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# parterre box

(the queer opera zine)

eighteen

Parterre Box has been informed by a generally unreliable source that diva June Anderson (in response to a conductor's well-meaning advice that she would need "more chest" to sing Norma) has recently undergone breast enlargement surgery. Of course, we don't believe this story for a minute, but, just in case, we have prepared a

### Top Ten List of June Anderson's Newly Augmented Repertoire:

10. La Fanciulla del Chest
9. Les Juguenots
8. Un Bali in Maschera
7. Cavalleria Busticana
6. Das Wunderbra des Heliane
5. Les Silicontes d'Hoffman
4. Così fan titte
3. Jiggoletto
2. Ariadne auf Knockers

....and the Number One new June Anderson role....

1. Hooterdammerung

# questo

**JUST SAY NO. . .**  
As a member of the horrified audience who witnessed Richard Versalle's death during the Met's *Makropulos* Case premiere, I

will simply say this: whatever the official cause of death may turn out to be, Versalle shouldn't have been up on that ladder in the first place. The tricky stage business the 63-year-old tenor was asked to do (climbing up and down while carrying a file folder in one hand) was not absolutely essential to the scene; besides, according to more than one experienced opera performer in the audience, the ladder itself appeared flimsy and poorly secured. As we left the theater, a singer less than half Versalle's age said to me, "No possible way I would climb that thing." Well, maybe. True, a singer who is asked to perform staging he perceives as dangerous should simply refuse; however, in the real world performers may well feel pressured to go through with a risky stunt for fear of being labelled "uncooperative" or a "bad colleague" or, for that

# quello

matter, of being replaced with another singer. As operatic productions increasingly feature such potentially hazardous elements as moving set pieces, elevators, open flame, chemical smoke, blinding lights and violent stage combat, it becomes absolutely imperative that designers, directors and management cooperate to foster an atmosphere in which singers have the freedom to say no to unsafe staging.

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**SOUPÇONS. . .** So, why hasn't Chicago Lyric Opera invited back that very grand American diva? Could it be the company resented having to reimburse the hotel for a fax machine and an exercise treadmill Madame took home as souvenirs of her last visit?

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**SEX, DRUGS AND WALTZES. . .** I'm in love with Jochen Kowalski. To begin with, as seen in the Metropolitan Opera's *Fledermaus* (December 20), he's fabulously cute: suave, lithe, pouty, narcissistic, a teeny bit dissipated, yeah, just the way I like them. You know, in

an interview Kowalski once asked rhetorically, "Don't I look like a rock star?" Oh, yes, La Cieca answers yes, but to tell the truth she could never say no to this guy, no, not on any subject. In Kowalski's hands, Orlovsky is the star of the show. His well-placed alto voice (comparable in size to Frederica von Stade's) is strong, meaty, solidly on pitch; I did not feel he was pushing. He has that pharyngeal, slightly "bottled" sound that is so German-- the timbre reminds me of the young Dernesch. He knows what makes the music go. And he's an intense yet elegant presence on stage, a real gentleman sexpot. His Orfeo at BAM a few years ago was a knockout, easily redeeming a hokey Eurotrash staging by Harry Kupfer. La Cieca assumes Mr. K will sing Oberon (*Midsummer Night's Dream*) next year for the Met; maybe soon if we're real good we might hear him in *Giulio Cesare* opposite Dawn Upshaw or Sylvia McNair. If only he had the range and stamina to do the Komponist!

And furthermore, La Cieca admires the way Mr. K interprets the character: he's more than just a prince, he's a queen. Or didn't you know the Prince liked boys? Well, he does, according to Kowalski's performance: when everyone else pairs off for the "Dui-du," this poor little rich queer seeks refuge on the lap of a burly manservant, his big bloodshot puppydog eyes glistening with tears: no matter how rich you are, it's tough being the only fag in the room. And while le tout Wien gets down doing the Thunder & Lightning Polka (the best thing by far in Otto Schenk's production, a perfect bourgeois orgy) Orlovsky just shakes his pretty blond head and yawns: alas, what indeed is more boring than watching straight people dance? (You'll find a modern-day Prince Orlovsky in any dance club in the city: he's the burnt guy in the corner of the VIP lounge shoving white powder up the noses of gay-for-pay buffboys.)

I say bravo to Mr. Kowalski for daring to delve below the surface of what is usually thought of (not least by the perpetrators of the Met's production) as a mindless piece of fluff. *Die Fledermaus* is actually a biting satire on the secret lives of the upwardly mobile. Maybe it's not specifically a queer work, but, boy, it certainly has a strong gay subtext: Eisenstein is a paragon of middle class morality by day, but by night he parties with "confirmed bachelor" Dr. Falke, indulging in illicit sex while in disguise (i.e., anonymous) and under the influence of an expensive intoxicant. (Nothing changes: the difference between Cordon Rouge and Ecstasy

1. By the way, the production continues to include one of the most successful product placements ever: look closely and you'll notice Orlovsky is costumed as a Mumm bottle. Alas, for the last act his ensemble is disastrously accessorized with this mink shako embellished with a rhinestone clip and a spray of aigrette. Surely so girly a fashion statement would be better left to Lisa della Casa.

is no more than a matter of *chacun à son goût*.) The Act 3 finale is about getting everybody back into the closet: all is forgiven, all is forgotten, nothing really happened. It's the Champagne's fault, or, as the frat boy said when he woke up naked and sticky underneath his best buddy, "Boy, was I drunk last night."

Making her very promising debut as Adele, Janet Williams was a handful. Sassy isn't the word for this domestic: surly is more like it. She's a perfect soubrette, the Despina of my dreams. (Oh, please tell me she's Cecilia Bartoli's cover and will take over the role!) Ms. W is what La Cieca likes to call a "Santa Fe" singer: the voice by itself is unexceptional (clean, on pitch, fast vibrato à la Battle, OK if hardly spectacular top), but the whole package (voice plus looks, acting, musicianship and sizzle) is dynamite. Schenk's staging doesn't do her justice-- that Judith (Insulin Available at the Snack Bar) Blegen crap is too tame and too lame for the feisty Ms. Williams. This lady's got mucho presence. Listen, when she swung into the Audition Song, I thought the technicians had bumped up the level of her followspot, but no, La Williams had just turned on the star power, that's all.<sup>2</sup> And I want to say brava, girl, for having the balls to use a hint of black dialect ("whuyu say?") to deliciously comic effect. (Dear Ms. Williams: Dr. Repertoire has asked me to tell you to take six months and get Zerbinetta into your voice. Then you'll own the world.)

Williams & Kowalski set a high standard for the rest of the cast, unfortunately for June Anderson (Rosalinda), who looked stunning and sounded shocking. Ms. Anderson does not lack for pep.<sup>3</sup> Oh, she worked that Staircase Entrance (complete with mandatory Peal of Laughter), thereafter treating le Public to heaping helpings of such "Great Lady on a Spree" staples as the Coyly Arched Eyebrow, the Knowingly Bemused Grin, the Roguish Toss of the Head, and, of course, the Flouncing Feather Fan. June, darling, may I offer a word of advice? Get over yourself.

Let's be fair: one must admit La Anderson looked fierce in those to-die-for Peter J. Hall frocks-- especially the lavender chiffon peignoir for Act One.<sup>4</sup> Her Act Two rig of beaded moire silk, plumed mask, mile-long feather boa and rhinestone garniture was perhaps better suited to Josephine Baker than to a Hungarian noblewoman, but Anderson carried it off: for once Rosalinda looked snaz-

2. Terribly sorry, but it can't be taught.
3. To say the least. Imagine Vera Charles buzzed on crystal meth.
4. The Marschallin should dress so well.

zier than Adele. And the "Little Foxes" ensemble for Act 3 was fun, too.

Now the bad news; except for a few ringing high A's and B's, most of the role was so undersung as to be inaudible.<sup>5</sup> Ms. Anderson's singing has always suffered from sluggish attack and a limited palette of tone color; as Rosalinda she affected a croony, "veiled" sound in the middle register that effectively doused any Straussian sparkle. The voice is a solid instrument (if she'd stop fucking with it) and she's a fine technician, but, let's face it, people, **JUNE ANDERSON IS JUST NOT AN EXCITING SINGER.** Does she really think she can pull off *Vêpres Siciliennes* and *Norma*? (Since La Anderson was obviously meant to be the class of this cast, La Cieca was startled at the chilly audience response to such a "big star": meager applause for the Czardas, and, at her solo call, some audible booing.)

