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the queer opera zine

#19: Cathy kills...

busted!

ONCE AGAIN THE MET'S HIRED THUGS HAVE ROUGHED UP YOUR EDITOR, AND THIS TIME I WASN'T EVEN DOING ANYTHING WRONG.

LONG-TIME READERS MAY RECALL THAT A COUPLE OF SEASONS AGO THE MET'S CRACK SECURITY CORPS CAUGHT ME REDHANDED IN THE ACT OF STUFFING FREE *PARTERRE* BOXES INTO THE MET'S SEASON BROCHURE DISPLAY RACKS. THEY EXPLAINED THEIR POSITION TO ME IN A MEETING THAT CONSISTED OF SIX GUARDS SURROUNDING ME IN THE PLAZA, THREATENING ME WITH PHYSICAL VIOLENCE, CALLING ME A **"faggot with a bad attitude,"** AND FINALLY SUGGESTING I **get my "ass out of the plaza."**

I'M A LAW-ABIDING KIND OF GUY, YOU SEE. SO FOR THE PAST TWO YEARS MY BEHAVIOR AT THE MET HAS BEEN SQUEAKY-CLEAN. BUT APPARENTLY THAT'S NOT GOOD ENOUGH.

ON THE EVENING OF MARCH 23 I WAS MAKING MY WAY THROUGH THE CROWDED LOBBY OF THE OPERA HOUSE, VERY MUCH LOOKING FORWARD TO HEARING GREER GRIMSLEY AS JOKANAAN. I HAD A FEW COPIES OF *PB* IN MY HAND. SUDDENLY THIS SECURITY GUARD GRABBED THE ZINES FROM ME, GROWLING, **"You can't distribute that faggot trash here."** HE THEN DRAGGED ME THROUGH THE LOBBY, RIPPED UP MY TICKET, REFUNDED MY MONEY, THEN "ESCORTED" ME FROM THE BUILDING. WOW! IF SYBIL'S PSEUDOCOPS ARE SO ROUGH ON A MEASLY LITTLE ZINE EDITOR, IMAGINE WHAT DIRE PENALTIES THEY MUST HOLD IN RESERVE FOR SUCH ENDEMIC MET MISBEHAVIOR AS TICKET SCALPING OR CHILD MOLESTING!

THOSE WONDERFUL PEOPLE AT THE ANTI-VIOLENCE PROJECT HAVE GONE TO BAT FOR ME, SEEKING AT THE VERY LEAST A FORMAL APOLOGY FROM THE MET. I'LL LET YOU KNOW HOW THE CASE PROGRESSES. IN THE MEANTIME, HAS ANYONE ELSE EXPERIENCED HOMOPHOBIC TREATMENT AT THE MET OR ANY OTHER OPERA HOUSE? WRITE AND LET ME KNOW.

— JAMES JORDEN

So, La Cieca, you ask, what are they doing at the Met next year? Ach, better you should ask what they're not doing!

According to cüb reporter **Little Stevie**, (who actually **slept** with a member of the Met staff in order to gain this wisdom, so you know it's gotta be true!), they're not doing *Le Roi d'Ys*. Or *Cardillac*. And *Emilia di Liverpool* is also excluded from the **bulging** list of 28 operas (and that's counting *Cav* and *Pag* as **one**!) that crowd the first Volpe-style season at the Met. 1996-97 promises to be very old-fashioned indeed: you know, *Trovatore*, *Aida*, *Traviata*, *Boheme*, *Butterfly*, *Tosca*, *Rigoletto*. . . and very little of it, alas, with interesting or even entertaining casting (that *Cav/Pag* features *Dimitrova* and *Johannsen*-- why bother?)

New productions include a *Carmen* from Purgatory starring **Waltraud Meier**, **Angela Gheorghiu**, **Placido Domingo**, and the inexplicably ubiquitous **Sergei Leiferkus**. Cheer up. It could have been "from Hell" had the Met kept on **Giancarlo del Monaco** (the originally-announced producer); the **Big Bad Volpe**, perhaps fore-seeing the fiasco of his new *Forza* (definitely a *Mess* in *H-Moll*), cut short his contract. Earlier this year La Cieca heard **Franco Zeffirelli**'s name whispered as a replacement for del Monaco, but apparently the combination of Ms. Meier and a limited production soured the Zef on the project. So **Liliana Cavani** gets her big break.

Now that Mr. del Monaco has slunk away from New York, those opening night boos ringing in his ears, we may well ask ourselves just whose bright idea was it to hire this guy in the first place. Well, here's a hint: what tenor starred in three of the four del Monaco productions? And what tenor frequently guests as soloist and conductor at del Monaco's former base of operations, Bonn? And what tenor's wife hones her stage directing skills (recently, *La rondine*) in the same venue? On the other hand, maybe the final straw was del Monaco's very insulting and

quello

ques to

supposedly off-the-record statements made to the Italian press in reference to that other tenor-- you know, the roly-poly matrimonially-challenged one-- who against del Monaco's wishes is scheduled to appear next season in that same *Forza*. During that same ill-fated soiree a reporter asked why the "misera pane" was not on stage during the "Pace, pace" scene. Mr. del Monaco's snappy comeback: "Because with Miss Sweet in the production we would need a whole bakery." This guy should probably forget about a career in politics.

