing can do. I thirst to hear him as The Red Shadow. And while we're on the subject, why isn't New York hearing what Enzo B. called Hadley's most successful role ever in Chicago, *Pelleas*?¹

Mr. Hadley's performance was particularly gratifying in contrast to his "Kleinzach" aria earlier in the evening. He sang it OK (I don't think it's much of a vocal showpiece anyway, but I'm not a tenor, so what do I know?), but his ill-advised interpolation of the "wicky-wacky knees" dance step made him look like a penguin doing Elvis. Something about this aria seems to bring out the jerk in tenors. No, Hadley was not nearly as obnoxious as, say, Neil Shicoff, but who is or, indeed, ever was? I move this aria be deleted from the concert repertoire (if only it could be cut from *Hoffman* as well!)

And what can one say about Vera Galupe-Borszkh? Only that her sweet but small voice sounds just as much at home at Carnegie Hall as it does at the Carnegie Deli. Undeterred by the presence of some very flaming creatures in a stage box, La Dementia worked her familiar magic on Azucena's *Condotta*. All La Cieca can add is, "Brava, you go on like this!" (and Vera need your help to keep on going. Details elsewhere in this issue...)

Making an operatic debut in the presence of such stars cannot be easy, but Lea Delaria² pulled it off in one swell foop, easily ensconcing herself among the ranks of the most demented of divas. Her traversal of Dean X Johnson's fifteen minute pastiche of the life of Martina Navratilova was

¹ I think he'd be ultracool in the Debussy opposite Dawn Upshaw, whom he even resembles physically-- think of a Pelleas and Melisande who look like brother and sister!

² Soon to join the Broadway cast of *Grease*, according to rumor. In this rapidly-changing world, we're glad to note that the producers of this revival are honoring the time-honored tradition of casting a butch dyke as Rizzo.

a zany, weird, physically wild smashingly sung and ultraqueer tour de force. I was particularly touched by her (instinctive?) feeling for the Puccini line-- her parody of "Vissi d'arte" was elegantly phrased and touchingly acted. My favorite highlight of the mini-opera was Judy Nelson's "I own a steakhouse in Fort Worth..." (sung to the tune of "Nessun dorma!") Bravi to the Gay Men, who provided a "Greek" chorus commentary in what sounded like a very tricky arrangement indeed.

And the rest. Benita Valente contributed a silvery Liù, and Roberta Peters laughed Father Time to scorn in a pair of *Merry Widow* selections (the chorus has elected her an honorary Gay Man. Isn't that cool?). In the presence so much glamour, Kurt Ollman, Arthur Woodley and Ruth Golden came off solid but dull-- just not gala material.

Now, I don't like carrying ants to a picnic, but somebody has to say something about the ghastly travesty of "Glitter and Be Gay" low-camped by Constance Hauman. She made her reputation as Bernstein's Cunegunde less than a decade ago; now, no longer up to the aria's difficult roulades and high notes, she courted cheap laughs by crawling across the stage on her belly and stripping down to a tutu, unwisely flaunting legs even spindlier than her voice. Ms. Hauman's "performance" was devoid of taste, charm or even the most rudimentary musicianship. Yes, this aria is supposed to be parodistic (Bernstein satirizes, among other things, the Jewel Song), but so are "Come scoglio,"

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(special thanks to Surfboy)

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the tenor's aria from *Rosenkavalier*, and the Doll Song. No one sings these pieces badly (not intentionally, anyway), so why must we put up with the undersung, mangled, mugged-up mess most talent-free sopranos make of "Glitter and Be Gay?"

But dear Terrence McNally made a dapper compère, along the way unhinging the door on of the biggest closets in operadom with the single word "effervescent." Bravo for your guts and taste, Mr. M.

DID I DOZE OFF DURING FARINELLI?

I swear I missed the scene when Farinelli flushed Handel's wig down the toilet. Or was that *Valley of the Dolls*? My dear, surely the real Farinelli could not have lived a *whole life* of B-movie clichés corny enough to make Joan Crawford cringe! As, for example:

- we open on the aging, embittered singer looking into the mirror and remembering humbler but happier days (a la Streisand's Fanny Brice). . .
- . . . when the fifteen-year-old divo-to be (at this point he's still just a Broschi) is singing in public for the very first time ever, and who should just happen to be passing by this humble country fair in some obscure Italian village? Why. . . it's Mr. Handel himself! ("Mr Florenz Ziegfeld?")
- . . . and so, on the spot, the teen castrato³ changes his name to (no, not "Al Capon") "Farinelli" because of some stupid and obscure pun on the word "farina" (flour). And the peasants shout, "bravo Farinelli!" ("Say it again!" "Vicki Lester!")⁴
- . . . and then Farinelli becomes this big star, see, but he's held back because he insists on performing his brother's lousy music because he's really loyal, like Betty Grable in *When My Baby Smiles at Me*....

³ "Castrato" was not a politically correct term in 18th-century society. Unless you wanted to start a fight, you'd never use that word before ladies or, especially, in the singer's presence. Nice people said "musico." Today, I suppose we'd call Mr. Farinelli "hormonally challenged."

⁴ The real Farinelli named himself after his voice teacher, the same way everybody did in those days. Sills probably would have called herself "Beverly Liebschen."

- ...and (this is kinda sad) he has only one real friend, this little crippled kid he sings lullabies to and who reminds him that maybe being a great big star isn't the worst thing in the world (this child could give Margaret O'Brien lessons in bathos)
- ...and he gets drunk at a party and tells off the London operatic establishment... ("Idiots! Handel's music is the greatest in the world...") like a refugee from *The Helen Morgan Story* (too bad he doesn't have Cara Williams around to remind him "There's a lotta sour notes in that bottle, honey!")
- ...and he has these nightmares about riding a big white horse because he supposedly lost his cojones in a riding accident, dig?⁵ So he can't sleep without his opium ("I need a doll!")
- ...so, he strides on stage and the conductor gives him his cue and the great big star promptly *loses it completely!* And the crowd *gasps!* Sorry, but Sissy Spacek and Ronee Blakely have both *been there and done it..*
- ...but the climax of *Farinelli* (no, that's not really the best choice of words, is it?) is the revelation that (gasp) he didn't really fall off a horse after all! (THE SEVENTH VEIL!)
- ...and would you believe Handel takes a theme *Farinelli's* brother composed ("That doesn't quite work, does it?") and... oh, well, you know the rest...

Oh, it's cheesy, all right. Mind-bogglingly incomprehensible backstage intrigue just swirls around the testosterone-free sex-symbol. Don't ask poor Cieca to figure it out. All I know was that *le tout Londres* was on pins and needles about what venue the "Singer to Kings" would grace. Actually, the part about the competing theaters sort of made sense (I vaguely remember something about it from Music History), but I never could figure out why Handel was such a dickhead; at one point, *Farinelli* has to break into Handel's office to swipe the score of a new opera. (Can't you just see, say, Chita Rivera doing a second-story job on Andrew Lloyd Webber's townhouse to get an advance peek at *Sunset Boulevard*?)

⁵ "Riding accident" was a popular euphemism for castration. Or think of it as an cover story strictly for public consumption. No one *really* believed it, any more than you believed that your best friend really "ran into a doorknob" when she came back from summer vacation with bruises —and a new nose.

And when *Farinelli* isn't melodrama, it's soft-core porn, wallowing in oh-so-tasteful threeways between (among?) the brothers Broschi and various busty baroque chicks. I will say that Stefano Dionisi, (the Tom Cruise lookalike⁶ who plays the divo) does have a cute little ass, but all the sex is 100% hetero. Chacun à son goût, but what about the documented historical fact that *Farinelli's* androgynous stage presence attracted admirers (and, some scholars believe, lovers) of *both* sexes? Not a word. As for the the fade-out, with the blissful Broschis (husband, wife, and brother) awaiting the arrival of the stork...