Moving on. This curly-headed priss named Russell Braun was making his debut as Falke: "I taold the Prinssss, the aonly cure for melancholy is potties, potties, potties." Uneventful voice; "I ♥ Myself" stage deportment; a repertoire consisting of Guglielmo, Harlekin, and Papageno; plus he stands on his tippytoes for high notes. I rest my case. Wolfgang Brendel is a big crazy Viennese good ole boy as Eisenstein: he yells too much, but every now and then he lets out with a high F that's so fabulously pingy you wish he could get the rest of the voice in line. But Herr Schenk hardly allows him a chance to breathe, what with all that rollicking he's required to do: I was afraid he'd break the furniture. (Honestly, never in my life have I seen so many people climbing onto tables and chairs and sofas and desks. I guess it's meant to suggest that they're having fun or something but to me it just stinks of a stage director who is out of ideas.)<sup>6</sup>

Neil Rosenshein has yelled his once-charming lyric tenor into shreds, but at least he knows operetta style; Ida or Sally or whatever was played by Virginia Seidel à la Miss Adelaide. Dom Deluise's Frosch shtick was way long-winded and silly but mostly fun, if you overlook all the spitting: those creaky old gags about coming out of the closet and "Bette Davis in Jezebel" really are endearingly camp. He earned the biggest laugh of the night for zinging Newt Gingrich.

5. And I heard no interpolated high notes at the end of the Czardas or the Watch Duet. Has our June suddenly gone purist on us?

6. Except for those bits he filched from Max Reinhardt's long-running Berlin production. And does Schenk realize that his fascination with squirting-water jokes could be of interest to another son of Vienna, Sigmund Freud?

Conductor Herman Michael (who does the fucking Ring elsewhere--Jesus, the waste!) knows what makes Strauss go: rubato, rubato, rubato; he did a bangup job following Mr. Kowalski. Perhaps in later performances, he will be able to give Ms. Anderson more help in getting though her role. The orchestra sounded, well, tired I guess; or is it that they know how little this revival has to do with music?

This "frivolity" lasted three and a half hours, or, in layman's terms, twenty minutes longer than Oliver Stone's Nixon.

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**HEADS UP!** Is the Met built over an underground lake? Does a mysterious masked figure lurk somewhere below the 66th Street IRT station? Accidents happen in any theater, but, my dears, the past few weeks have just been too creepy! Just as we go to press comes a report of Raul Gimenez's debut in Barber of Seville: no, that's not the creepy part. This is: first, Mark Oswald cancelled and then, the roof of the Act One set collapsed practically on top of Ruth Ann Swenson's pretty noggin. La Cieca will just say this: the next time she goes to the Met, she's not sitting under the chandelier!

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**DIVA DEAREST.** . . . And just exactly what is Terrence McNally trying to prove in *Master Class*-- that Maria Callas was a nervous, unstable, irritable, demanding, capricious, insensitive, self-centered, patronizing and thoughtless bitch? Like, this is news?

Seriously, though, a lot of people out there seem to regard this "love letter to Maria Callas" (as some nobe at the *LA Times* called it) as an accurate portrait of the artist. As if! The truth about the diva's famous 1971-1972 master classes is amply documented in John Ardoin's excellent book *Maria Callas at Juilliard* (out of print at the moment, but absolutely worth searching for); and on a new CD (*Callas at Juilliard: The Master*

7. Of course, the real-life Callas was sometimes catty or self-pitying or too full of herself. We all know that. But she had the good sense to realize that the classroom is no place for indulging in such "prima donna" behavior. Look at it this way. It's one thing to pull that "palco funesto" stunt in a moment of rage, and another thing altogether to brag about it in front of your students.

*Classes*, EMI D203418, with enlightening liner notes by Ardoin).<sup>8</sup> In fact, I will confess I was a little disappointed when I heard the CDs: Maria is so... well, normal. You expect lofty, mystical priestess revelations, but what you get is down-to-earth practical advice based on her years of experience in the theater. You know, suggestions about portamento and diction and phrasing, the kind of advice any really competent coach can provide. Plus she emphasizes the importance of energetic, vital, passionate singing, so unlike the dourly earnest style still favored in the American conservatory system. While she is certainly demanding, she is in no way starry or overbearing or "difficult." "We are here to work," she says, and that's the truth. As a coach and producer, I particularly admire the way she communicates her ideas so economically: a few well-chosen words, a demonstration of half a phrase, *basta*. For, unlike so many inexperienced teachers, Callas knows when to shut up: the student learns by doing, not by listening. In a word, Callas at Juilliard is more colleague than diva.

...and Callas at the John Golden Theater is nothing but a horrible bitch: Jesus, will you listen to this woman barking at the accompanist, sniping at students, mugging for the auditors, bullying the stagehand and endlessly yakking, yakking, yakking-- my God, is this a master class with Joan Crawford?

All right, I know McNally has emphasized that his play takes place not at Juilliard but at an imaginary class, but I find his disclaimer disingenuous: the onstage class copies the Juilliard format, the costumer dresses Ms. Caldwell in a duplicate of Callas's Chanel ensemble, down to the barrette in her hair; the director poses his star in a series of *tableaux vivants* of Beth Bergman's famous photographs of Callas teaching. Above all, Mr. McNally's script quotes verbatim (though usually out of context) a number of Callas's best-known remarks during the Juilliard classes, especially her so-called "Farewell" speech. I believe this profusion of familiar documentary detail tends to persuade an audience that everything in the play is similarly factual: that, allowing for selection, compression, and invention based on sound conjecture, what they are seeing is an accurate recreation of a real event. Mr. McNally can cry, "It's just a play!" all he wants, but he's still responsible for its content.

8. He also wrote the program notes for *Master Class*. At first blush it seems incredible that the *Gran Vestale* of the Callas legend could ever partipate in this desecration of his goddess. But, in fact, Ardoin has given his blessing to Maria-bashing before: he provided source material for that lurid biography written (or rather, plagiarized) by Arianna Huffington, years before she attained her current prominence as spokesmodel for the Radical Right.

Now, this is hardly the place to discuss the moral or ethical questions raised when an artist chooses to leaven his fiction with documented reality; after all, this technique is hardly an invention of Mr. McNally's. To cite just one example, in *JFK* Oliver Stone's use of the Zapruder footage and other documentary material lends believability to scenes of the most bizarre and baroque fantasy. However, Mr. Stone has never made a secret of the axe he has to grind: his melodramatic distortion of history is a function of his belief in an all-powerful right-wing conspiracy.

Mr. McNally's motives for mangling the truth are more elusive. (At first I just assumed Maria must have beaten him with a wire hanger or something.) Setting the action at a master class seems to be only a pretext: Callas's qualities as an educator, indeed, even as an artist, are simply glossed over in favor of the melodramatic events of her personal life. McNally overlays the singer's onstage art with her offstage angst in what I guess must be an attempt at dramatic irony: it doesn't come off. Early in first half of the play, student "Sophie" attempts "Ah! non credea mirarti." Maria slaps the girl around for a while (she deserves it... imagine singing this standard Bellini aria for La Divina herself without even bothering to check what the words mean!), then sits back and listens for about two seconds before drifting off into a stream-of-consciousness recollection of her La Scala glory days. This ludicrously overwrought *scena* consists of equal parts hoopla ("The theater is sold to the rafters! See the bejeweled audience! The stage is buried in floral tributes! Milan has never heard such an ovation!") and suds ("Ari, don't look at me that way! What is that you're saying? You don't love me? No, I won't believe it! I can't believe it!")

Well, I can't believe it either: the real story is infinitely more dramatic than McNally's invention. Callas sang *Amina* before she ever met Onassis; her exquisite portrayal of love betrayed was founded on imagination, not experience. Examining how a sheltered, almost nun-like personal life could be the inspiration for such rich and varied artistic creation could have made a fascinating play. (In fact, it already has, twice: *The Belle of Amherst* and *The Barretts of Wimpole Street*.) Instead, McNally seems determined to take the easy way out, taking his cue from such masterpieces of the "Portrait of the Artist as a Young Mess" genre as *I'll Cry Tomorrow* and *With a Song in My Heart*. For dramatic action he offers nothing but a slogan ripped from a Warner Brothers three-sheet:

**HER MAGNIFICENT CAREER  
SOARS TOWARD ITS LEGENDARY ZENITH  
EVEN AS HER LIFE AS A WOMAN  
PLUNGES HEADLONG INTO THE TOILET!**

I'm convinced what *Master Class* is really about is making money; Mr. McNally has succeeded in writing a very big hit by carefully catering to the New York theater audience's pet interests: flamboyant emotional fireworks for Ms. Caldwell's fans, "artistic" subject matter for the snobs, soap opera for the matinee ladies, and, of course, bitchy one-liners for the queens.<sup>9</sup>

There's nothing wrong with this production a better play couldn't fix. In an enormous role-- she's never off-stage-- Zoe Caldwell is a force of nature and probably the supernatural as well. Undaunted by the minor physical handicap of having exactly the wrong speaking voice (her growl is the diametric opposite of Callas's honk), she transmutes soap opera into grand opera, convincing us irrevocably that she is indeed the greatest performer in the world. (And, you know... that just may be true.) Yes, once or twice Caldwell's boundless enthusiasm leads her over the top: what should be choked confessions emerge as bravura tirades, as if Callas were flaunting her open wounds for our amazement. But perhaps broad strokes are the only appropriate way to paint a figure so much larger than life. I say bravissima to La Caldwell, an artist at the height of her powers, for her volcanic energy and her dazzling technical ability, for her unswerving dedication to her artistic task, for her honesty and guts and for her utter commitment to this role. The theater hungers for this kind of star acting; Ms. Caldwell's performance is a feast.