On to more uplifting things: *A Midsummer-Night's Dream* is an interesting novelty if hardly a natural for the Met: it's not one of Britten's strongest works (despite that creamy final chorus) and it's small-scale to boot-- what will all those solo strings sound like in Sybil's Barn? La Cieca predicts a heavily-papered house, since the only way this show sells is if there's a star in the cast, and that's not a word one ordinarily applies to **Sylvia McNair**. (Where's **Bryn Terfel** when you need him?) But **Jochen Kowalski** should make an ideally creepy and homoerotic Oberon, so it's worth a lookin'.

Lovely, legendary **Mirella Freni** will say goodbye to the Met in Giordano's *Fedora*, a production that has been touring the world's operatic capitals for about four years now. Latest word is that she has grown into the role and no longer resembles a teenager dressing up in her mom's clothes. Her Loris is, of course, Mr. Domingo, whose protégée **Ainhoa "Tatertot" Arteta** shows up as Olga the Bicycle Lady.

Overexposed **Vladimir Chernov** as Yevgeny Onegin? Right hair, wrong voice. **Galina Gorchakova** should make an unusually in-your-face Tatiana, but what is over-the-hill Francisco Araiza doing singing the 18-year-old Lenski? **Robert Carsen's** production will no doubt be "controversial": time will tell whether that's a good thing or a bad thing.

Fans of the Art of Mal Canto can look forward to **Maria Ewing's** trademark self-indulgent hambola caterwauling in *Wozzeck*, directed by that limp noodle **Mark Lamos**.¹ Proof of the decline of Western Civilization: the last time we

¹ Realistically, though, we might as well start getting used to him. He's sure to be a fixture at Kellogg's new "Glimmerglass South" at the State Theater. And, hey, you think maybe a new recording of *Wozzeck* on DG starring La Ewing will hit the stores just about the time this production opens? Duh.

heard the Berg masterpiece here, Goddess of Song **Anja Silja** was appearing in Supergenius **David Alden's** razor-sharp production! Wir arme leut, indeed! (And who the fuck is **Falk Struckmann**?)

America's sweetheart **Renee Fleming** graces two revivals well-suited to her honeyed voice and rather passive stage demeanor: *Rusalka* and *Faust*. Let us hope she has better luck in that ghastly **Hal Prince** staging of the Gounod better than did her predecessor **Carol Vaness**. The presence of **Samuel Ramey** and **Richard Leech** should help

YVES ABEL & HIS CONFRÈRES AT L'OPERA
FRANÇAIS DE NEW YORK OFFER TWO
 EXCITING AND **queer-friendly**
 PROGRAMS THIS SPRING. **JACQUES**
OFFENBACH'S CAMPORAMA CLASSIC *LA*
BELLE HÉLÈNE OPENS APRIL 24 WITH
ANGELINA RÉAUX CHANNELLING THE SPIRIT
 OF **HORTENSE SCHNEIDER** IN THE TITLE
 ROLE. AND FRANCOPHILE **titpigs** WILL
 REJOICE TO HEAR THAT **POULENC'S**
MAMELLES DE TIRÉSIAS WILL FORM THE
 CENTERPIECE OF THE JUNE 11 PROGRAM:
AMY BURTON IS THE EPONYMOUS
 TRANSSEXUAL; **CHRISTOPHER ALDEN**
 DIRECTS; THE SPOOKY *DAME DE MONTE-*
CARLO IS ALSO ON THE BILL. BOTH
 PROGRAMS AT 8 PM IN ALICE TULLY HALL.

matters considerably. Bel canto babe **Ruth Ann Swenson** will finally see all those Rosinas and Zerlinas pay off when the Met revives *I Puritani*, and **Francisco Araiza** shows up (again?) in *Bartered Bride* (he looks adorable in the dirndl!)

Dawn Upshaw and **Marilyn Zschau** will spice up a revival of *Hansel and Gretel* (Trivia in the making: Zschau sings the Witch while covering Brunnhilde!) And those starry-eyed media darlings **Bobby Alagna** and **Angie Gheorgiu** will bill and coo for our amusement in a revival of *Roméo et Juliette*, a revival made possible by a grant from Hallmark.

A telecast of the Met's stunning **John Dexter** production of *Billy Budd* features that ideal Claggart **Dwayne Croft**... as Billy. Now, it could have been much worse-- once again he's replacing the increasingly unreliable **Thomas Hampson** in the title role. (Just the image of wide-load Tommy in tight white bell-bottoms is enough to make me unswallow my grog. Even if Hampson could sing the relatively simple role-- which he can't, not with the husk of a voice that he can still muster-- his smarmy **Hugh Grant** Just-a-Gigolo persona is just so ultimately completely totally wrong for the ingenuous Billy!) What the role wants is, say, **Rodney Gilfrey**, who just last year at Covent Garden set all the London critics a-drooling over his buffed Budd. Even if he's not available, well, it's not as if the world is exactly lacking in cute young baritones. Couldn't the Met borrow a few from **John Crosby**?