What's worse, the opera scenes are lifeless and dumb. Shit, *Bertolucci* even did a better job in *Luna*! *Farinelli* warbles and shakes his booty downstage while the ladies in the audience cream. He even wears the same helmet over and over, accessorized with different plumes.. The camp highlight is a scene set in a garden with a 20-foot tall peacock unfurling its tail in the background as the megastar does his florid thing. Don't you think reminding the audience of secondary sexual characteristics during a castrato's performance is in the worst possible taste?

Oh, yes, the ultrahyped "morphed"⁷ castrato voice of *Farinelli* is fleet but insubstantial and far more "feminine" in timbre than a real castrato's⁸. Unfortunately, the engineers chose to base their sound on the voices of coloratura Ewa Malas Godlewska⁹ and falsettist Derek Lee Ragin, who embodies every cliché you've ever heard about counter-tenors (weak, breathy, hooty). Why ever was Ragin cast instead of, say, Jochen Kowalski or Brian Asawa, exponents of a ballsy, energized brand of virtuoso male soprano vocalism? I am told *le public français* adore Ragin, but, then, they feel the same way about Jerry Lewis and Barbara Hendricks.

But it's a campfest (and the costumes are to die for), so rent *Farinelli* and see it with an opera queen friend. It's even funnier than *Waterworld*.

⁶ Interview with the Castrato?

⁷ Don't you think this kind of audio trickery should be called "Schwartzkopfung?"

⁸ I base my opinion on a young male soprano I heard at an audition a few years ago— an illness just before puberty left him the physiological equivalent of a castrato. His sound was neither feminine nor boyish; the closest equivalent I can find is the "rock scream" sound some heavy-metal frontmen produce, a cold but exciting head-chest mix. Paradoxically enough, it's a more ballsy sound than the anatomically-correct Mr. Ragin produces.

⁹ Who, according to PR for the film, made her Met debut in 1992. Anybody who was there care to tell me how she sounds in real life?

AND. . . WHILE WE'RE ON THE SUBJECT. . .

Hey, you filmmakers! If you **insist** on using operatic music in your films (and we all know it ain't class unless you got an aria or 2 on the soundtrack!) pleez try at least to choose relevant repertoire.

Let *A Room with a View* be your beacon: Dame Kiri's starchy renditions of *O mio babbino caro* and *Canzone di Doretta* are a witty comment on *gli Inglesi in Italia*. But more often the obligatory aria seems to be dragged in only because you have to pay royalties to use "Blue Moon." I thought the depths of this kind of soundtrack irrelevance were plumbed when Rusalka's Song to the Moon was interpolated into *Driving Miss Daisy*.¹⁰ But a couple weeks ago I was floored when, in the treacly Brit tearjerker *Heaven is a Drag*, we watched this queer visiting the gravesite of his lover accompanied by the worst rendition ever of *Au fond du temple saint*. No excuses offered (such as one of the characters is an opera queen). Nothing. I guess one of the fags working on the flick must have liked the tune. You know, the tune Nadir and Zurga sing about the woman they both love??? Hey, people, just because two guys sing close harmony doesn't mean they're doing it! I mean, **Thomas Hampson** and **Jerry Hadley** are frequently partners on the concert platform, but never in bed (so far as I know).

And, to tell the truth, I'm just about over that damn *Pearl Fishers*. The piece is becoming the all-male equivalent of *Viens, Mallika*, which is now so associated with Lesbian lovemaking (in *The Hunger* and three gazillion other films) as to be nicknamed as the "Lickme Duet."

On a happier note, I can tell you that baritone **Greer Grimsley** is going to look as good as he sounds (i.e., like a million bucks) as Jokanaan in *Salome* at the Met next March opposite **Cathy Malfitano**¹¹ (who's pretty easy on the eyes herself). Reliable sources who have heard him elsewhere in this role say he's the bestest Baptist in the world today--imagine, they say, **George London's** voice emanating from **Liam Neeson's** bod. . . Alas, the Met has the humpy Mr. G scheduled to sing this, his signature role, once only — so watch your calendar and don't miss it!

¹⁰ Has Gabriela Benackova ever seen a Piggly Wiggly?

¹¹ P.S.: the Divine Miss Malfitano knows the role of Emila Marty (she's singing it in Chicago next year). Is it too late to ask her to jump in, Met?

We hear that everyone's favorite diva Cheryl Studer has added yet two more operas to her already *bulging* repertoire: Poulenc's *Voix humaine* and Menotti's *Telephone*. Particularly suitable for Cheryl, since both are roles you can phone in! (Guess that makes her a "Sprint-o" soprano.)

La Cieca is of two minds about that *OUT Classics* CD. On the up side, it's nice, if long overdue, for RCA to acknowledge the fact that many musical geniuses were (who knew?) gay. We can all use the role models. But, on the other hand, **NONE** of the composers represented on this album, especially the more recent guys (**Leonard Bernstein**, **Benjamin Britten**, **Samuel Barber**, etc.) was out while he was still alive— a better title for this disc would be *Dead White European Closet Cases*.¹² And the cover art (Generic Sweaty Buffboy) is nauseatingly cynical. Objectification of the human body as a sales technique is offensive under any circumstances, but **particularly** when classical "product" is sold like so many units of Calvin Klein underwear. RCA's attitude is obviously:

fags will buy anything with a picture of a nekkid guy on the cover!

Coming soon from RCA— **Marky Mark's** *Schöne Müllerin*?

Eve Queler will conduct three **real** rarities next season: **Puccini's** "cyberpunk" one-act *Gianni Mnemonic* (with **Dmitri Hvosostovsky** singing the stirring aria "Mnemonico della patria") will share a double bill with **Mascagni's** verismo tribute to New York City policewomen, *Cagna e Lacchè* (**Aprile Millo** and **Dolora Zajick** star). Closing the season will be the U.S. premiere of **Donizetti's** sparkling bel canto gem *Maria di Minneapolis*. The cast includes **Frederica von Stade** (Mary), **Cecilia Bartoli** (Rhoda), **Paul Plishka** (Lou), **Thomas Hampson** (Ted), **Dawn Upshaw** (Georgette), **Alan Monk** (Murray), and **Evelyn Lear** (Sue Ann). **Jessye Norman** guest stars as "Phyllis."

La Cieca

¹² "Glitter and be queer/ that's the fate I fear..."



Not the only *fruit*

When Richard Breath and Peter Hunter recently went to San Francisco for the Gay Pride Parade and the Gay Film Festival, they told their Texas relatives and coworkers that they were going out there for two operas: Prokofiev's *Love for Three Oranges* and Beethoven's *Fidelio*.

The parade and film festival were both **FABulous** but the operas left a lot to be desired. The big drama over *Oranges* was whether or not it would even take place. It seems the chorus of the visiting Lyons Opera was threatening go on strike because they didn't like their hotel, they wanted a higher per diem and they wanted a full American (not Continental) breakfast. Peter thought it was the French who invented the Continental breakfast in the first place: you know, coffee, croissant and cigarettes, followed by two hours of diatribe about the inferiority of all things American. But the strike was averted when the chorus got their hash browns and sausage links, and the performance went on as scheduled.

Tied in with the United Nations celebrations, *Oranges* turned out to be an opera by a Russian sung in French to an English-speaking audience. This last we know because the audience was speaking English non-stop throughout the performance, oblivious to the few shushbirds scattered throughout the balcony, where Peter and Richard found themselves exiled.