Caldwell's scenes with Audra McDonald sparkle with the electricity generated by the confrontation of two real stars (I was reminded of last season's *Turandot* with Gwyneth Jones and Teresa Stratas). Ms. McDonald's bold acting performance is no more than a promise fulfilled to those who saw and admired her Carrie Pipperidge at Lincoln Center, but, to my great surprise, she boasts both the vocal means and the stylistic sensitivity to sing the murderous *Macbeth* aria very creditably indeed.<sup>10</sup> I look forward to hearing her in the classic legit roles: Sarah Brown, Eliza Doolittle, Lilli in *Kiss Me Kate*, Julie in *Showboat*... and, ladies and gentlemen, I think we've found our Carmen Jones. So honest a performer surely deserves a better exit speech; the

9. He gets quick-and-easy laughs by having Callas dish Renata Scotto and Joan Sutherland. The middle-aged opera queens in the audience just *SQUEALED* at this cheap, out-of-character bitchery. Well, what more should we expect from the man who wrote the scene in *The Ritz* in which a hairy Mafioso was crowned winner of the "Zinka Milanov Lookalike Contest?"

10. She coached the aria with Shirley Verrett backstage at *Carousel*. Next summer, I am told, she's doing her first Ado Annie opposite the Aunt Eller of Grace Bumbry.

handful of cliches McNally has cobbled together sounds like an outtake from *Valley of the Dolls*.<sup>11</sup>

The remaining characters are "e poi" roles, no more than feeds for La Callas's yakathons; the actors are all fine, if seemingly a decade too old to be voice students in serious hopes for a career. I should note that Matthew Walley, the understudy who played Tony in this performance, revealed a sweet voice and an engaging manner. Director Leonard Foglia seems to have a fine sense of pace: the Caldwell/McDonald scene even captured some of the excitement of the teacher/student relationship. I can't say I'm crazy about the way he tarts up the production with projections and heavily-amplified recordings, especially when Caldwell is forced to outshout Callas. (It feels like trying to carry on a conversation with the radio going full blast.) The physical production is quite beautiful: if only we had so attractive a recital hall in New York as the one onstage at the John Golden theater!

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**YOU CALL THIS PROGRESS?** I'm not going to waste your time dishing at length Inger Aby's ghastly film version of *The Rake's Progress* (life, even without the standard cuts, is too short), but I feel I must address one most pertinent point. The talented young counter-tenor Brian Asawa was cast in the mezzo-soprano role of Baba the Turk.<sup>12</sup> His sinewy arms, slim hips and flat chest seemed to imply that he was directed to play the role not as bearded lady but, in fact, as a man; his disco goatee, messy eye makeup and fan-queen voguing further specified Baba was a homosexual man. As the camera zoomed in with fascinated horror on the eerie spectacle of Tom and Baba almost making out, the director's message was not difficult to decipher:

## Queer = Freak

11. The definitive Callas play is still Charles Ludlam's *Galas*. It's high time the Ridiculous Theater revive this delightful and very moving take on the Callas myth.  
12. Mr. Asawa's succulent voice and impeccable musicianship are all wrong for Baba: her ring-around-the-break vocal line requires the abrupt register shifts of an aging mezzo to make its comic effect. The delightful Mr. Asawa makes no more sense in this role than Dawn Upshaw would as Santuzza.



Hey, straight people, how many times do we have to tell you that gay men and women are fucking sick and tired of having our sex lives sensationalized and exploited for your amusement and titillation! From now on, if you want to get off on a freak show, I suggest you try the circus. A word in your ear, Channel 13: this kind of pseudo-artistic homophobic schlock makes Viewers Like Me want to vomit.

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NO, LA CIECA ISN'T SO HARD TO PLEASE. . . all she asks for is superb performances of great operas. And that's just what she got at the Metropolitan Opera's revival of *Mahagonny*. This production is one of the last reminders of those golden days of the late 1970's, just before the Met turned into a theme park. John Dexter's regime as Director of Productions left a legacy of fascinating and mostly successful (and, incidentally, low-budget) productions that finally brought the Met into the second half of the twentieth century: I think especially of his Stravinsky and "French" triple bills, *Dialogues of the Carmelites*, *Vespre Siciliani*, and, above all, his unsurpassed *Lulu* (surely this staging deserves a telecast more than yet another Domingo *Otello*!) But I am particularly fond of *Mahagonny*, perhaps because its indictment of materialism is more relevant than ever before and its artistic values are directly subversive to everything today's Met stands for.<sup>13</sup> At first I was afraid the production, so provocative in 1979, might date in the safe-and-sane '90's: you know, a sort of *Monogammy* ("Oh, show me the way to the next salad bar...") However, considering the limited time the Met allots to revivals, the show was in fine shape, lacking only the razor-edge of rage that a perfect *Mahagonny* should balance on: ideally one or two scenes (the brothel, the trial) could have been a little meaner, a little more shocking. The *coup de theatre* of the "Nothing you can do can help a dead man" finale (the set flies out, revealing the cavernous guts of the Met stage) retains its maximum of effect achieved with a minimum of means; our stunned silence at the final blackout was an eloquent tribute to Dexter's genius.

Unlike, say, a middle-of-the-season *Bohème*, this revival was cast from strength from top to bottom. The Jenny of Teresa Stratas is a creation to rank with Beverly Sills' Manon or Tito Gobbi's Simon Boccanegra as one of the

13. The city of Mahagonny is controlled by a triumvirate consisting of wealthy front man (Moneybags), down-and-dirty tough-guy enforcer (Moses), and sexually perverse behind-the-scenes mastermind (Begbick). Sound like any place we know?

great interpretations of the twentieth century. When I heard Ms. Stratas, she was still battling flu; her wise solution was to sing most of the role *mezza voce*. True, the sustained phrases of the Crane Duet stretched her voice to the limit, but Stratas has never been a canary anyway. More to the point, her art has grown only more refined with the passage of time; Stratas stands alone among contemporary artists in her genius at understanding and expressing the subtleties of the human spirit. The Alabama Song was weary and determined and hesitant and bold and shy and tough, and, yes, funny and sad, too, because Stratas knows a bad-luck girl like Jenny can't afford the luxury of feeling just one thing at a time. The soprano has the courage to shun sentimentality in the funeral procession finale, choosing to play instead bitter disbelief, impotent rage and barren despair: Jenny is just another sad little whore with no past and only the next whisky bar for a future. If this revival indeed marks the farewell of Teresa Stratas, she could not leave us with a sweeter or more characteristic souvenir of her treasurable art.

Now, I expect great things from Stratas, but who could have guessed how much power and poetry Gary Lakes would find in the role of Jimmy Mahoney? Even his heavy Act 3 aria found him fully in control, and his singing throughout the night had the punch and vitality he seems to lack in roles like Siegmund or the Kaiser. Helga Dernesch belted out Begbick with Crespini-quality diction and Wagnerian stamina. Her wit and her glamorous star presence (along with her chic black costumes and platinum chignon) made the character if anything more frightening than the usual dykey gorgon: this woman is smooth. So much so, in fact, that she tipped the opera's balance of power, outshining her henchmen Timothy Noble and Kenneth Riegel, whose energetic characterizations did not completely compensate for some out-of-control singing. Luxe casting also gave us the rich voices of Jan-Henrik Rootering and Alan Held in secondary parts. How glorious that every role in *Mahagonny* was cast with (as Willa Cather would say) "a singer with enough!"

No praise is too great for the men of the Met chorus: their firm singing and committed acting was all the more impressive when you consider they had to learn this music especially for this revival and will almost certainly never sing it again. The Met orchestra wove the tricky score into ravishingly phrases in collaboration with James Levine, who was at the peak of his form, his superb musicianship and masterly technique allowing him to make this magnificent score sound effortless. This is what a night at the Metropolitan Opera should be.

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IN BRIEF. . . Yes, we all know what Francesca Patane (aka Callas with a Kazoo) was doing at the Richard

# opera continues to suck.

Tucker Gala: family connections count for something, after all. But who is this Elizabeth Vidal character, and how could she think she belongs on the same program as such A-list singers as Renee Fleming and Denyce Graves and Dmitri Hvorostovsky? (And where on 14th Street did Mlle. Vidal buy those dresses? Honey, next time take a gay friend along!) Dolora Zajick was far and away the classiest thing on the stage: I want to see her in *Cavalleria* and *Adriana* for sure-- and how about Carmen and Ortrud and Kundry? Mr. Hvorostovsky sounded as yummy as he looked (i.e., very), but "Il balen" is a major stretch-- I just don't see him as Di Luna.

And maybe it's not my place, but I'm worried about Paul Groves. He's obviously talented, sincere and smart; his *Steuermann* a couple years ago was a showstopper. So what the hell has happened to his voice since then? Is this what the Met calls "Young Artist Development?"