So, have I left anything out? Oh yes, the *Ring*.

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La Cieca predicts: it's about 11:40 at the James Levine gala. **Leonie Rysanek**, **Christa Ludwig** and **Birgit Nilsson** enter to thunderous applause. They laud the maestro, joke a bit, giggle a lot. We begin to wonder if they're going to sing or just talk. Then Rysanek steps forward, smiles at Family Circle, and begins, "You can pull all de shtops out/ 'til dey call de cops out/ gwind your behind 'til you're bannt..."

oooooooo

Well, all right, La Cieca will be the **first** to admit that she has been just a **little** bit cuntly lately on the subject of stage directors, specifically the Met's roster of regisseurs, but now that the gruesome twosome of del Monaco and **Elijah Moshinsky** are out on their respective cans, the old gal feels somehow younger, fresher, taller, cleaner. And ready to say nice things about people. So it's a pleasure to report that **Lesley Koenig's** new staging of *Così fan tutte* at the Met is really pretty decent. With the invaluable assistance of a genuinely world-class cast (something we don't run into every night of the week chez Sybil), Ms. Koenig presents a bright, sunny show; if that's how you like your Mozart, you're bound to be delighted.²

Ms. Koenig's experience in reviving other directors' productions has clearly enabled her to find practical solutions to the most common and obvious problems besetting Mozart productions in a large theater. The first of these is the vast Met stage: remember, even **Jessye Norman** looks like a munchkin up there. So a six-character chamber opera can end up looking like a tea party in an aircraft hangar. Ms. Koenig's solution was simple: a false proscenium narrowed the focus, and a raked decklike stage floor encouraged the performers to stay well downstage. A series of mostly attractive set pieces designed by **Michael Yeargen** (louvered doors, a mini sand dune) slid on and off smoothly to suggest the varied indoor and outdoor locations. I do wish the unit set had offered the players more variety of acting areas: Ms. Koenig was in breach of Dr. Repertoire's rule #5 of operatic stage direction ("You can't do Mozart without benches"), leaving singers standing around without anything much to do for long periods. I really don't know why stage directors today are so opposed to letting singers sit down: it's a perfectly natural human behavior, not to mention a relatively comfortable position to sing in (especially as compared to kneeling or lying on the floor, of which there was plenty in this production). Over and over again, Ms. Koenig's good ideas for the beginning of a number ran

² On the other hand, if think *Così* should be a dark and creepy journey of psychosexual discovery, you're shit out of luck. Hey, this is the Met, remember?

out of steam: when Carol Vaness is left high and dry and looking ill at ease in the middle of "Per pietà," something is **definitely** wrong.

Moreover, Ms. Koenig's ideas for the very beginning and the very end of the opera left me bewildered: I just can't figure out what she was trying to say. In the opening scene, we find Don Alfonso and the two guys in an unfurnished shuttered room in a beach house. It's definitely daylight outside (just a few minutes later, Fiordiligi announces it's nearly noon), and the men are drinking. Is this where Don Alfonso lives? Have they been drinking all night, or are they getting an early start? Where are we? Well, the impression I got (from all that natural wood and the dunes and the charmingly dilapidated boardwalk and the misty grey-blue sky) was Fire Island. Sure, I have a dirty mind, but I just couldn't help wondering if this choice of locale weren't a clue to the boys' enigmatic refusal to commit. Even more obscure was Ms. Koenig's version of the finale ultimo: Despina advances to the footlights looking like her dog has just been run over. Huh? What reason does she have to get so bent out of shape, **especially** when you consider that she's singing the same happy peppy words and music as the rest of the cast? Of five audience members I polled, I got five radically different theories:

- Despina has betrayed Fiordiligi and Dorabella, who trusted her
- Despina feels betrayed by Don Alfonso, whom she trusted
- Despina feels betrayed by Don Alfonso, with whom she is in love
- Despina feels dumb for not seeing through the Albanians' disguises
- Despina realizes she is all alone and will end up an old maid

But this is all moot: Despina's reaction to the turn of events is hardly the most important issue here; rather, we should be focused on the reconciliation of the young lovers. And that all-important moment went for very little: I can tell you they returned to their original partners, but that's about it-- I got no sense of how the kids were going to mend their relationships. A certain uneasiness, maybe: but was that the characters or the performers?

La Cieca went in to this performance dreading the prospect of **Carol Vaness** as Fiordiligi: my recent

experience of her includes a lackluster Desdemona and Tosca and a shitload of cancellations. And her appearance on the cover of *Opera News* in the "Friends" haircut did nothing to allay my fears. Readers, I was wrong. What I saw on that stage was nothing less than the rebirth of an artist. I don't know what that personal trainer she's supposed to be dating is doing to her, but for Christ's sake, don't let him stop. He seems to agree with her: she's fucking fabulous. She looks smashing, with a trim waist and not a line on her face (I was on Row D, so I know); more importantly, the voice is working better than it has in ten years.