Now, other composers have given us **FABulous** fairy tale operas (think of *Zauberflöte*, *Turandot*, *Frau ohne Schatten*, *Le Coq d'Or*), all including the occasional slow tempo aria, duet or ensemble. Prokofiev did not follow this pattern. Dozens of character dash about the stage like runaway cars on the Trans-Siberian Express, declaiming short bursts and spurts of text with all the depth and subtlety of a Fox network cartoon. Meanwhile we kill time reading the subtitles while waiting for another snippet of the famous March. One gets the feeling that if Prokofiev had set the *Ring* to music, the whole cycle would last three hours tops.

And while we're on the subject of bursts and spurts, Peter was distracted by the two standees directly behind him who enacted their own miniopera, perhaps best described as *The Love of Two Passion Fruits*. The highlight of the evening, Peter believes, was the moment when one of the standees became a kneelee.

Vocally, it was hard to tell if anyone in the Lyons Opera Company has star potential. With no extended passages to sing, the singers had no chances to shine, not that you could tell one from the other anyway. The chorus was running around, crossing ramps over the pit, peeping around corners of the set and singing from side boxes. True, Jules Bastin scored a triumph in drag as the Cook. And Monique Barscha (Fata Morgana) stood out, less for her Elena Souliutis-style wailing than for her

punk mohawk. Everyone else wore all-white or all-black on a minimalist setting that positively screamed Eurotrash trendiness. This show would look right at home at BAM.

This performance marked the temporary closing of the War Memorial for a "seismic retrofit." We'll all miss the bizarre earthquake netting under the ceiling that all last season prevented falling slabs of plaster from mussing audience coifs. In the meantime SFO will perform in other venues such as the Civic Auditorium and the Orpheum Theater. The repertoire is scheduled to include *Aida*, *Carmen* and *Harvey Milk*. Despite rumors that Cecilia Bartoli would be making her San Francisco debut opposite Dmitri Hvorostovsky in *Barber of Seville*, Jennifer Larmore's name somehow found its way into the brochure.

The San Francisco Symphony gave a concert reading of *Fidelio* starring Hildegard Behrens and Ben Heppner. In the place of spoken dialogue, we got a tedious and very politically correct narration by Colonel Klink, aka Werner Klemperer. Perhaps because his dad used to conduct this opera, Werner thinks he is qualified to sit at the side of the stage and rant at length about freedom, repression and prison reform. Well, no. *Fidelio* deserves better.

And this opera sure deserved better than Miss Behrens, who seems to have a voice one month and a tattered rag down her throat the next. Peter and Richard got the month of the rag. Leonore is not all that high-lying a role, but it was clear to all that Miss Behrens would have trouble hitting each high note as she

telegraphed its arrival. Garbed in a chic black pantsuit with fussy trim on the jacket, she sang most of her big aria in a kneeling position, which excited those in the audience who live for theatricality.

Richard's favorite moment came when Werner told everyone how Florestan had been placed on half-rations so he would starve to death in a few weeks, and then out walked Ben Heppner, looking as if he had just eaten Caballe for breakfast. He did make loud sounds and received a long ovation after his aria.

Although the concert was semistaged with a few dramatic entrances and exits, after their duet Behrens and Heppner sat like statues during the Leonore Overture Number 3, which was hair-raisingly played under the baton of Christoph Eschenbach, who whipped everyone and everything into a frenzy. It made for a glorious finale, with the Symphony Chorus going into overdrive. The predictable standing ovation brought everyone back for repeated group bows. Had solo calls been allowed, Amy Burton as Marzelline and Franz-Josef Sellig would surely have been cheered. Richard Paul Fink, who sounds **FABulous** in Houston Opera performances, sounded weak and thin as Don Pizarro in the vastness of Davies Symphony Hall.

And so, Richard and Peter returned to Texas to tell friends and relatives of the opera, but not a word about the film festival and the parade. That **NO ONE** would believe.

Richard & Peter

fishbone at large

Eve Queler has chosen Bellini's *I Puritani* to conclude her 1995 season at Carnegie Hall, as a confirmation of the special interest she has always felt towards the Sicilian composer, being already able to claim most of his operas (*Il Pirata*, *La Straniera*, *I Capuleti e i Montecchi*, *La Sonnambula*, *Beatrice di Tenda* and, next year, *Norma*) in her repertoire.

Since she is about the only one on the New York opera scene to perform belcanto works with affection and regularity, and especially considering that in the past she presented exhumations of long forgotten operas as well as alternative versions of more popular works (it may be sufficient to recall the original French version of *La favorita*), I would have preferred Queler to choose the "Naples" version of *I Puritani*, which Bellini composed in honor of Maria Malibran, whom nowadays we would classify as a (high) mezzo-soprano. In Paris to write and stage *I Puritani* for the Theatre des Italiens, Bellini simultaneously prepared two versions of this opera, one for the cast he had in Paris (the legendary "Puritani quartet": Giulia Grisi, Giacomo Rubini, Antonio Tamburini, Luigi Lablache), the other one for the Spanish diva, who was engaged at the Teatro San Carlo in Naples.

Alas, La Malibran never sang her *Puritani*, as the score reached Naples only after an enormous delay, when the primadonna had already left for other operatic "piazze".

It would have been desirable, therefore, if Queler had chosen the Malibran version, never performed in New York City*, all the more so as she almost always selects operas which are not staged by either the Met and the City Opera, and both these houses have the standard *Puritani* in their repertoires.

I presume however that one of the reasons the Paris version was chosen was being able to dispose of the best Elvira-soprano currently around, a.k.a. Mariella Devia, who once again gave immense proof of her belcanto skills. Her voice, which is not particularly rapturous in its low-middle register, acquires shine, brightness and density the more it goes up into the funambulatory

God,
grant me
the courage
to change
the things
I cannot
accept.

Here she is su
of Bellini's *Il*

Bin

thanks to Joezine.

peaks of her extreme high notes, produced with astonishing naturalness and easiness. Her coloratura is pyrotechnic, her variations creative and original (the repeated acciaccature introduced in the first act finale to suggest Elvira's sobs were so evocative). But the most impressive peculiarity of this soprano lies in the absolute perfection of her breathing technique- the flux of air is produced by using her diaphragm only and is projected into the "mask" with infinitesimal precision, encountering no obstacle or the least friction in the throat during its course. It is no mystery that Devia's Achilles' heel is her scenic coldness and stiffness, and this is why a concert performance of an opera is particularly congenial to her.

Remarkable was also Carlo Guelfi as Riccardo. This is a young baritone gifted with a strong, dark voice, one of those natural instruments that strike one's senses and make one partly forget or forgive a certain want of shades and nuances. Although the coloratura enriching Riccardo's aria was unraveled with surprising clarity (but, alas, with not even a single variation in the da capo ...), it is also true that Guelfi maintained just one color all through the opera. In any case, it urges on me to repeat it, his beautiful healthy, authentically baritone tone, in a period like this crowded by "short" tenors giving themselves out as baritones, is a real blessing.

Dean Peterson as Giorgio at times sounded as if desperately trying to imitate Sam Ramey without disposing of his raw material, and was ultimately overwhelmed by the thundering voice of the baritone in the electrifying "duetto della tromba".

Arturo is one of the highest and most unapproachable roles in the entire tenor repertoire, especially if one is willing to undertake it without resorting to compromises. It was consequently inevitable that a great part of the general attention and curiosity was centered on Gregory Kunde, whom I remember tackling Rossini tenor roles such as Rodrigo in *La donna del lago* (and already at the time, three years ago, I'd rather have had him as Giacomo V, the other, lighter, tenor role in the opera) and Idreno in *Semiramide*.