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REMEMBER, WE'RE ALL IN THIS TOGETHER... *Parterre Box* is your zine too: let's hear what you think! Don't feel like you have to be literary or scholarly or anything; just imagine you're yakking on the phone to another opera queen and write it down. Reviews are cool, so is fiction or accounts of personal experiences related to opera. No censorship, ever-- all I edit for is stuff that looks libellous and every now and then obvious typos. (Though I am gonna ask you, just as a favor to me, to go easy on the fat lady jokes... I just think they're so unfunny.) Especially we're looking for more writing from lesbians and anyone outside the NY/Chicago/SF loop.

If you're not up to doing the Andrew Porter thing, do help us spread the word. Pass along the zine to a friend. Leave a copy of *PB* lying casually about in a record store or the opera house or your favorite bar or baths. Mention *PB* on an online opera bulletin board. Send a copy of *PB* to your local gay rag or mag. Wear your *PB* T-shirt proudly to the opera. Feel free to xerox & reprint & distribute & email anything you find in *PB*-- but please include our address so people can subscribe.

And let me know what you hate and what you like about our zine: write to **PARTERRE BOX, 174 W. 76th St. #12-G, New York, NY 10023**, or else voicemail me at 917-953-2685.

La Cieca

14. Not to be confused with Elizabeth FUTRAL, the gifted lyric-coloratura who scored such a big personal success in the NYCO's *Lakme* last season. You think the Tucker people sent the invitation to the wrong soprano?

*Our story thus far: In October, Stefano of the Singers Network wrote a cool article called Why U.S. Opera Sucks attacking government arts funding as a sort of drug (i.e., quick fix = dependency). Then I replied in the last issue of PB, (Yes, Opera Sucks, but...) placing the blame on the minority of self-indulgent directors and conductors who get the majority of media attention (Giancarlo del Monaco, Daniel Barenboim, there are others) and an arts establishment that sells opera like so much cream corn (like, did you hear Joseph Volpe interviewed on PBS last month? He gabbed on for 20 minutes without ever using the words "opera" or "music" or "art?" He kept talking about "product.") Anyway, now Stefano writes back:*

I am amazed at the simplicity of some in our society that believe that the only way we can get something done is if the government does it for us. Some people believe prior to government support of the rail lines, no one was able to get anywhere, and that we only had donkeys to ride on if we wanted to travel to see our dying grandma in the neighboring city. History is just the opposite. Prior to the decay of the rail lines (which started shortly after the funding began) there were several rail lines that could provide competitive service, and travel anywhere. After the advent of government support, there have been more rail lines closing and more tracks left to rust than at any time before.

The same goes for the opera world...

Any good monopolist will tell you that the first step in having ultimate control of your business is forcing all your competition out of the game. (Why do you think the Met had the Old Met building leveled? Not for economic reasons, but as insurance that no one else could compete with them. The New York City Opera doesn't count as competition.)

I am not talking about the struggling dance company that tries its best to do four shows a year and hopes at best for some scraps from the government table. Neither am I talking about the small opera company that has to make do with cardboard sets and pray they can break even at



the end of the season. They, in my opinion, are more victims of government funding than benefactors. My beef is the middle-to-big companies that have general directors enjoying huge salaries and perks--the companies with bloated bureaucracies and overpaid staff members that are in control of almost all the opera output in America. The smaller private companies just cannot compete-- and a lot of it has to do with government funding. What I think is most destructive about government involvement in the arts is that in order to qualify for funding, the opera company has to be run as a non-profit organization. And conversely, in order for the wealthy patron or corporation to receive a tax deduction, the patron can only donate to "non-profit" organizations. For big opera companies, government funding may be only a small percentage of the annual budget, but they use that extra income to lure in the big fish of patron support.

The small opera company is the victim of government funding because they do not have the resource to compete with the fundraising ability of the Goliaths. And if a company is run on a "for-profit" basis, forget it! Not only do you not qualify for the government drug, you cannot receive vital patron support. You are punished if you look like you want to make money in the arts. (If you're clever, though, you can rake in a ton of dough and still give your patrons the impression you are "non-profit." Just ask James Levine.)

As for comparing government funding to a drug, I think my analogy is correct. A drug isn't necessarily a bad thing; actually, sometimes it can cure an illness. But one can OD on it or have an adverse reaction. Or, in the case of narcotics, the user slowly loses touch with the world around them and starts suffering from paranoid delusions of grandeur. *Ecco il mondo dell'opera.*

But, as I stated in my article, government funding is not the entire problem. It contributed to creating the situation, but did not cause it. There are so many reasons why opera sucks. I just happened to focus on government funding as one issue. You bring up excellent points regarding the competition from CDs and Laser video disks as well as the simple bastardization of the art form through mass media coverage. You are also right on target about the "glory hogs" of the opera world who want to satisfy their egos by getting top billing and "controversial" reviews.

As for directors, let me say that you, James, have been one of the few directors I've ever worked with who knows something about opera. The first time I had a chance to talk with you, I was floored by the fact that

you knew what you were talking about. I know there are good directors out there who really want to treat music and drama as equals. But, in my experience, most directors have a strong dislike for opera, and they are committed to putting a modern twist on something written before the birth of Abraham Lincoln. I think those directors should be forbidden to work on operas written before 1950.

My suggestions? Well, I think it might help weaken the centralized power of these opera scoundrels if companies were allowed to operate on a "for-profit" basis. But mostly I just scratch my head and wonder what the hell happened.

I guess you can tell from the tone of my zine that I am pro-singer; I'll let directors and bureaucrats defend themselves. With few exceptions, aspiring opera singers are tortured, degraded, and humiliated by the "opera establishment" who then demand our tax dollars to keep them in power. Singers often have to pay a fee for the opportunity to audition; they are derided by directors, and (as you pointed out) they are sucked into apprentice programs only to become "slave labor comprimarios." Singers in "music in the schools" programs have to dress up as teapots and such, making opera look so stupid that kids will never want to see another opera again. If you really want to get kids interested in opera, give them Act 2 *Tosca*. [I say *Salome* with uncensored supertitles.-JJ]

I created the *Singers Network* to provide a sounding board for screwed-over singers. Singers have a right to sing without being told they are worthless just because they're not on CAMI's roster. I advocate the personal management of careers, and providing singing opportunities for ourselves instead of waiting for Government or Corporate Interests to "save" us. I want to create a forum where the misery of the opera world isn't swept under the rug for fear of offending readers (as in *Opera News* or *Opera Now*) or losing advertisers (*TNYON*). We all know there are coaches, teachers, opera companies just waiting to rip off unsuspecting singers. Sadly, we are so isolated that we cannot even stand up for ourselves. But there are a lot of us out there. We just need to connect.

— Stefano

write to: The Singers Network / 1070 US Hwy 3 / Suite 190 / Matawan, NJ 07747

## *We fear that...*

**Richard Bonyng**e has discovered a bravura cabaletta for Puccini's *Turandot*, to be sung by the Princess after Calaf answers the first riddle. Maestro Bonyng discovered the manuscript while poking about in the back room of a Roman bookstore. The first performance will be in a San Francisco revival next season starring first-time *Turandot* **Nova Thomas**.

**Alfredo Kraus** will return to the Met next season in *La Fille du Régiment*, singing Tonio's act-one aria transposed up a half-step.

**Eve Queler** and her Opera Orchestra of New York will perform *Perderecki's The Black Mask*, Ligeti's *La Grande Macabre* and Glass's *The Life and Times of Sunny von Bulow* in celebration of the 1997 Donizetti bicentennial.

Swedish sperm machine **Bo Hunkus** will pose nude for a three-page foldout in the June *Opera Now*. Mr. Hunkus is not scheduled for any opera performances at the Met or anywhere else; in fact, he's not even a singer, but his pictures sell CDs, so *Opera Now* is giving him reams of free publicity.

La Scala will open its 1999 season with Wolf-Ferrari's *Segreto di Susanna* featuring **Andrea Rost** and **Renato Bruson** under the baton of **Riccardo Muti**. The **Franco Zeffirelli** production will feature 400 supers visible through the apartment windows.

The Metropolitan Opera's previously-announced uncut *Huguenots* (Gruberova, Dimitrova, Bartoli, Pavarotti, Hampson, Morris, Ramey) has been postponed indefinitely, to be replaced with a revival of *Fledermaus* featuring members of the Met's Young Artist Development Program.

**Terrence McNally's** new play *Mister Schlock* will depict a **Maria Callas** diatribe-cum-breakdown as she soaks in **John Ardoin's** bathtub and listens to a broadcast of **Renata Scotto's** Lucia. **Nathan Lane** stars as Callas with **Dom Deluise** as Ardoin. **Charles Nelson Reilly** directs.

**Leonie Rysanek** will delay her retirement just a little longer so she may shriek the role of the Witch in a new Salzburg *Hansel und Gretel*.

The Met's latest high-tech breakthrough, Virtual Reality Opera Helmets, will allow wearers to imagine they are experiencing thrilling performances with high-caliber artists and lavish production values, when, in fact, the stage is quite bare. The inaugural production will be a "morphed" *Trovatore* (del Monaco, Ponselle, Verrett, Warren; Toscanini; Visconti/Karinska).