Venerable, vivacious
VERA GALUPE-BORZSKH
and those other donnas (prima and otherwise)
of **LA GRAN SCENA OPERA** return to the
Sylvia and Danny Kaye Playhouse with what
threatens to be their **MOST** gala program
EVER on May 3, 4, 10 and 11. The final
performance is a **BENEFIT** for the troupe's
New York Production Fund; irresistible
impresario **IRA SIFF** reports the event will
include drinkies with the divas and an auction
of such **to-die-for** memorabilia as a **Lakmé**
costume design autographed by **Joan**
Sutherland! You can bet your tiara that le
tout New York will be there, so call now!
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Her intonation is oboe-precise and you could eat off her fioratura. Vaness poured out those long difficult lines with such a glorious sense of repose. **Eleanor Steber** in her prime probably sang "Per pietà" this well, but I don't see how even that magnificent Mozartean could have sung it better. And best of all, her performance is full of joy: this is a happy artist at her peak in the music she loves. Thank God, Vaness has wised up and ditched the faux-Callas posing she indulged in the last couple of years: that all-purpose *angoscia* we saw in *Otello* and on various TV galas made her look like she was about to replace **Zoe Caldwell** in *Master Class*. In contrast, her onstage demeanor in this *Così* was crisp, charming, witty, intelligent-- first cousin to **Katharine Hepburn's** Tracy Lord. Dr. Repertoire (who in my opinion should start writing his own column if he has so much to say) calls on the Met to give Vaness a shot at some more of that eighteenth-century big-lady rep: Alcina, Cleopatra, Alceste, Iphigénie, Médée. And, well, what about *Fidelio*?

Debutante **Cecilia Bartoli's** is something that isn't supposed to exist any more: a real true star. One uses phrases like "lights up the stage" every now and then in this biz, but La Bartoli redefines that cliché: everything she does is electric. Even her mistakes are treasures: at the second performance (2/13), she fought a losing battle with a French door, finally lurching onstage with a great clatter of broken louvers, gabbling her recit, terror in those big brown eyes. And I loved it. She's just so damn human, not like the audio-animatronic stiff the Met props up in front of those **Michael Scott** sets the other five nights a week. An Italian-American stage director friend (who, like me, is no huge fan of Bartoli's voice) calls her a "mammarella," a little mama. Shorter, stockier and more hatchet-faced than Decca's photographers would have us believe, she is a comic actress in the tradition of **Giulietta Masina**; her closest American equivalents are **Andrea Martin** and **Tracey Ullman**. Bartoli shares with these great clowns a non-sexual (or maybe pre-sexual) quality: she behaves as honestly as a child, or an animal. Frankly, she did not need the built-up entrance Ms. Koenig devised for her (though she shlepped the house with great style); I preferred her chocolate-tasting bit: the buzz of pure pleasure was so strong she had to sit down.

The creamy nougat center of a Despinas performance is of course the two disguise set-pieces: here too La Bartoli excelled. Her Dottore was suitably wacky-sounding, voiced in a cartoonish chirp. The mezzo obviously has a terrific ear: her Texas-style Notary was note-perfect in its twang, though stylistically all wrong: I hate to be a spoilsport, but the notary is supposed to do the classic Bolognese whine (just like in *Gianni Schicchi*); changing that is a little like recasting Miss Adelaide as a Cajun. Had this been a less "period-realistic" production, I don't think I would have quibbled; as it is, I'd forgive a lot more than a passing anachronism for the chance to see Bartoli stalking around in that big-butt frock coat and four-inch mules. (While La Cieca has her **Will Crutchfield** hat on, let her just pedantically point out that what we think of as a "Texas" dialect could hardly have existed in the late eighteenth century when that area was still a territory of Spain; besides, what would an 18th-century Neapolitan chambermaid have known of New World speech habits?)

Now, the voice. Signorina Bartoli is no fool: she realizes all that studio-inspired finessed breathy self-indulgence would spell disaster in a theater the size of the Met. Accordingly, she places the tone well forward for maximum efficiency. She's at her best in recit; nobody since Scotto has rapped out those words with more meaning. True, in ensembles you can't much hear her, but that's true of most of the girls who sing this role. Her approach to the arias owes more to opera buffa than to what we think of as "Mozart style;" like Callas's "Marten aller Arten," it's weird but it works. To my mind, it was all to the good that she chose a relatively undemanding role for her debut: we could get to know her and her voice without the distraction of that machine-gun coloratura other people seem to like so much better than I do.

Dr. Repertoire has asked me to remind Ms. Bartoli that she is still just a baby; he asks that she ease up on the glottal attack, and that she try hard not to sacrifice the line for effect-- in her first-act aria she seemed determined to color every single word, to the point that the melody was sometimes obscured. Dr. Rep is all in favor of her vigorous commitment to her art; on the other hand, he wants her to be around delighting us

ten years from now.

And what a class act is **Thomas Allen**! Such mastery of style-- he was so at home in this music he seemed to be improvising on the spot. He is making a remarkable transition into the old-smoothie repertoire that **Hermann Prey** is just relinquishing. I cannot say that his rather sinister take on Don Alfonso was to my taste: the fashion these days is to make this character Mephistophelean; I like him with more of a Molière feeling. Surely Mozart and Da Ponte must have meant the dramatic action of Così to be a learning experience for everyone involved, not just the kids. Mr. Allen could make something very interesting and human from Alfonso's surprise at the denouement: what cynical old philosopher could have guessed that the couples would come out of the experience enlightened as well as disillusioned? One little thing: what the hell was Don Alfonso doing hanging around while the girls were in their underwear?