In this *Puritani* performance Kunde appeared to have kept his miraculous extension in the upper register, but on the other hand he also evidenced worrisome signs of vocal wearing out in the middle register and in his first high notes. In particular the passaggio area sounded rather strained, laborious and unfocused. Arturo's role forces the tenor, it is true, to frequent incursions into the stratosphere of the notes above high C, and we should be thankful to Kunde for singing them all, including the terrifying high F in

Vedeasi misera, but it often requires also a certain vehemence and tone vibrancy in the middle register and passaggio, like in the challenge between Arturo and Riccardo. Kunde's attempt to artificially swell his voice, which is by nature small and a bit dry, made him almost aphonic in this moment, as well as in others. Ultimately, a technically flawed voice, which has on its credit only an uncommon extension usually precluded to most mortals, yet totally unhooked from the rest of the vocal organization.

Eve Queler offered a subtle and involving reading of Bellini's last opera. Careful, as usually, to the orchestral color, she has the great merit of being able (and willing) to follow the singers, an irreplaceable quality in this kind of repertoire (as in any other, I should say). The result was an exciting evening, one of the best in this past New York opera season, which especially thanks to Devia reached moments of white heat.

Nick Fishbone

The "Malibran" *Puritani* had its US premiere in October 1993 in Boston.

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

Nothing

If there is any point at all to Debussy's (and Maeterlinck's) *Pelleas et Melisande* (and, as far as I'm concerned, the jury's still out on that one), it's something subtle, something felt more than comprehended. My guess is it's a sort of anti-opera—no hit tunes, no breathtaking curtains, no neatly-tied up story. As the joke says, "Nothing happens and then Melisande dies." I'm willing to concede (and, remember, I don't like this opera) that *Pelleas* can remind us that life and art are not necessarily neat, that loose ends don't always get tied up and that there will be some questions that will never be answered. Fine.

But I don't think that's why people go to this opera. I think they go because the music sounds like Puccini and the libretto sounds like the subtitles of a nouvelle vague film. Featuring two big-name star singers and a much-discussed (mostly by himself) director doesn't hurt the box office either.

So in that sense the new Metropolitan Opera production works: the house is full. But the result is arty and overripe, turning the opera into a document in decadence. It's not a good sign that the unit set is a wall of doors (where have we not seen that before?) or that the stage is littered with artistically gnarled branches, ruined sculpture, empty picture frames and crumpled drop-cloths. Call it Euro Trash— if you ever went to a cocktail party in a loft in Tribeca in 1988, you know the look.

So, after our eyes have adjusted to the in-and-out of focus scrim projections (it feels like driving with a dirty windshield) we get a load of Frederica da Rimini (it's a

RED dress!) and Victor Braun in *fin de siècle* hunting costume (a la Alfredo). This Melisande is too busy admiring her waist-length hair reflected (by a pool of water? on the floor?) to pay much attention to Golaud. But he's smitten, all right— so much so, in fact, that he leaves his shotgun behind when he wanders away.

But fortunately, there's a footman waiting right there on the revolve to fetch the firearm so no harm done. The Allemonde place has servants to spare: they come and go, including a burly fellow pushing a very literal wheelbarrow (bric-a-brac delivery man?).

And... we're in the drawing room of Arkel (Robert Lloyd) and his daughter Genevieve (Marilyn Horne). She's about the most alive thing in this production, singing and acting with sincerity: I only wish she would lose the idea that the letter scene has to be sung with straight tone and a dropped soft palate, achieving that "French" (read: "just barely under the pitch") sound that so grates on non-Francophone ears. "C'est Pelleas," she says, and in saunters a very dapper Dwayne Croft in an ice cream suit. He has a lovely medium-sized voice (he's audible in the ensembles in *Figaro*, unlike, for example, Thomas Hampson) and his French is well-coached and clear. So why isn't he wearing a wig? In a show with so much yak about hair, why should the teenaged Pelleas look like a Rogaine ad? If anything were going on, I would not have been distracted so much by the coiffure-challenged Mr. Croft, but everyone just stands there waiting for the next light cue. Nothing happens. Even more nothing than usual in this show— Dr.

Miller is interested in directing the sets more than the characters.

Then the servants cover the furniture with dropcloths. You'd think they could be bothered to clear some of the rubble from the room, but, anyway, we're on a terrace and Mmes. von Stade (looking like Desiree Armfelt in winter white) and Horne (looking like the second Mrs. Borden in taupe) are out for a stroll in their Merry Widow hats and parasols. If you think this sounds a little dressy for this dilapidated villa, you're not paying attention. *Chez Arkel* we always dress to the hilt! We even wear white tie at a simple family dinner!

Then, for the first but not by a long shot the last time, we see le petit Yniold. Now, this role (written for a female soprano, but sung here by treble Gregory Rodriguez) is a stone in the craw of even the most fervent admirers of this score. He's only supposed to show up twice: in the portentous yet superfluous "Berger" scene (which was written as a crossover to cover a scene change) and the notoriously overlong and impossible to stage "Non, petit pere" sequence. He's annoying in the way only a boy soprano can be. So does Dr. Miller soft-pedal the brat? Oh, no. Le petit Yniold shows up in practically every scene, observing, eavesdropping or usually just lurking. And (this is so subtle!) he's all in black. As Arkadina says in *The Seagull*, "I think it's symbolic."

On the bright side, the set for the

well scene is terrific-- we should have such a nice fountain in *Lucia*. Plenty of room for Croft and von Stade to climb and recline. I wish it were in a forest, though. As half-baked as the symbolism in this show is, the "into the woods" motif is an important metaphor for delving into the unconscious. It's subtle *visual* symbol (unlike the hokey literary conceit of the "Well of the Blind People,") but we need to see trees. Where are they?

In yet another room of this strangely decrepit mansion (look, *Marilyn Horne* runs this place! Couldn't someone at least *dust*?) Golaud lies wounded on a bed under a large antique mirror (he likes to watch while he and Melisande do it?) He thrashes and suffers and von Stade suffers and suffers in a scene that owes more than a little to John Dexter's staging of the Old Prioress's death in *Dialogues of the Carmelites*. Le petit Yniold pops in to check on his dad's progress and to glare meaningfully at Melisande at the end of the scene, but does not get around to singing "Petit pere wanted... I think he wanted..."

Now, some of the cleverer ones among you may begin to suspect that this production sounds a little low-budget. A little? My dear, the cave on the beach turns out to be a few sheets thrown on the floor (Thank God for the Met orchestra's gorgeous playing of the sea music!) Well-mannered singers von Stade and Croft take care to avoid leaving footprints on

the wrinkled muslin. At this point, the French tourists behind me snorted with disgust and walked out.

Finally, our buddy le petit Yniold shows up in a scene where he's actually called for: he sits on Victor Braun's shoulders (and he's a hefty kid-- more Tadzio than Trouble) and **faces upstage** for the whole spying scene. Mr. Rodriguez possesses one of those "there are three kings at the door" voices (i.e., breathy, small), so we missed a lot of the lines, but, from what I could hear, he nailed every cue square on the head. (Even Betsy Norden used to miss one every now and then.) Give the kid a 10 for musicianship.

Von Stade is maybe a little mannered in the tower scene. Well, maybe more than a little: that "medieval" white tone and that "deer caught in a headlight" facial expression both get old fast. But you have to feel sorry for her. She's on a ladder behind a flat (it looks like *Our Town*) and Croft is so far below her that, even as tall as he is, he can't touch her wig. Or, obviously, tangle it in the (nonexistent) vines. So the whole scene ends up pointless and, even worse, sexless.

Into a room redressed to look like the prologue of *Ariadne* (scaffolding, dropcloths) clamber Golaud and Pelleas looking for all the world like Holmes and Watson. At the foot of the rickety steps, Golaud shocks his half-brother with what is apparently the family's darkest secret-- in this dank cellar they are storing... the big bronze horse from Met's hideous *Elektra* production!!!! Oh, the horror! The horror!