**Hans Korngoldmark's** masterpiece *Der Schweineslagenberg* (unheard since its 1924 Dresden premiere) will be recorded for Telarc with a cast headed by **Cheryl Studer**, **Deborah Polaski**, **Hildegard Behrens**, **Christa Ludwig**, **Brigitte Fassbender**, **Helga Dernesch**, **Ben Heppner**, **Thomas Moser**, **Wolfgang Brendel**, **Bernd Weikl**, **Kurt Moll** and **James Morris**. The seven-hour score will be played by the combined forces of the Vienna and Berlin Philharmonic Orchestras under the direction of **Giuseppe Sinopoli**.

Superduperdiva **Jessye Norman's** tell-all autobiography, entitled *I've Shit Bigger Turds than You*, will hit the shelves early in 1996. The tome will recount the soprano's repeated confrontations with lapdog conductors, airhead colleagues and fawning hairdressers.

The Metropolitan Opera will stage a six-week summer festival in 1997, offering 48 performances of *La bohème* as well as a gala concert during which over 200 past and present soloists of the Met will lift their voices in the world premiere performance of **John Corigliano's** cantata *We Worship Thee, O Great God Jimmy*. Following the concert, contracts for upcoming opening nights, new productions, broadcasts and telecasts will be signed in blood.

**Linda Ronstadt** will star as **Montserrat Caballe** and **Richard Simmons** will be **James Levine** in **Andrew Lloyd Webber's** *Desecration of the Opera*, currently previewing in the sewers of London. **Sam Harris's** role as **Jose Carreras** has been eliminated, informed bottom feeders report.

**Carol Vaness** is scheduled to sing *Norma* in Houston this spring.

# AN AMERICAN OPERA QUEEN IN LONDON

Tallyho, girls! Enzo has only recently returned from his initial trip to England and is brimming with enthusiasm for the place. Ah, England! Land of bitters, bangers and buggers. Birthplace of such culinary delights as bubble and squeak and stewed tomatoes. Home to critics whose idea of a great Mozart soprano is Joan Rodgers.

But seriously, my dears, London is everything wonderful I'd ever heard and more. From afternoon tea at Harrod's to tomb-gazing at Westminster Abbey, the city won Enzo's Italianate heart. Of course, visual and performing arts of all kinds are special attractions.

Besides its obvious historical settings, London is full of associations with things operatic. Within hours of landing at Heathrow Airport, I stumbled upon the cluttered excess of the John Soane museum, which houses the original "Rake's Progress" series by Hogarth. These paintings, dark, bawdy and haunting in spirit, inspired Stravinsky's musical setting of the 18th century morality tale.

Elsewhere, I viewed autograph scores by Beethoven, Rossini, Berg and Britten in the books and manuscripts section of the British museum. Also on view was the death warrant for Robert Devereux, signed by Elizabeth I (images of Beverly Sills roughing up Placido Domingo came to mind).

At the Theatre Museum in the Covent Garden district, I saw costumes worn by 18th century castrati (lots of gold brocade), Swedish nightingale Jenny Lind and others, as well as playbills for performances featuring legendary 19th century divas like Pasta, Grisi and Sontag.

If you have anything of the mystic about you, it's hard not to be awed by the visual immediacy of all this history. I was especially moved while studying Mozart's original manuscript of his song "Das Veilchen." As I looked at the elegant, absolutely flawless penmanship, I imagined what it might be like to stand face to face with the mythic wunderkind.

Covent Garden's Royal Opera House is also redolent with history, operatic and otherwise. The present building was erected in 1857 during the reign of Queen Victoria and replaced two

previous opera houses on the premises, both destroyed by fire. A white-washed Georgian structure, the Royal Opera House isn't much to look at on the outside—it's easily overlooked amid the hustle and bustle of the nearby piazza. Once inside, it's a different story.

The auditorium is a riot of warm, somewhat threadbare red velvet, glowing with quaint little loge lights. As an American-bred opera queen used to barn-sized opera houses, I was shocked by the intimate scale of the place. The atmosphere is as cozy as your grandmother's living room.

I was also shocked by the blatant classism that characterizes the opera house. Persons with balcony seats can enter only by way of a "commoner" staircase located on a side street. More privileged audience members are welcomed to the downstairs lobby by busts of Melba and Patti, a reminder that every great opera singer of the past 150 years has graced the stage of London's House of Vegetables.

Display cases full of Franco Zeffirelli's costumes for Sutherland as Lucia and Violetta also serve as evidence of the grand vocal history enshrined here. And if all this memorabilia isn't enough, the queers in standing room will remind you ad nauseam that this was the house where Callas and Gobbi rocked the opera world with their joint appearances in Puccini's Tosca.

My first evening at the Royal Opera House featured Maria Guleghina's company debut as Giordano's Fedora. The November 18 performance was a "Special Saturday" offering, a subsidized event intended for people on low incomes (students, the unemployed and senior citizens on public aid). I managed to snag a full-view seat in the amphitheatre for 9 pounds, which is sort of like paying 25 dollars for a good orchestra seat at the Met.

As is well-known by now, Enzo is no fan of Fedora, but it doesn't make any difference what you take in your first night at a great opera house. I remember being in ecstasy at my first Met performance, a Manon Lescaut with Carol Neblett and Vasile Moldoveanu. Can you imagine getting excited over that? But I was. Even on an off-night, an evening at the Met used to mean something. Going to Covent Garden still means something.

The evening turned out to be better than it looked on paper. Although not in the Olivero class, Guleghina delivered a forcefully sung account of the title role. She's a stunningly beautiful woman with a generalized sort of temperament that seems more suited to Verdi than verismo. She uses absolutely no chest voice and doesn't seem to have a clue what parlando is, both indispensable tools of the true verismo soprano.

In the death scene, a great Fedora like Freni or Soviero will communicate the fear of damnation awaiting the ferocious heroine, who cries out for the comforting touch of her lover Loris. Guleghina sang the notes in an effective but one-dimensional manner. Still, her genuine dramatic soprano is welcome among the many false pretenders working the current scene. I love her old-fashioned habit of sitting on notes longer than their actual value, particularly the isolated high C at the end of Act Two. She seems incapable of singing at dynamic levels below mezza forte, but when she lets it rip in the middle register, the sound is both rich and huge.

Domingo-protégé Jose Cura looked like a porn star as Loris but still sings with underwhelming resources. He sounds kind of like Giacomo Aragall but without the glamorous tone. He threw himself into the action, however, and played each situation as if it was Shaw or Shakespeare, not Sardou. The audience devoured Guleghina and Cura at curtain call time with loud ovations.

Carlos Alvarez was an agreeable De Siriex (he's scheduled for some Met appearances in the future), while Rosemary Joshua was a pretty, not quite perky enough Olga. Veteran maestro Edward Downes employed expansive yet firm tempos. The company used the same La Scala-owned set seen at Lyric Opera and presumably now en route to the Met. I hope they fix that horribly loud and squeaky turntable before the opening in New York.

Covent Garden's contribution to the Hindemith centenary was a new Peter Sellars staging of Mathis der Mahler. I went not expecting much but was pleasantly surprised by the depth and integrity of the work.

Hindemith's music is what it is, a challenging synthesis of counterpoint, fugue, folksong and chorale melody. But the text poses universal questions worthy of serious exploration: how fully do artists serve a higher power or mankind in their contained worlds? Is creativity a justifiable endeavor when so many are suffering? When artists absent themselves from the turmoil of everyday life, have they become cynical or transfigured? As an actor turned social worker, I am troubled by these questions. Mathis captures the existential core of my daily struggle and seems far removed from the dry, academic exercise I imagined it to be.

The production was an unadulterated fiasco. Sellars is nothing if not consistent and this staging was no exception: ugly sets, uglier costumes, amateurish direction and a mostly irrelevant concept. There were tons of naked scaffolding all over the stage, some of it adorned with blinking light bulbs. The costumes were a collection of modern, utilitarian looking uniforms. The chorus was

permanently placed in the boxes adjacent to the stage, with chorus members wearing their own clothes for the evening.

Sellars is nobody's fool: his intellect can be discerned among the wreckage. Unfortunately, he has none of the practical skills necessary to bring his artistic vision to life. The chorus is any opera is not a nuisance to be banished from the stage, but a challenge to be solved by directors who know how to work with operatic conventions.

There were constant allusions to the harshness of modern life (mounds of rotting corpses, urban warfare, homeless people, etc.) But just when you expected Sellars to make his hyperrealistic point, he soft pedaled the effect with stylized pretension. Schwalb and his fellow rebels did not die a horrible death at the hands of government troops, but melted to the stage floor in a laughable flurry of charade gestures and arty-farty poses.

What little did work, worked very well. For example, Mathis' final paintings were represented by a collection of blood spattered canvases, the symbolic transformation of suffering into art. As a totality, however, Sellars conception of the opera as a warning against the bipartisan factionalism now rampant in American politics left the British audience scratching its collective head.