These three superb performers cast a bit of a shadow over their merely excellent colleagues. **Suzanne Mentzer** sang gracefully if generically, and won lots of laughs as Dorabella; I can't help feeling she's capable of more light and shade. Dwayne Croft looked leggy and butch and, well, let's just say appealing (all right, what I really mean is, you could tell even from standing room that he dresses to the left-- La Cieca does so hope that massive thang is getting the attention it deserves!); his voice has gained in heft and color in the past couple of years. Give him a good production now and he'll kill as Don Giovanni. He seems to have come down with a slight case of Baritone Acting, nothing more serious right now than a bit of jaw-jutting and the occasional lurch, but it bears watching. **Jerry Hadley** was having an off night, I'm afraid-- the higher stuff just didn't seem to want to work. He might have been

³ Miss B's special voice and girl-next-door persona will make her not so easy to cast. Even the *Cenerentola* the Met has promised us is going to be tricky. *L'italiana in Algeri* would work. So would *Preziosilla* (if anyone could afford her!) *Mignon*. And *La Périhole*. But most likely the Met won't give her much beyond *Susanna* and *Zerlina*. You know, if she could hack the German, I think she'd be fabulous as *Hänsel* and the *Komponist*. (If only someone would write an operatic *Star is Born* for her and Thomas Allen!)

better off omitting "Tradito, schernito." He did look very dashing in his burnoose, redkindling La Cieca's desire to hear him as The Red Shadow.

And I have to give James Levine credit for melding his six soloists into a convincing ensemble: the blend was festival-quality. New to Mozart alla Jimmy were a number of "improvised" ornaments to the vocal line: little turns and trills and grace notes, in very good taste.

(La Cieca wonders why this PC style did not extend to the recitatives: appoggiaturas were scarce indeed.) Predictably, the "Mendelssohn" trio in Act 1 shimmered like a precious gem; the horn obbligato to "Per pietà" was as luscious as a warm throbbing mouthful of... (well, Dwayne Croft, one can only hope). Levine seems determined to revel in exquisite orchestra sound at the expense of practically every other consideration, especially pace and consistency of texture. Frankly, he's in a rut: his Met performances the past few years have grown more and more tired, sometimes bordering on routine (that telecast of *Otello*, for example). Now, the *Così* wasn't nearly that bad, but you could see from his body language which numbers he really cared about and which he just beat time on-- the difference between poetry and prose. And toward the end of the (long) evening the tempi turned flaccid: the Wedding Canon just sat there.

There's this story about **Sir Thomas Beecham** and **Arturo Toscanini**. The scene, London in the 1930's.

Beecham: Arturo, dear boy, you look fabulous-- rested, refreshed, vital, and so slim and fit! By Jove, what's your secret? Exercise? Diet? Colonic irrigation? Eh?

Toscanini: None of the above, amico mio. Just five years without conducting opera, that's all.⁴

Maybe Levine (who, let's face it, is no longer a kid) should try a Toscanini cure himself.

⁴ Additional dialogue by La Cieca.

Ever wonder why *The New York Times'* **Bernard Holland** pads out his reviews with historical background, musicological musing, or off-the-topic political discussion (like, didja know that Wagner was anti-Semitic?) Ever wonder why Holland seem to write about everything but the performance itself? Because he's pretentious, you say? Well, maybe. Or can it have something to do with that hearing aid he wears?

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The torrent of interesting historical video releases shows no sign of abating: just this last month the notoriously frugal Cieca has sprung for three sizzling sixties performances: *Turandot* with Birgit Nilsson, the famous **Herbert von Karajan** Salzburg *Carmen*, and a recently-rediscovered **Magda Olivero** *Tosca*. Ah, nostalgia! Do you think the opera queens of 2025 will look back with this much affection on del Monaco's *Butterfly*? As if.

Carmen (Philips 440070 540-3) is based on one of those "What God could do if he had money" stagings that made the Salzburg Easter Festival into the Eurotrash tourist trap it is today: combine the most famous singers money can buy, a lush (but unthreatening and ultra-traditional) physical production, and Herbie the K in one of his Orson Welles moods (conductor/stage director/lighting designer/etc.), and you'll have a show the whole family can enjoy, assuming your family's name is Rothschild. I confess I have little patience for such bloated psuedo-artistic Karajanerei; it is to real opera production what *Sunset Blvd.* is to musical comedy. But, on the other hand, a distance of three decades lends a patina of charming unreality to these postcard gypsies in their travel-poster Seville: the whole film has a sort of MGM camp sensibility that can be quite fetching.

Hair this big has not been seen since *Valley of the Dolls*: **Mirella Freni's** honey-blond beehive suggests Micaela spent the whole morning under the drier; certainly her journey on foot all the way to Seville mussed not a bit her powder-blue frock, her dense false lashes, her spike heels or her Barely Pink lipgloss. And they must have air-conditioned that cigarette factory since

the last time I was in Seville: the lacquer on **Grace Bumbry's** sleek 'do is as solid as teflon. But the look works with her red minidress and jumbo gold hoops: *Carmen* as a Shirelle. In other words, forget the verismo: this is one of those productions where Frasquita's dress is white with black polka dots, and Mercedes' is, yes, black with white polka dots.