So you think by now Dr. Miller has trotted out every Euroarty cliché? You forgot the wheelchair! Yes, Pelleas's father rolls in for a cameo appearance, though his recovery after such a long illness means apparently means nothing to his wife: Horne doesn't even look up. During a curiously tame hair-pulling scene LPY creeps on to eavesdrop (this child needs a hobby!) and Von Stade turns on the tears.

You only **thought** she was suffering before. I've heard Anna Held say goodbye to Flo Ziegfeld with more composure. Flicka suffers so much her diction goes to hell-- the rest of the opera sounds like tuned moans. And that's a pity, because earlier on her French was exemplary-- she's the first Melisande I ever heard who didn't make "Ne me touchez pas" sound like "Ne me douchez pas."

Now, to accompany perhaps the most celebrated moment in the opera, the tormented "If I were God I would have pity on the souls of men" interlude, Dr. Miller shows us Genevieve, Melisande and Arkel happily occupied **playing cards**. We are left with a portrait of Genevieve that is, to say the least, unflattering: she enjoys gambling with blind men and basket cases ("Melisande can't seem to remember how many trumps are out..." "Shut up and deal, Pops!")

Meanwhile, it's time for the moment we've all been waiting for, le petit Yniold's aria about the sheep and the rocks. (Someone should tell Franz Schubert about this). There's nothing any goofier about this scene than the rest of the show, so why decide this moment is a dream? Especially when the adolescent boy in bed has to call out lines like "my ball is caught between these two rocks... by arm is too short... I can't reach my ball." Ribald laughter was heard from various parts of the house even before he started babbling about the sheep. And besides, the poor kid kept turning his head away from the microphone hidden in the pillow, so his voice alternately boomed and whispered, like Lina Lamont's in *Singin' in the Rain*.

For a composer who spent four years tinkering with his score trying to avoid "Wagnerianism," Debussy sure managed to copy *Tristan*, Act 2 real good at the end of *Pelleas* Act 4 (it's the identical dramatic situation). This is where I take exception to James Levine's otherwise admirable (if slowish) conducting. The orchestra tone was really too rich; the French prefer

"What I'd like to know is, what's the deal with *Pelleas et Melisande*? I mean *nothing* happens! What's the deal? It's so doggoned boring! I mean, My show's about *nothing*, too, and I think we agree it's great, but this *Pelleas*... What the heck is that show about?"

Jerry Seinfeld

their Debussy "on the string, not in the string." Under Levine's baton, the last pages of this act sounded lush but inauthentic. I might also point out that this is where a tenor Pelleas can carry the show home- the tessitura suddenly jumps above the staff, leaving baritones (Mr. Croft not excepted) in the dirt.

Two howlers in an otherwise lackluster staging of this scene: "I see him there at the end of my shadow," Melisande says, looking down at a shadowless floor. (Could the Met hire Dwayne Schuler to light their next *Frau Ohne Schatten* revival?) And surely the murder of Pelleas (Braun whonked Croft on the head with his sword) could have been handled better.

I confess I nodded some during Act 5. One of the rules of opera is that something has to happen in the last act besides just a lingering death- that's why *Manon Lescaut* always just misses. The

only semi-exciting moment occurs when Melisande calls for the windows to be opened and the wind machine ruffles the curtains. But we've seen that before in *Ermani*, *Salome*, *Fanciulla* and various other Met shows. And I'm disturbed at the final image: we should see the oldest of all (Arkel) comforting the youngest (Melisande's baby). Instead he hands the infant over to (who else) le petit Yniold. Is this wise? My dear, the kid is a voyeur and he has wet dreams about sheep! Maybe at the Met these days, such behavior is so commonplace as to seem normal, but we're left with a particularly creepy reading of "Now it is the turn of the poor little one."

If I were Joe Volpe, I would take pity on the souls of men and consign this production to the vaults of the Met- preferably under the bronze horse.

Everett Zimmerrein

5 January 1995

Dear James Jorden,

Your Parterre Box is fabulous. I read each issue, each word. Yours is the smartest and most freshly partisan commentary on contemporary opera performance. I relish your proudly skewed observations, your wit, and your details. Do not retire! Persist! If only Opera News had half the punch of Parterre Box.

Yours ever,

Wayne Koestenbaum

Wayne Koestenbaum

P.S. If I need to prove to any skeptical friends that an "opera scene" still exists, I show them your Box, in which illicit juxtaposition reigns, and frenzy is everything--a frenzy that never precludes true love.

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other opera stuff & cool comics.
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fax from Flora

Gosh, me write for *Parterre Box*? I hardly know what to think. What could I write about? Could I contain my innate outrageousness? But, after all, who goes to more parties, knows more secrets, has drunk more champagne than *Flora Berwick*? And you do know that an autographed picture of Tippy Votipka sits atop my grand piano next to the one of Margaret Truman? So don't you love the idea of a regular entry called *Fax from Flora*? Or let's just say an *irregular* entry.

I was just passing through Philadelphia the other day (covering the lead in *Salome*. You know, Herodias?), when I went to a play. Yes, spoken drama. No music. Well, as it turns out, there was music and that was the best part. (But I digress) Invited to a play to see Maria Callas! Yes! Terrence McNally's latest Callas effort. Master Class was having its world premiere at Philadelphia's tiny-charming-old Player's Theatre in Delancey Street, and some angel had showered down tickets. The entire run (a vast success) was sold out and so weren't we lucky! The big news is not the play, it's Zoe Caldwell as La Divina. The photos released by the theater company only suggest how smashing she was! At times she REALLY looked like Callas; she studied films said to be in the Juilliard library, archival footage, etc., and had Maria down pat. Zoe's Anglican thinness of feature did not recall the Greek demi-goddess, of course, but if all the arts of acting and theatrical skill could conjure up the late unlamented Callas, Zoe did it. The gestures were perfect, the hair, the black pantsuit, the fussy detail. The disclaiming of applause, even when it was not offered. Zoe & Co. gave adamn good show. And, yes, I wrote "unlamented." I was never a Callas fan, even though she sang Violetta in support of my Flora a number of times; the chemistry was somehow not there. I thought her voice hideous, her personality contrived and her Care for Fellow Mankind rather scanty. Did you ever stand next to her at a curtain call? Talk about territorial! She made my Corgi bitch look like a Christian! But that's just the point. While McNally's play at the stage I saw it was not really finished (the ending was cliched and