Musically, Mathis operated on a much higher level of achievement. Alan Titus, that prettyboy baritone of yesteryear, has developed into a sort of American Bernd Weikl, potbelly and all. (Titus has sung Hans Sachs and Barak in Munich recently, his current base of operations.) Heard November 20, Titus sang the title role with a convincing mixture of tonal muscularity and interpretive refinement. Stig Andersen displayed a youthful heldentenor and an attractive Nordic presence as the Cardinal Albrecht. As Regina, a "breakthrough" role for both Rothenberger and Lorengar, Christine Oelze touched many hearts with her sweet lyricism and urgent characterization.

There were many veterans of the British opera scene in this production, including Robert Tear, Gwynne Howell and Peter Rose. They all looked like they'd rather have been in front of the telly watching the infamous Princess Di interview that aired on BBC that night. Nevertheless, they sang with undiminished authority. Yvonne Minton, in a cameo appearance as the Countess von Helfenstein, sounded as fresh as ever. Sadly, her beer-colored satin pants suit could have garnered some kind of all-time worst award for costuming (Dunya Ramicova was the designer).

The vocal standout was Inga Nielsen. As Ursula, Nielsen blew the walls down with a jugendlich soprano that must be scrumptious as Salome. She proved very adept at negotiating George Tsy-pin's

set, particularly when the flimsy plank she climbed onto for her big aria almost snapped under her feet.

Esa-Pekka Salonen's impassioned conducting had people invoking the young Karajan at intermission. The Royal Opera House Orchestra and Chorus deserved every accolade.

After the tweedy stuffiness of Covent Garden, the English National Opera and its environs were a breath of fresh air. ENO is **crawling** with queer people! Onstage, backstage, inside, outside, gay men and lesbians rule.

The London Coliseum is ENO's current home. A charming turn-of-the-century music hall, the Coliseum is just a stone's throw away from St. Martin in the Fields Church and Trafalgar Square. More importantly, the Coliseum is nestled between several tres chic gay bars.

I was always a little dubious about the stories of fuckin' and suckin' going on in standing room at Bing's Met, but multiple orgasms (musical and otherwise) are the order of the day at ENO. At intermission, there were more audience members at Brief Encounter (a nearby gay disco) than in the Coliseum lobby. The upper balcony and adjoining standing room area were abuzz with homo testosterone. There's actually an in-house men's bathroom you can retire to during the performance for sexual assignations and **still hear the music** (several couples took advantage of this convenience during Turandot). And what better way to begin your night at the opera than with a cruisy welcome from buff boy ticket takers and ushers?

The gay positive spirit isn't just confined to out front: ENO productions revel in queer aesthetics. Seen November 21, David Pountney's staging of Purcell's The Fairy Queen didn't just hint at the love that dare not speak its name--it put it in your face with a vengeance! Imagine Purcell's masque conceived as a cross between Wigstock and a Calvin Klein commercial and you get the idea. Drag queens, leather daddies, hunky ballet dancers, a same-sex wedding--I swear, the only thing missing was RuPaul as mistress of ceremonies!

And why not? Purcell's disjointed reworking of A Midsummer Night's Dream, a work all about loosened inhibitions, needs a unified concept to bind its disparate elements together. Besides, Purcell's creative bent is decidedly faggy. I mean, just how many busy tableaux vivants can you cram into one show?

Pountney's staging was dazzling in its inventiveness and smoothly integrated use of dance. After apparently being forced to raid Salvation Army resale shops for her Mathis costumes, Ramicova redeemed herself with Priscilla-style creations that were

colorful and fun to look at. Robert Israel's clever set pieces contributed to the visual extravaganza.

Musically, the evening left a lot to be desired. As Titania, Yvonne Kenny's edgy soprano belied her bel canto reputation, while countertenors Michael Chance and Andrew Watts made a weak impression vocally. As Oberon, tenor Thomas Randle looked and sounded like Prince in heat. ENO veteran Richard Van Allan made the most of his brief appearances as Theseus and Hymen. Nicholas Kok led his modern-instrument orchestra with little regard for proper balance between stage and pit, frequently overwhelming his feeble soloists.

The real stars of the evening were the dancers, particularly Simon Rice as Puck. Dressed in a tiny bra and red tights, Rice tormented the foolish mortals with commanding relish. Quinny Sacks supplied the winning choreography.

Critics were incensed by this production and several parents with small children were seen leaving after the first act. But ENO does not pander to homophobia--at least, not yet. Let's hope some British Jesse Helms type doesn't control the purse strings for the arts. ENO is **very** reliant on government subsidies for its existence.

The following evening, ENO unveiled Christopher Alden's magnificent staging of Puccini's Turandot. Dramatically, this opera has always seemed a shade false to me but Alden made a compelling case for Puccini's unfinished swan song.

Transplanted to the early Communist China of the 1930's, this Turandot evoked the totalitarian death machines that flourished unchecked in the first half of this century. Played out within a claustrophobic arena, Alden's direction revealed the cruelty and horror of a work too often obscured by pretty, vacuous chinoiserie. In Act Two, Ping, Pang and Pong were true bureaucrats of death, compiling statistics at their typewriters as they recalled Turandot's slain suitors.

But Alden also sees the pitiless princess and her henchmen as a metaphor for AIDS and its destruction. Turandot even looked like a virus at her first entrance: dressed in purple, she invades the body of the chorus while backlit by a lurid beam of corpuscular red.

The walls of the arena were hung with obituary photographs of young men who represented Turandot's suitors. As if to reinforce the connection between death and desire, Alden had the executioner dispatch the Prince of Persia after simulating intercourse with him.

Turandot herself became a symbol of institutional indifference, blind to the suffering her apathy creates. Thus, Turandot's tramonta suggested a day when AIDS is cured. The finale, with the

chorus holding up the photographs of those lost, provided the devastating sense of resolution missing from Alfano's hollow anthem.

With a thought-provoking director of Christopher Alden's ability available, I fail to understand the fascination with charlatans like Peter Sellars. Alden knows what he's doing and doesn't need to disguise his deficits with visual nonsense. Alden not only embraced the challenge of a big chorus opera, but had the ENO ensemble moving like a Bill T. Jones dance troupe. Would someone please invite Alden back to the States? We need him.

In the title role, Austrian soprano Sophia Larson riveted attention with her enormous soprano. Unfortunately, the thrill provided by the power of her Nilsson-like instrument was undercut by a grating timbre a la Josephine Barstow. Because she overloads her middle register, Larson's high notes were sometimes unsteady. Still the size and weight of her voice were impressive and we will undoubtedly be hearing more from her.

Edmund Barham's Calaf was competently voiced; he appeared to be a kind of English Michael Sylvester, pushing an essentially lyric voice beyond its compass. Janice Watson received a heroine's welcome at final curtain calls but it was undeserved. Her so-so lyric soprano never really soared in the upper register and her interpretation was nothing special, either. David Atherton's conducting spotlighted the elements of Bartok, Schoenberg and Stravinsky in the score.

Well, that wraps up Enzo's exploits abroad. I loved my first trip to jolly old England and encourage all you virgin queens to see it for yourselves. Covent Garden was absolutely fabulous, but ENO's queer-friendly milieu made Il Bordello's maiden voyage truly memorable.

Enzo Bordello

# JESSYE was dressy

but cold as a slab (as Mr. Sondheim would say) in her first attempt at one of the twentieth century repertoire's greatest star parts, 300-something Emilia Marty in Janacek's *Makropulos Case*, which finally had its Metropolitan Opera premiere on January 11. Her stiff performance, as well as some odd mis-

casting in other roles and a wretchedly misguided physical production, made this belated *prima* sadly not worth the wait.

Emilia Marty, queen of the blasée, totally self-absorbed but fabulously magnetic: I guess the Met management thought Norman could just play herself. But she has no self to play; when you've converted your offstage life into performance art, what is left to do on stage? Asking La Norman to play so arch a character is severe overkill, like directing Bruce Willis to do smartass or Meryl Streep to play quirky or Sylvester Stallone to act dumb. She layered mannered upon mannered: it was like watching the Statue of Liberty in the role of Mildred Pierce. The soprano's strongest onstage quality is a sort of monumentality, a goddess persona that renders her fascinating as Didon or Cassandre or Stravinsky's Jocasta, even, to a lesser extent, as Ariadne, but she's just too lofty, too inhuman, too much for most of the repertoire, including this role. Like other classic "femmes fatales" (e.g., Lulu, Kundry, Poppea, and, going farther afield, the great Dietrich and Garbo film roles) Marty is written cold and distant; it's the performer's task to complicate the character by playing the fire inside the iceberg, to warm her up with honest emotion. Maralin Niska did just that, I am told, at the New York City Opera's celebrated 1970s revival of this work; so, apparently, did Anja Silja at Glyndebourne last summer. Ms. Norman seems unwilling to reveal anything but a glistening marmoreal surface; no matter how striking, it cannot hold our interest for long.