As far as drama goes, it's up to the individual performers: Karajan does nothing beyond basic Opera Workshop walk-and-pose stuff. His single innovation is resetting Act 3 on a beach (instead of in a deserted mountain pass); maybe it looked better on the notoriously hard-to-fill Salzburg "Cinerama" stage. But it makes the opening chorus risible indeed: "La fortune est là-bas"-- sunken treasure, perhaps? Or what about

Did you know that Puccini never approved the version of *Madama Butterfly* that we today consider standard? The first studio recording ever of the real true original *Madama Butterfly* (the so-called "LaScala" version) is on its way from Vox Classics under the baton of Charles Rosekrans. The 3-CD set includes as an appendix all the "alternative" material Puccini included in the "Brescia" and "Opéra Comique" revisions, including such familiar numbers as "Addio fiorito asil." And, coolest of all, the CDs are set up so you can program your player to recreate any of the three "versions" you like!

"Prends garde de faire un faux pas"-- a warning of jellyfish underfoot?

But Freni's googly-eyed charm counts for a lot, as does the young **Justino Diaz's** sexy suavidad (and, baby, it sure doesn't hurt that he sounds positively luscious!) The José of **Jon Vickers** is, as you might guess, untraditional but electrifying, a boy-next-door who goes psychotic bit by bit as we watch: it's a disturbingly believable performance, Brandolike in its consistency and imagination. La Bumbarina, unsurpassable as Eboli or Amneris, is simply too uptight, too gawky to be a natural *bohémienne*. But Karajan's camera flatters her exotic looks and trim figure: she is undeniably handsome and her face is strikingly expressive. Now and then even she even manages a hint of irony, a quality only the very greatest Carmens (I mean Crespin or Troyanos) can muster. But what this video is really about is singing: Jesus, but they had voices then! Bumby and Freni pour out phrase after luxurious phrase of pure vocal velvet: with plush sounds like these, who cares if the interpretation is a bit generalized? (Bumby's rocky career since she went soprano in the early '70s sometimes makes us forget what a phenomenon she was. Yow, what a voice! And remember, she was barely 30 at the time!) Vickers reins in his titanic tenor, up to and including a head-voice Bb to cap the Flower Song. But starting with the Act 3 finale he takes off the white gloves and the sound just gets bigger and bigger and more terrifying: yes, he screams some, but because he wants to, not because he has to.

The Vienna Philharmonic sounds creamy but absolutely unidiomatic: imagine a French brass section making those glacial sounds! Their maestro chooses the most corrupt edition of the score I've ever heard: even in New Orleans they don't do "L'Arlesienne" in Act 2.

One thing you have to keep in mind about those restored kinescopes of RAI telecasts is that they look like early episodes of *Dr. Who*-- in *Turandot* (Legato LCV 011) the images have that surrealistic nightmarish contrasty look, with a black halo around any source of light, and the sets are all made of mylar and bubble wrap and ostrich feathers and not much else-- the Forbidden City wiggles every time anyone moves. But it's fun-tacky, and as such not entirely inappropriate for Puccini's Spaghetti Eastern. And the costumes just about defy description-- La Nilsson herself is Queen of the Krewe

of Hunan in jewel-encrusted silver lamé, decked out in a spiky-banged bubblecut that emphasizes her resemblance to **Patrick Swayze** in *To Wong Foo*.⁵

The Lady from Sweden is in reliably blazing vocal form, though lip-synching to a prerecording is obviously not her long suit: that ill-at-ease grin is endearing if hardly appropriate for the ice princess. **Gianfranco Cecchele** and **Gabriella Tucci** are the sort of artists fans took for granted in the sixties; if only the Met could field such "routine" performers now. For me the high point of this video is the surprisingly humpy tenor's stentorian "Nessun dorma," sung to a gardenful of writhing catwomen-- in a word, *purr-fetto*.) The underappreciated Tucci is at her very best here shaping Liù's lines with imagination and an exciting temperament (not like your modern wimpy Liùs), yet never forcing her warm lyric soprano.

Legato LCV 016 preserves the only complete video performance of controversial diva Magda Olivero; this kinescope was considered "lost" for over thirty years (a bit of "Vissi d'arte" showed up in that *I Live for Art* documentary). At the risk of being blackballed as a real opera queen, I have to say I find her Tosca disappointing. Unflattering lighting and camera angles emphasize the diva's weak chin and massive overbite, transforming her into a double for Judith Anderson's Mrs. Danvers; her celebrated acting looks like bad silent movies, all eye-rolling and mannered hand gestures. I am told that on stage Olivero seemed always in motion, lithe and feline: little of that quality is in evidence here. The veteran artist's lack of experience working before the camera leaves her looking physically stiff and rather prim.