Caldwell as Callas:
 "a mouthful of theatrical Listerine"

weak—I trust by now he brushed it up), he has done wonderful thing. He tells it like it was. I think he's finally set aside the Love Stories of the likes of that Dallas Civic Opera Queen who luvv our diva to death, or Fat Albert, or that silly Cubano ballet critic who wrote La Scotto's bio or any of the sissies who slaver over bad singing and silent-movie acting. I think he must have read Michael Scott's definitive 1991 biography of Callas (fact-based, not fag-based). I invoke all this because in *Master Class* McNally reveals what I know to be the real Callas—vain, self-centered, vulnerable, weak, utterly uninterested in others save as mirrors to herself. And neither supportive nor particularly helpful to her master class "victims." That's how McNally tells it, and I'll bet he's right. Bottom line? The Julliard master classes by Callas were also FOR Callas. It was to my long-jaded insider's view of the Callas Myth a fresh mouthful of theatrical Listerine to witness McNally's presentation of Callas's character as it was (or as much as could be absorbed in 90 minutes) I felt fresher and in better health when the play was over as Zoe/Maria dashed off stage in search of other venues. Lux et Veritas! More irony: here we were in Philadelphia, not a stone's throw from where Tom Hanks whirled himself into Oscardom enacting "La mamma morta..." and, wouldn't you know, the most riveting and only spine-tingling moments in *Master Class* proved to be La Caldwell's re-creation of scenes from *Puritani* and *Macbeth* before a projected backdrop of the interior of La Scala. Did McNally see *Philadelphia*? Or did Tom Hanks see *Lisbon Traviata*? Anyway, as a modest sound system convincingly filled the tiny theatre with the sound of Callas screeching Bellini and Verdi, Zoe, God bless her, lip-synched and acted her way into the history of opera. Hair-raising! (and, all right, Callas had some good moments too. Just a few.) Zoe and Terrence, you done good. And let's hope this promising play melts some of the spun sugar that has encrusted the legendary diva's reputation. (Oh, Philly Opera's *Salome*? Thank God I didn't have to go on. What a pathetic provincial opera company! Why do they bother? The silberschüssel said Reed and Barton on the underside and Herod's rugs were labeled "Kerastan." And what of a Miss Diane Curry? She looked like she was about to hike up Broad Street to buy another set of consolation pearls at Wanamaker's cuz she sure wasn't getting any dick from Herod. She should have gone to the elegant jewelry store next door to Wanamaker's. The one named Caldwell's.

You want to know how to undercut a leading soprano during the telecast of her once in a lifetime coast to coast Violetta? Well, Hon, you should have tuned in to PBS's Live (hardly) from Lincoln Center March 28. Scandale at NYCO's stunning (ha!) new (ha!) production of *La traviata*. You might just have expected Miss Janice Hall's New York City Opera Violetta to have been mildly sung and tapioca-acted, sort of not worth remembering, didja huh? Well, just in case you did not, the producers saw fit, as a first intermission program, to bring on a video of hearty, smiling Mme. Beverly Sills in the same role, same house, same act, sounding strong of voice and brimming over with joie de vivre compared to the vanilla-voiced Hall. Sills was known as the Perle Mesta of Violettas; nobody ever smiled more, piled more strawberry blonde curls atop her lovely noggin, or handled more fellas (all in the name of *bonhomie*, you understand... Did that girl ever stop raising funds?) Later that week, your correspondent bought a spanking new Sony top-of-the-line TV, distrustful of the sound quality of her Hitachi. She kept the old set though, for sentimental reasons: it was tossed on stage as a tribute in Osaka a decade ago, following her final triumphant Suzuki. On second viewing, Sills looked a bit haggard; the voice was rough and now and then out of tune. *Awful* high Eb end of Act One. Shit happens. Anyway, if the former Miss Sills were not enough, PBS/NYCO further imploded Hall by bringing on her *metteuse en scene*, the once and future Scotto, stage improviser of this oh-so-pedestrian production. The now utterly blondined *diva du temps perdu* recalled her many successful deaths. My dear, what can the matter be? What witch bitch former primadonna was in charge of the telecast anyway, Jac Venza? Poor Ms. Hall never had a chance. And she wasn't that bad, just not that good. But nobody deserves that kind of competition. Sue them, Janice. Who is Stephen Mark Brown? He looks and sounds like a chipmunk. He rather imitates, in facial expression most particularly, one Sig. Pavarotti. Mannerisms. The boy rides the voice too hard; "De miei bollenti..." was oversung a little. Then the fool tired to sing the high C in the parto and smashed it. They all do: Hadley, de la Mora and some other nonentity I lately heard. As Bob Peters always said, "If you can't do it, don't try!" Is Chris Keene sick? He looks thinner and generally unwell. Hope not. Give us a rest from Traviata. So tired, and nobody around to sing it any more. (Yes, I know I'm the ideal Flora, but there's more to the opera than that!)

Enough already! Your faithful Flora, in the audience and not on stage for a change during the Met "production" of *SoSad Boccanegra* decided to make the mad dash to hear silken-haired Will Crutchfield's seminar on the Art of Singing in List Hall during the second intermission, broadcast over the Texaco Opera Network, doncha know? Gimme a muthafukkin break! There aren't enough camellias in the world to freshen up what we had to endure. There was Maestro Crutchfield (who gives new meaning to the term "pedantic milksop") attempting to interview, with lengthy questions and many dependent clauses, three "experts," including the retired Phyllis Curtin, the retiring Marilyn Horne and something called Regina Resnik. Now, way back in the 1940s when I first attended the opera (I was a babe in arms), there was this singer named Resnik doing *Peter Grimes* and Donna Elvira and then she graduated to some Wagner, and a Dalila or 2 and a bit in *Vanessa*, but nobody thought much about her. She was not all that important! (Easy for me to say...) So the other afternoon, here is this bionic *thing* sitting there (aged 80+) who must be keeping some plastic surgeon in business, and with the dazzling blonde 'do, endless pearly teeth and so on, rumbling on about how she changed from soprano to mezzo ("*It was all a matter of color, Will!*") What does it matter? For that matter, what *did* it matter? She sang Brangäne instead of Ellen Orford, so fucking what? Is this what Texaco really thinks its audience wants? Come on, Met, cool those boring old-diva sessions during the broadcast intermissions. They're the worst! Who wants to spend an afternoon listening to has-beens and never-weres yakking with Edward Downes and Peter Allen? They make Flora long for Francis Robinson who had passion and (dare I say it) taste. When Father Owen Lee is the hottest thing on the program, isn't it time for a new broom? (Mme. Resnik will be glad to lend you one of hers.)

Ponder these coming attractions: Giancarlo del Monaco's staging of *Carmen*. Après Millo as Desdemona and Maddalena. Mme. Malfitano singing all the Salomes next season. There's quite a list of horrors one could run through. I wish I were wrong about this, but all signs at the Met point toward no improvement of taste, musical values, casts, or conducting. Young John Fiore disappointed me with his conducting this past season; he was most promising at Santa Fe a few years ago. Of course, there he took over a *Traviata* from John O. Crosby, the local

conductor, and the opera suddenly came to life. But that doesn't prove much. At the Met he should have done better. Why does the Met have so few distinguished conductors, aside of course from their current Musical Director? What is getting in the way? My guess: for almost two decades UK or British nationals have been in charge of casting. Of course, in New York, it's chic to be a Brit (look at how they've taken over magazine publishing). But by what fiat do Englishmen (yes, I most especially include Joan Ingpen) have such authority in matters vocal? Name me a few Milanovs, Nilssons, Stebers, Corellis, Tebaldis, Flagstads, Melchior, Rethbergs, Chaliapins or Nordicas that the English ever produced, found, or managed. Eva Turner. Margherita Sheridan. Name another. Mary Garden? Maggie Teyte? Kiri? Dame Gwyn? Ha! Don't talk to me about them, or Joan Hammond or Walter Midgely either! Yes, my middle name is McCormick (after the late Chigacoan Anglophobe Divaphile publisher), but I'll be damned if I don't think those Brits are at the bottom of the Met's problems (them and James Devine.) I say, throw them out! Bruce Crawford, out! James Levine, out! Joe Volpe, out (or at least muzzled) Come to think of it, maybe the Met should be out! (of New York, at least. Shut the house down and make it into the Holocaust Museum of Opera, move the company to Denver or someplace and turn it over to Americans to manage. Men and women rich in testosterone, beauty, taste, education and aesthetic values. (Sort of like the people who abounded in New York before 1950.) Pensez-la, mon cher!

Your devoted *FLORA*

Flora Bervoix, America's
most beloved retired courtesan,
resides in Ridgefield, CT.