And Marty is a hard sing: the vocal line is wide-ranging and declamatory; besides, the character is practically never off stage. Norman chose to "talk-sing" most of the time, which in the first two acts is not such a bad idea: her diction was generally clear if forbiddingly elocutionary ("Geev me the ahnveloope.") She did not rise to the challenge of the killer final scene, with its long and arching Straussian phrases. Coming at the end of a long evening, this finale is a formidable test of

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any performer's stamina, not least because the dramatic situation requires Emilia to abandon her carefully manicured self-control as she rapturously embraces death. Janacek's musico-dramatic intention is clear: as Emilia achieves greatness of spirit, at last she can truly sing. Obviously, then, it's not a moment you can finesse. Even after carefully husbanding her resources all night, Ms. Norman ran out of voice halfway through the scene, curtailing or faking the high-lying phrases. Her contortions of face and body suggested not so much a world-weary woman throwing off the shackles of unwanted immortality as an exhausted singer calculating her odds of finishing the performance. While Ms. Norman has preserved the celebrated bronze richness of her middle and lower registers, everything above the staff is strictly hit-or-miss: often well below the pitch and devoid of thrust or color. It is not surprising the soprano has severely curtailed her operatic activities: roles befitting her star status are simply too demanding for her current vocal estate. I predict she will move into the Astrid Varnay repertoire: look for Norman's first Klytämnestra within five years.

Perhaps in an attempt to compensate for their star's discomfort in the central role, the production team gave her the kind of full-out glamour treatment Glenn Close got in *Sunset Boulevard*: lavish gowns and wigs, emphatic lighting, splashy stage business-- even a mammoth billboard of Ms. Norman's brooding visage, visible through the windows of the sets for Acts One and Three. Her costumes ("executed by Barbara Matera, Ltd." which I take to mean the diva vetoed Dona Granata's designs) are flattering and quite grand: Ms. Norman looks just like Ms. Norman, only rather more so. In her Act One street ensemble of crushed-velvet swing coat, toque, and catglasses, Jessye could pass for Queen Latifah. I thought the gold-lame caftan and turban Marty wore for Act Two looked awfully familiar and I was right: Jessye models something very like it on the cover of her *Shéhérezade* CD. But the gayest drag of the night was Emilia Marty's pre-Raphaelite tea gown for the finale, just the thing for self-immolation-- sort of Norma meets Christian Lacroix. Lighting effects and staging were also calculated to distance the leading lady from the rest of the cast, presumably to emphasize Marty's isolation from humanity. A cool idea on paper, but in practice it only emphasized La Norman's already chilly rapport with her fellow singers: she came off like a soap star slumming at a slightly disreputable dinner theater.

All three leading men were more or less miscast. Graham Clark, for all his keen intelligence and obviously passionate commitment, lacked the heft and breadth of voice for Gregor (it calls for a James King); he is, moreover, simply too wired a performer to be believable as a bored rich boy: he needs to stick to mad geniuses and kinky aristocrats. Besides, he is a head shorter than Ms. Norman: their scenes together were elaborate exercises in concealing this potentially embarrassing contrast. Hakan

Hagegard, conversely, lacked menace as Prus. This character should be a modern-dress Scarpia; the Swedish baritone came off more like Papageno with a hangover. Donald McIntyre would have made more sense in this role: instead, his intense presence and granite bass-baritone were misplaced on the literal-minded Dr. Kolenaty.

Anthony Laciura was perfect, though, for the cameo role of Hauk, a part that has "ham" written all over it; as expected, he stopped the show with his brief Act 2 scene. Marie Plette and William Burden were fresh-voiced and attractive young lovers, though they seemed to be directed to play gloom and doom instead of callow enthusiasm-- surely a mistake. Ms. Plette showed enormous couth (and more than a little décolletage) in the RuPaul getup Ms. Granata designed for Act Two, and Mr. Burden deserves our sympathetic admiration for the dignified way he performed that bizarre and potentially embarrassing entrance from the auditorium-- and for his debut yet! (I still haven't figured out what that was all about.) A special word of praise to Ara Berberian, who turned four or five lines into a fully-realized and engaging character.

Well, I've tapdanced around the issue as long as I can: this Elijah Moshinsky production sucks. Character blocking seems to matter little to this producer-- the singers, reduced to mere props in his visual scheme, stood, slouched or sat before stylized backdrops, their positions on stage unrelated to the dramatic action. Against a vast wall of filing cabinets, a massive set-piece sphinx on an empty opera stage, and a creepy new-money hotel suite, he poses his chicly-costumed performers as though he were styling a shoot for *Vogue*. Everything moving or exciting about the opera was sacrificed to Moshinsky's quest for "images." At the end of Act One, Ms. Norman and Mr. Clark tried their best to play an emotionally complex love scene, but the audience was distracted by the intricate play of light and shadow that crept across the "film-noir" set, along the way completely obscuring the singers' faces. The myriad light cues and set changes for Act Two needlessly confused an already complicated series of brief scenes.

But the Act Three finale was by far the most disastrous of Moshinsky's transgressions. He pushed the cast downstage and dropped in the show curtain, forcing the heroine to play out her final aria "in one." The huge Met proscenium dwarfed Ms. Norman just at the moment her character must command the stage, and the radiant transfiguration music was interrupted by the noise of scenery shifting. Then, ignoring the simple but very effective stage directions for the finale (Kristina burns the Makropulos document, Emilia collapses, curtain), Moshinsky interpolated an irrelevant special effect: Ms. Norman's billboard exploded (well, actually, "fizzled" is more like it) as the diva lurched offstage. Huh? What the fuck is that supposed to mean-- when a star dies, her PR dies with her? Since when is the destruction of

outdoor advertising a metaphor for the end of eternal life? The audience, puzzled by this clumsy magic trick, had to refer to their programs to figure out the end of the story. (It is symptomatic of Moshinsky's "effects without causes" aesthetic that the opening scene-- the ladder business that led to the death of Richard Versalle a week earlier-- could be so easily restaged for Thursday night's performance. Nothing was lost by leaving Ronald Naldi safely on ground level; like so many of the producer's ideas, the scene was striking but meaningless.

*Makropulos Case* is the latest installment in a series of "daring" new Met productions (see also Jonathan Miller's *Pelleas et Melisande* and David Pountney's *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk*), whose reliance on postmodern cliché render them as dated as power suits and cocaine. This BAM Lite ("Looks Great, Less Meaning") style reminds me of that passé brand of interior decoration that produced a gorgeous but forbidding room. You know, those places that look so great in *Architectural Digest*, but no one could actually live there, or, to put it more bluntly, the kind of apartment where the guy you're fucking keeps yelling, "Stay on the towel!" Moshinsky's stage pictures are similarly inhospitable, as if he were afraid real drama might leave Crisco stains on the carpet. Like so many other "name" producers, he seems unwilling to accept the convention that stage direction, like conducting or singing, is a discipline of interpretation, not creation. An interpreter's first and most vital duty is to remain faithful to the artistic intentions of the true creator, in this case the composer. To accept this "limitation" requires a certain humility and willingness to compromise that may be alien to the mindset of so celebrated an artist as Mr. Moshinsky. Well, if that is so; if the works of Strauss, Verdi, Tchaikovsky and Janacek do not afford Mr. Moshinsky sufficient opportunity to exercise his exquisite aesthetic sensibility, I suggest he write his own opera.

David Robertson understands his duty as a conductor and will, I think, make a valuable addition to the Met's roster. He shaped the spiky orchestral lines with authority and grace, rising to poetic heights in the final pages of the opera. I myself prefer a softer-focus reading, but Robertson made a convincing case for his interpretation. I admire particularly the sensitive way he adapted his approach to his leading lady's limitations: some people I know (no names!) would have shown far less consideration. Mr. Robertson deserves extravagant praise merely for showing up after the horrific events of the past week; beyond that we should thank him with all our hearts for doing his job so well. In fact, he won a warm round of applause for his efforts; the production team, on the other hand, refrained from taking their traditional first-performance curtain call. Now, you tell me what that means.

--- James Jorden

## Slaughter of the Regiment

*La Fille du Régiment* is one of the very few Donizetti operas that have always played an active role in the Metropolitan Opera repertoire, its title role having never failed to appeal to those coloratura divas seeking to show off their funny side and scenic verve. Marcella Sembrich sang it in 1902; Frieda Hempel appeared as *La figlia del reggimento*, its Italian version (which as a matter of fact is far more than a simple translation) in two consecutive seasons, 1917 and 1918.

In 1942 *La Fille* was chosen for opening night, with Lily Pons carrying (in place of the Tricolor) the Cross of Lorraine in salute to the free French forces of Charles de Gaulle. The Met's 1971-72 production was centered around Joan Sutherland, supported by Luciano Pavarotti, Regina Resnik and Fernando Corena. Sutherland returned to the role in the Met's centennial season, this time opposite Alfredo Kraus.

Finally, it was only two seasons ago that Donizetti's opéra comique was revived with former Broadway star Harolyn Blackwell as Marie and Frank Lopardo as Tonio; if that cast sounds less than stellar, that is because the scheduled protagonist, superdiva Kathleen Battle, was spectacularly fired from both the production and the Met roster "tout court" by general manager Joseph Volpe, weary of the prima donna's notorious whims and shenanigans.