Even worse, close miking emphasizes her edgy, curdled timbre, making her sound scream on top and guttural in lower-middle; her obviously intelligent and heartfelt phrasing in the more sustained pages is severely compromised by a bleaty fast vibrato. Two or three moments ("Egli vedi ch'io piango", the pantomime following the murder, the discovery of Mario's death) suggest Olivero's genius: a mesmerizing synthesis of vocal

⁵ Perhaps Mr. Swazye could team up with **Wesley Snipes** (dead ringer for Jessye Norman) in a drag version of *Die Frau ohne Schatten*?

technique, musicianship, imagination and near-fanatical commitment.⁶ With only heavily flawed documents like this one to offer glimpses of her unique art, it's hard for us to figure out what Olivero was all about. Thirty years from now the next generation of opera queens will have the same problem understanding **Diana Soviero**.

00000000

And that's one reason I'm so overwhelmingly glad Ms. Soviero's stunning performance of *Madama Butterfly* March 9 was broadcast. It's there on tape for anyone to hear: a great artist performing at her peak. I was there (and not only there, but on Row C, darling, guest of the newly-buzzcut **Enzo Bordello** and his lovely vis-a-vis **Joanne Melzia-Bordello**): the show was bubbling along quite nicely until the cannon fired in the harbor. And then La Soviero started behaving like Melpomene stessa; after "Ei torna e m'ama" the place just went nuts. Not just applause, girls. Cheers. Loud sobs. Grown men weeping uncontrollably. (Thank God for **Wendy White**, who practically had to hold up the overwhelmed diva: she is surely this generation's great Suzuki.) That kind of moment what La Cieca goes to the opera for, and she thanks Miss Soviero for making her believe once more.

The remainder of the performance was just as "on"-- **Richard Leech**'s Pinkerton entered in Act 3 in a state of barely-controlled hysteria, a boy sent to do a man's job. Even the aimless blocking del Monaco "devised" for Kate and Sharpless looked taut and meaningful for once. And the finale, with Pinkerton brought on stage to see his son for the first time, was pure electricity.

Remind La Cieca to tell dear **Licia Albanese** that it's safe for her to go back to the Met: **Paul Mills** restaged this revival, editing out most of del Monaco's worst excesses. Gone are Pinkerton's drunk scene, the gunplay at the wedding, the kimono-ripping business, and (grazie Dio!) the blindfolded child on the swing. (Maybe next time Mills will excuse Cio-Cio-San and Suzuki from bathing the kid in the ditch during the Flower Duet.) But I'm glad he left in Pinkerton's **Tom of Finland** sailor buddies-- let's hope those two humpy supers return for

⁶ Let me emphasize that I'm not dishing the diva: I'm blaming the recording engineer for failing to catch her magic. The many magnificent pirate recordings of La Olivero singing live in a real theater minimize the flaws I mentioned, allow her widely-admired artistry to shine through.

next season's *Billy Budd*!

A standing ovation greeted the overwhelmed diva's solo curtain call. This kind of response makes me wonder once more why the Met management treats La Soviero with such disdain: all she ever gets is leftovers, those eternal Musettas and Neddas. Never a telecast, never a photo in the season brochure, never a display in the gift shop. And, of course, never a chance to wow New York with the "big ladies" she has made her own the last few years: Tosca, Adriana, Maddalena. (Sure, it's great that Freni is bringing her Fedora to town next year. But should she own the role?) Yes, I know there are worn patches in Soviero's voice. Twenty-five years of singing killer roles will do that. But she delivers like no one since **Renata Scotto**.

We should treasure this wonderful artist, especially when we are privileged to hear her in partnership with Richard Leech: what a touching and subtle thing they make of the love duet! Vocally and dramatically he is for me the ideal Pinkerton; after the delightful surprise of his jumping into this season's *Roméo* I'm looking forward to his moving into those other glamor roles like Riccardo in *Ballo*, Hoffman, and, one of these days, Lohengrin.

And was it **ever** fun backstage! You know that La Cieca rarely ventures into the nether recesses of the Met, but she made an exception just this once to join the mob outside La Soviero's dressing room. The weary but endorphin-charged diva greeted us warmly after getting off the phone with **Evelyn Lear** and **Rosalind Elias**, who rang up to report they were just as blown away by the broadcast as we were in the theater. Ms. Soviero revealed that her next Met season here is, yes, mostly Nedda (opposite Domingo, but still.) And it was truly an uplifting lesson in operatic political theory to watch the General Manager cooling his heels in the corridor for oh, fifteen minutes or so, before the afternoon's stars deigned to receive him. Be a friend to make a friend, Joe.