Since those of us "in the know" define *queer opera* as a tautology, then any operatic event or occasion is, by definition, a gay event. This definition was never more true than at the New York premiere of

Harvey Milk, the first uncoded, openly gay opera to gain real mainstream attention in the operatic community. And let me tell you, the atmosphere at City Opera that night was definitely gay. The

men's room was as cruisy as any gay bar, and, though I personally didn't see any, friends tell me there were, in fact, drag queens in attendance (imagine!).

As far as the opera goes...well, I'm really not sure. I wanted to fall in love with it, but I didn't. I wanted to be swept away by it, but I wasn't. I wanted to weep salty tears,...well, you get the picture. Yet, I didn't dislike it either. There were some very strong performances and much of the music was very beautiful. The characters are basically strong and well-defined and the story is certainly moving. Harvey Milk can absolutely be considered a modern American hero; dramatically as strong a character as Mario Cavaradossi or Andrea Chenier. So why do I return again and again to see *Tosca* or *Chenier*, but don't feel the urge to see *Harvey* another time?

Operas like *Tosca* and *Chenier*, though politically based, are emotionally driven. Their revolutionary themes are only the backdrop against which relationships and life and death decisions are played out. You don't need to fully understand the politics involved in these operas to be moved by them. Hell, you don't even need to know the words to the arias to fall in love with how they sound and feel. That's a big reason that these operas are classics.

Harvey doesn't seem to really have that kind of emotional wallop going for it. The opera is based entirely on the life and politics of one man during a very specific time in American history. As a young gay man, I was not around for Stonewall and was virtually unaware of the sexual revolution of the

milk

'70s; I came of age right as AIDS became the watch-word of the day. Yet, I was still able to feel a connection to these times and to these people, thanks to whom I am able to be an openly gay man without shame or fear of reproach (well, not much fear—we still have a long way to go). It was this emotional connection to my "forefathers" that kept me interested and able to enjoy the show.

But, like it or not, straight people do go to the opera, and most of them probably would not feel this connection to *Harvey*. Many of them may not even know who Harvey Milk was. I'm sure that part of the purpose of writing this opera was to educate people about the life of a great, if maybe little known, American hero.

Even though this goal was surely achieved, it would have been nice if there were other enjoyable things about the experience. There are no memorable arias or duets. Relationships are not fully explored or, dare I say, exploited for their emotional impact.

Under Christopher Alden's direction, the production tended to be rather "presentational." One of my companions commented that it was almost "Brechtian" in its dramatic approach. While this style can be sort of show-y and is certainly very "art-y," it does little to draw the audience in and let us care about the characters.

My biggest problem with the piece, though, was that it never *sounded* like an opera. I couldn't help but think that this show would have played better on Broadway than in the opera

house. Even the singing, though generally very secure and often impressive, struck me as rather unoperatic (and *definitely* unglamorous. With the exception of the lush soprano of Juliana Gondek, there was not a voice on the stage that I could imagine singing a standard operatic role. Most of them I could hear doing a bang up job in *Les Misérables*, though.)

We're all waiting for an openly gay work good enough to win a place in the standard repertory. I'm honestly sorry to say I don't think *Harvey Milk* is it.

by **Vic
Lupino**

Dawn Patrol

I fell in love with **Dawn Upshaw** last year at the Met's *Dialogues of the Carmelites*. Technically, yes, she was miscast as Blanche (her role is Constance), but she pulled it off with committed acting, musicianship and clever use of a smallish voice. That voice sounds warmer and maybe a tad larger now on her new recording of **George and Ira Gershwin's**

**And there's an
ultracool bonus:
Susan Lucci
in the (singing!)
role of rich bitch
Constance Appleton**

Oh, Kay! (Nonesuch 79361) I swear to you she sings legit music theater repertoire better than anyone else living; for that matter, I can't recall hearing better singing in any repertoire so far this year. Go out and buy the CD now. I'll wait. Now, listen to Upshaw's reading of "Do, do, do." What in most other hands (her partner Kurt Ollman's, for example) can be jerky and annoyingly insistent ("Baby see, it's A B C! I love you and you love me..."), she sings legato; the bouncy in-2 beat sounding just right: It's harder than it looks to sing a line while maintaining a crisp foxtrot tempo--don't try this at home unless your own rhythmic sense is as discriminating as La Upshaw's (And she is aided immensely by Eric Stern's alert and idiomatic direction: I love his "Boswell Sisters" arrangement of "Clap-a yo' Hands.") Now, watch Dr. Repertoire go out on a limb. I say Dawn Upshaw sings "Someone to watch over me" better than... oh, all right, better than anyone. Her only rival is Gertrude

Lawrence, who, after all, created the role of Kay, but Lawrence lacked Upshaw's vocal security. Upshaw's performance strips off layer upon layer of cabaret artists' "interpretative" varnish from this lovely song. She just sings it, the way Elisabeth Schumann "just sang" Schubert. It's a wonderful performance, almost enough to make up for the heartbreaker of the year: Upshaw's withdrawal from Nagano's *Susannah* recording. I understand why she did it-- the role really is too heavy. But would she have dropped out had she known how incredibly shitty Cheryl Studer's performance would turn out? We'll never know. But Dr. Repertoire does have a few suggestions for new Upshaw roles:

BABY DOE

Cleopatra

Gretel

Poppea

Louise

MANON

Anne Trulove

Melisande

Lulu

Margo Bonvalet

Lend Me A Heldentenor

August Everding's ongoing staging of Wagner's **Ring** for Lyric Opera of Chicago has few admirers here in the Windy City, but I confess to finding the production elements magical. It is true that some of the stagecraft employed thus far has a thread-bare quality about it but Everding and his designer John Conklin have made a virtue of necessity in manipulating the ancient technical resources of the Civic Opera House.

Everding's **Ring** has the same fascination as watching old **Star Trek** reruns--the literal-minded may sneer at the take-it-on faith monsters and primitive lighting effects but the creative viewer will utilize his own imagination in giving form to the mythic or cosmic dimensions suggested by the plot. Contrast this approach with the Met's hightech staging by Otto Schenk, where scenic effects make their initially striking impression, then return season after season with increasingly diminished impact.

As with his **Rheingold** and **Walkure** stagings, Everding's concept relied heavily on a synthesis of postapocalyptic images and Kabuki stylization. Mime's forest dwelling, outfitted with burnt-out relics from some long-destroyed civilization, looked like something out of **Johnny Mnemonic**. Erda and Wotan played out their dialogue amidst the withered remains of the world ashtree. The representation of Fafner as the fluorescent skeleton of a dinosaur, maneuvered by an army of stagehands dressed in black, proved an effective evocation of the dragon. Most importantly, Everding encouraged the singers to fashion complex, multifaceted interpretations of Wagner's characters, rather than the monoliths often encountered.

Not surprisingly, the vocal stamina and reserves of power needed for climactic moments were in short supply among Lyric's cast. Siegfried Jerusalem can be a convincing Siegmund, but the tenor's portrayal of the junior Walsung lost focus whenever the vocal demands threatened to overwhelm his meager technique. By the final duet with Brunnhilde, Jerusalem abandoned all semblance of the playful characterization he had crafted earlier and adopted an exhausted stance that matched his tired vocalism.

Eva Marton supplied a shaky, cautiously sung account of "Heil dir, Sonne," but managed Brunnhilde's transformation from goddess to woman with rare sympathy (not an easy task in the frumpy black gown and platinum wig she was forced to wear). Sadly, James Morris' once healthy bass-baritone is now dry and unresonant and there were no histrionic compensations to be found in his casual presentation of the Wanderer's dilemma.