This time the primary reason for *La Fille*'s reinstatement was the curiosity of Luciano Pavarotti's tackling the same role that bestowed international celebrity upon him thirty years ago. At that time, he created an instant sensation by virtue of the boldness and defiance with which he effortlessly showed off his easy and extended top in the now-legendary "nine high C's" aria.

Why he has now decided to compete with his younger self is quite puzzling; one can only ascribe it to a blind megalomania. His voice, albeit remarkably fresh for a singer of sixty, obviously no longer possesses the same range and insolent facility of old. Moreover, years of miscalculation in repertoire choices have decidedly thickened and contracted his natural contraltino vocal structure, originally ideal for the role of Tonio.

Thus, on opening night, November 4, the high B's (for the "King of the High C's" thought it wiser to transpose) sounded strained and stretched, as if the tenor, in desperate fear of cracking, was trying to substitute will-power for diaphragmatic support; the effect was painful.

Pavarotti's performance was fatally handicapped by his total concentration on merely getting through the role. His only goal seemed to be to get to the end of the arias without clamorous incidents, resulting in incredibly rapid tempi, complete disregard of dynamics, and (hard to believe), phrasing even sloppier than usual. The splendid second-act aria *Pour me rapprocher de Marie*, as imbued with pianissimi and mezzecoci as *Ah, mes amis* is bursting with brazen high notes, was practically annihilated by Pavarotti, who moved through it with the grace of a caterpillar. (At the second performance a few days later, Pavarotti cracked the first high note, performed the following ones an octave lower and refused to appear in the second act of the opera. Jean Luc Viala filled in for him.)

June Anderson in the title role was no less a failure. In a recent interview to the magazine *New York* she admitted she dislikes, or to use her own word, "hates" the role of Marie. Apparently she was forced to sing it against her will; her contempt for the part was quite clear and visible on stage. Anderson merely walked through her music, limiting herself to singing the notes without trying to communicate the several facets of Marie's personality: her tomboy spirit, her sorrow, her love. Even from a purely vocal point of view, her performance was far from immaculate; in evidence were her usual flaws: a tendency to attack notes from below, suspect pitch, disturbing metallic resonances in the upper range, and, worst of all, a monotonously whiny timbre. In the aforementioned interview Anderson stated "...except for *Lucia*, none of Donizetti interests me. I find him dull as dishwater." The same judgement could be easily applied to Ms. Anderson's performance.

In the midst of such desolation, not much relief could be expected from the supporting roles. Michel Trépoint was inaudible as Sulpice, whereas Sarah Walker fell into the easy trap of caricaturing the Marquise de Berkenfield. Her sopranoish sound did not do full justice to this character's low-lying (and far more demanding than generally believed) music, especially at the very beginning of the opera.

Edoardo Muller tried hard to express all the radiance, wit and brilliance, as well as the poetic and pathetic atmosphere of this masterpiece. He was aided mightily by the wonderful orchestra of the Metropolitan opera, but his good intentions were constantly and severely frustrated by the blandness of his primadonna and the breakneck tempi demanded by the primo tenore. Sandro Sequi's production, which dates back to the 1971 season (and before then at Covent Garden), is modest when compared to the grandiose Met productions of the 1980's. Its painted flats and cutout trees are obviously meant as homage to a typical 19th century production.

Nick Fishbone

# Duelling mezzos

There used to be just two seasons in Texas: football season and hunting season. Lately, a new one has been observed: Will-Bartoli-Sing-or-Will-She-Cancel season. Richard Breath and Peter Hunter trekked from San Antonio to Houston to see if Bartoli would actually show up for her contracted *Cenerentolas* or if she would cancel, as she did last season in Dallas. The good news is that she sang; the bad news was that much of the time she was inaudible.

It is no secret that Bartoli has a tiny voice that sounds loud only when Decca's engineers pump up the volume. In an opera house (even one as small as Houston's Wortham Center) Bartoli gets totally drowned out by her colleagues. In solo passages she was brilliant; no one today can sing that lightning-fast coloratura as rapidly and accurately as she can. But *Cenerentola* is an ensemble opera. It was obvious that the whole cast was bending over backwards to help her. Even in the Act One duet, Bartoli stood right at the footlights while Raul Jimenez (Ramiro) stood a good 20 feet behind her, scaling back his voice-- and he still sounded three times louder than her. And in the quartets, quintets, sextets, etc., Bartoli could have been silently mouthing the words for all we knew. Is it really true she will try this opera in the cavernous Met next year? Someone needs to warn James Levine in advance that his engineers need to max up the mikes he denies are used there.

Enzo Dara as Don Magnifico did the best singing, but the house was packed with the uninformed, who know Bartoli's name (thanks to her massive publicity machine) and were there to hear her. Well, at least they **saw** her. (A bizarre rumor has it that Bartoli will return to Houston next season for *Nozze di Figaro*-- not as Cherubino, but as Susanna!)

Alternating with *Cenerentola* was Gounod's *Roméo et Juliette* in the most infuriatingly dreadful production Houston has seen in years. The score was butchered; entire minor characters were omitted so that the design team could invent two silent roles: a man with one black wing (Angel of Death, perhaps?) and a woman with two faces (Fate?) took turns stalking the stage.

Someone must have considered these two "characters" important: they were given curtain calls.

In the night's most offensive bit of stage business, men raped bare-breasted women before the prelude even began. Juliette and her father sang their first lines standing on the dining table. The lovers spent their wedding night lying on a giant tilted painting of a hand (the same piece of art hung earlier in Fr. Laurent's cell). The bed was unused. Roméo climbed up to Juliette's window on what appeared to be a swimming pool ladder; when we later saw the interior of her bedroom, the window was 20 feet of the floor. How did she access it so easily?

Houston, which claims to be a major international house but is usually sub-provincial, heard Maureen O'Flynn early in her career (Gilda in 1990); she was sensational as Juliette, once she climbed down off the table. Her Roméo was the wooden Marcello Giordani (who debuted in that same *Rigoletto*). He has the most schizoid voice since Huguette Tourangeau: the middle range is loud and ringing, while the upper notes are louder and out of control. He comes across as a hybrid of Franco Corelli and Ermanno Mauro. That is not meant as a compliment.

The day after the Houston trip, Richard and Peter jetted off to San Francisco for *Faust*, another *Cenerentola* and the annual Halloween riots in the Castro District. This last event, unfortunately, was rained out.

After sitting through the wretched Hal Prince production at the Met a few years ago, Peter swore he would never go to *Faust* again, but this time Sam Ramey was billed, so it was a must-see. He was stunning; loud, virile, suave and funny, interpolating some high notes baritones would kill for. Richard Leech was quite good as Faust; Nancy Gustafson was a blank Marguerite.

The set was minimal: a giant turntable with an outer ring that could also turn. (It was used here for 1992's *Guillaume Tell*.) The most interesting prop was a giant book the aged Faust perused from time to time. Then he lay down on the book and tried to roll a page around him like a blanket, eliciting a loud round of snickers from the packed balcony. In the final scene, Faust, not Marguerite, died, while Ramey cringed in defeat. It was as if everyone got confused and thought they were doing *Mefistofele*.

Then townspeople (not angels) ran into the cell and offered white bouquets to Marguerite, who sported a Susan Powter buzzcut. Even with no ballet and instant scene changes, this performance lasted a buttnumbing 3 hours, 45 minutes. Peter has renewed his vow NEVER to go to *Faust* again.

In contrast to Bartoli, Olga Borodina was not only audible but fabulously loud in the *Cenerentola* ensembles. This woman could probably sing Amneris at the foot of the Pyramids-- unmiked. She combines von Stade's femininity with Horne's gatling-gun precision in the coloratura cumshot moments. She should be dominating the stages of every major opera house in the world right now. No doubt the Met will book her as Suzuki in 2002 or so, just as they once offered Ramey Sparafucile for his debut.

This *Centerentola* performance was ruined by a trio of standees who applauded and screamed brava every time Borodina entered, exited, or finished a solo passage, even in the middle of ensembles.

Richard went into an AIDS hospice thrift shop and found a debut LP album by tenor Charles K. L. Davis. Despite never having heard of this person, Richard shelled out fifty cents, since the disk looked like it had been played only once. Davis sings all the tenor biggies-- *Rigoletto*, *Turandot*, *Tosca*, *Manon*. It's a light voice, like he's imitating Bjoerling, but to ride over the Puccini orchestrations, he pushes dangerously. The liner notes say he won the Met auditions in 1958, leading to this Everest album. Did he ever do anything else? Has anyone ever heard of him? Whatever happened to Charles K. L. Davis?

And finally, why do commentators on Catalani's *La Wally* always have to remind us that Toscanini loved this opera so much that he named his daughter Wally? No one ever mentions that the opera features another character named Walter, and Toscanini named his son, not the Italian Gualtierio, but, yes, Walter. Of course, this doesn't explain why he named the other daughter Wanda. (He could have called her Avalanche.) Maybe Toscanini just liked names starting with the letter W.

Richard Breath  
and  
Peter Hunter

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