Rounding out the cast were Ekkehard Wlaschiha's malevolent Alberich, Nancy Maultsby's youthful Erda, Eric Halfvarson's innocuous Fafner (allowed a metamorphosis back to his original form as a giant) and Olga Makarina's sweet-voiced Forest Bird (impersonated by a dancer carrying an origami bird on her hand). But it was Graham Clark as Mime who engaged the audience most with his superb physicality and deeply felt utterances. The pathetic look of shock and reproach Clark gave Jerusalem as he died in his murderer's arms was unforgettable. Zubin Mehta's conducting was adequate, nothing more.

As a footnote to these **Siegfried** performances, Ardis Krainik found herself at the center of a huge scandal when she announced that patrons who did not purchase tickets to complete cycles of the **Ring** in 1996 would have no opportunity to view the addition of **Götterdämmerung** to the repertoire. Since only three cycles are being offered (as opposed to nine subscription performances each of the first three individual operas), this decision means some patrons will end their **Ring** experience incomplete. Word is that the Lyric Opera switchboard has been jammed by furious callers.

A word of advice, Ardis: get the fuck out of Lane Bryant and start treating your audiences with some respect.

Peter Schreier brought his acclaimed interpretation of Schubert's **Die Winterreise** to Chicago's Orchestra Hall on March 13. Christa Ludwig and Hermann Prey have also sung Schubert's challenging song cycle recently in Chicago, but Schreier's tender, achingly painful reading takes the palm. Schreier's critics are fond of sounding off about how nasal, breathy and sour his singing is. Yeah, and Callas had a wobble, Sills a tremolo, Scotto forced, Freni pushed, Price moored, etc., etc., etc. Wake up, you myopic queens! Stop missing the forest for the trees!

Schreier gave lessons in how to respond soulfully to the text, while singing with consummate grace and skill. Only his decision to use the baritone key for "Der Lindenbaum" proved puzzling, since the transposition placed equally awkward demands on his lower register. But this is quibbling. Schreier's legato was flawless, his enunciation exquisite, the overall reading spellbinding. A small but deeply moved audience gave a lengthy standing ovation to this underestimated artist.

What a shame Daniel Barenboim was not given his own solo bow--then we could have booed his ass back to Argentina or wherever the hell he hails from. What an impostor this guy is! He can't conduct, can't play, and unfortunately for Schreier, can't accompany. Barenboim failed to let one song pass without inflicting some mannered tempo or dynamic on it. His intention seemed to be that of undermining Schreier as much as possible and drawing attention to his untalented self.

Colleague that he is, Schreier embraced Barenboim at the conclusion of the cycle but I kept hoping he'd kick the jerk right in his overactive privates.

While we're on the subject, a versatile American diva currently prone to flashing her hooters at the drop of a hat has a growing number of engagements in Chicago, Berlin and Salzburg--the same cities Barenboim does all his performing in. Gosh, do you think they're having an affair?

A trip to Dixieland in April allowed me to catch the New Orleans Opera Association's spring production of Tchaikovsky's **Eugene Onegin**. New Orleans still has one of those opera companies once so prevalent in the American provinces (circa 1955-1985), where individual stars were imported and entire productions built around their performances. Unfortunately, the dwindling availability of funds for the arts makes it harder now to lure celebrities away from the major circuit.

Nevertheless, New Orleans is still able to snag a big name every so often and this **Onegin** featured the famed Bolshoi baritone Yuri Mazurok in the title role. Mazurok has been singing Onegin for the past thirty years and, now in his early sixties, still invests the part with a handsome, sappy timbre and cultivated phrasing. If his wax museum plastique

seemed a throwback to the fossilized traditions of Russian opera acting, his amazingly slim and handsome appearance counted for much. I felt honored to have witnessed Mazurok's idiomatic performance.

Mazurok was not the only native-born Russian in this production. As Tatiana, former Met soprano Natalia Rom (remember her?) produced a good deal of hard, abrasive tone and was rather grand in demeanor. Still, her dark, Vishnevskaya-like good looks and **hauteur** worked to advantage in the St. Petersburg scenes. Vladimir Bogachov, a recent Otello for Covent Garden, has an enormous, somewhat leathery tenor sound but his poetic, expressive phrasing in Lenski's big aria reduced me to tears.

Other standouts in a strong cast included Melanie Sonnenberg as Olga, Debria Brown as Filippyevna, Peter Blanchet as Triquet and Louis Lebherz, a potentially important bass, as Gremin. Seymon Vekshten conducted with a wealth of nuance and detail, the Louisiana Philharmonic responding sensitively to his gift for rubato.

David Morelock's direction was faithful to the melancholy spirit of Tchaikovsky's queerer than queer bio-opera ("No one understands me," gushes Tatiana, the composer's amorous mouthpiece, hungering for male love). Robert O'Hearn's designs were simple and functional.

Diana Soviero is fabulous on her new CD of verismo arias (**Analekta, AN 2 9602**)! Never mind that it's 15 years overdue: Soviero sings with all the 'face' that has made her the finest verista of her generation. At age 49, her lyric instrument retains most of its warmth and pliancy. Okay, so there's a strained, unsteady high note here and there--who cares? The soprano's commitment and generosity sweep all before her. In addition to such Soviero specialties as **Suor Angelica** and **Madama Butterfly**, this recital features arias from many arcane titles, including a touching solo from Cilea's forgotten **Gloria**. Grab this honey of a disc when you can: when I was passing through New York a few weeks ago, the Broadway location of Tower Records was completely sold out of it and an impudent lackey at HMV told me he had no idea when its initial arrival was expected there (the Met gift shop has copies but their prices are a joke).

Enzo Bordello

LA GRAN SCENA OPERA CO.

July 15, 1995

Dear Friends,

It is time, once again, for me to ask for your help, so that La Gran Scena can stay alive and present the planned Gala Fifteenth Season.

ADDIO, SENZA RANCOR! We have reached a turning point in La Gran Scena's evolution. 1995-96 will bring our Gala Fifteenth Season and the New York farewell to the popular "gala of stars" format which has delighted our public here since 1981. The season will be launched with two performances of *Vera Galupe-Borszkh - The Tenth Annual Farewell Recital* at the Kaye Playhouse, October 8th and 14th. This spoof/tribute to the extravagant diva recitals of the past features Gran Scena's "prima donna" in a dazzling array of arias and songs, along with her inimitable, hilarious anecdotes. The show, a favorite of Dame Joan Sutherland, has never before been seen in a theatre venue in New York. "The audience was helpless with laughter" raved The London Times. Then, in May 1996, Gran Scena will present four full-company evenings at The Kaye featuring the company's favorite divas in their most celebrated scenas. A truly gala farewell to the Galas!

After this season, La Gran Scena will continue to take the gala on tour. **BUT** in New York, the company will present a variety of exciting, hilarious and dramatic NEW shows. These plans *can not and will not* come to fruition without your help. In the past, you, our New York public, have made it all possible with your loyal attendance and support. Our 1994 season at The Kaye was our most successful ever; we even added a performance! What followed, however, has not sustained us. Promised European bookings dried up and our total performances fell from 70 in 1993-1994 to 17 in 1994-1995. Next season appears to be down even more. With the current conservative climate, we cannot get the company booked regularly across the U.S., no matter how ecstatic the press, nor how successful our regional appearances are when we finally get the opportunity. Go figure!

We have so much we want to offer to you, our best, most loyal public- so many ideas we want to turn into those evenings you enjoy so much. And we believe that you do not wish to see us disappear from the New York scene. But, I'm afraid, that is exactly what will happen without your support.

Please help us bring you the Gala Fifteenth Season by giving as generously as you can. Whatever the amount, your tax-deductible donation is greatly appreciated. And remember, if you work for a company with a Matching Grant Program, every dollar helps.

Thank you for helping La Gran Scena to continue.

Ira Siff, Artistic Director

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