--La Cieca



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In keeping with its decade-long tradition of performing unusual works (Catalani's *La Wally* or Nielsen's *Maskarade*) or original versions of Verdi's operas (*Les Vêpres Siciliennes*, *Simon Boccanegra*), the Sarasota Opera Company headed by its musical director, Victor De Renzi, has presented a most interesting revival of the 1862 St. Petersburg version of *La forza del destino* in alternation with the familiar revision first performed in Milan in 1869.

fishbone

Before reviewing the performance, a few words concerning the two versions may be appropriate. The 1862 opera opened with a Prelude, replaced in 1869 with the famous Overture. The first two acts remained substantially the same: Preziosilla's Inn Scene solo was originally a semitone lower, and, more significantly, the melodic line in the Leonora-Padre Guardiano sustained important alterations in the revision. The final two acts were subject to major and drastic modifications. In 1862 "Una fatale" was a semitone higher. The encampment scene consisted of Preziosilla's couplets "Venite all'indovina", Trabucco, Melitone's sermon, the Rataplan, and then the "quarrel" duet; the act ended with an extended Scena and Aria for Alvaro, "Qual sangue sparsi." Written for the exceptional instrument of the first Alvaro, Enrico Tamberlick, this aria is remarkable for its very high tessitura and neurotic tension, and did not make its way into the final version. Verdi, all too conscious of the difficulty of finding another tenor with the same vocal endowment, replaced this piece with a much more accessible arioso in which Alvaro expresses his intention to take the cowl. (It is interesting to note that the original aria was more ambiguous, stressing the character's death wish). In the 1869 revision Verdi reordered the scenes, concluding the act with the Rataplan.

The most striking alteration of the opera was the finale, which disconcerted and horrified the first audiences. Don Alvaro wounds Carlo onstage, then joins Leonora for a brief and joyous cabaletta of recognition. Carlo concludes that the couple have been living in sin all these years; with his last strength he stabs his sister. She dies quickly, without the familiar redemption trio. Padre Guardiano, Melitone and a

chorus of monks rush on stage to attempt to restrain Alvaro, who insults the Padre, proclaims himself a messenger of Hell (to which Melitone answers, "I knew it all along!") and then hurls himself over the cliff. The opera ends in a shocked pppp.

The drastic revision Verdi undertook is unique in that it was undertaken solely for dramatic purposes. Verdi's letters offer overwhelming evidence that the decision to rework the plot was in fact the publisher Ricordi's: the "Redemption Trio" was the idea of Antonio Ghislanzoni (future librettist of *Aida*) who was engaged to rewrite Piave's original text. It appears his inspiration came from Ghislanzoni's libretto for Petrella's *I Promessi Sposi*, based on Manzoni's famous novel: here too a basso cleric and a soprano heroine placate the raging tenor hero. Verdi's affection and respect for the great novelist are likely reasons for his willingness to accept a denouement so divergent from Rivas' original play. For better or worse, the success of the new *Forza del destino* at La Scala in 1869 doomed its parent to oblivion.

The Sarasota performances confirmed my suspicion that the 1862 *Forza* is a far more coherent and theatrically effective opera than its later reworking. For one thing, the action more fully justifies the title: all the characters are indeed victims of destiny. If Alvaro survives, Carlo's obsessive wish that they must die together ("A entrambi morte!") loses all its ominous force.

Director Michael Scarola did his best to make this wide-ranging story gripping and believable. His very traditional production was faithful to Verdi's and Piave's *disposizioni sceniche*. Although the Sarasota Opera obviously operates on a rather limited budget, it nevertheless succeeded (as always) in producing a lively and thoroughly enjoyable performance. Even the old-fashioned painted drops were fascinating, especially the imposing Velletri castle or the charming Gothic portico of the monastery. Victor De Renzi conducted the score with breathtaking dramatic impetus, abetted by a flexible and skillful orchestra. His emphasis on dramatic involvement did not prevent him from giving due care to the lighter moments of the score (such as a very lively tarantella), which the composer emphasized were as significant as the main plot. The very youthful chorus sang with exceptional precision and accuracy, something that happens all too infrequently in smaller companies.

Tamara Wright (Leonora) gave the finest singing of the evening. Hers is a solid instrument with a beautiful middle range and a powerful top, allowing her to sail through the role's several high B's without discomfort. Her low range, where so much of Leonora's music lies, is not yet fully developed, diminishing the effectiveness of the declamatory phrases, especially in the duet with Padre Guardiano. On the other hand, her masterful use of mezzavoice and pianissimo was shown off to fine effect in "La vergine degli angeli" or her final melodia.

The original version of Don Alvaro is undoubtedly the most strenuous tenor role in the entire Verdi canon. Tamberlick flaunted an incredible range (his high C-sharp from the chest was particularly celebrated) and a facility for sustaining high tessitura; he specialized in high-strung dramatic parts. An ideal voice for this role should therefore combine squillo and an agitated, nervous quality-- Corelli and Lauri-Volpi come to mind. Robin Reed, the Sarasota Alvaro, boasted a very reliable high register, surfing effortlessly through the part's many high B's and B-flats, and sustaining a climactic high C at the end of his cabaletta. But astonishing high notes are not enough if the rest of the voice shows evidence of a premature wobble and an opaque timbre.

Lawrence Alexander sounded overparted, lacking the depth and vigor of a true Verdi baritone. The final moments of "Egli è salvo" left him almost voiceless. Good performances came from Lorraine de Simone, whose Preziosilla was nastier and more abrupt than usual, and from Matthew Lau, smooth-voiced and compassionate as Padre Guardiano.

Every opera lover should feel indebted to Sarasota Opera for allowing us to become acquainted with this intriguing Verdi masterpiece. While it is difficult to overlook the various vocal shortcomings of this production, we should keep in mind that this opera calls for no fewer than six first-class singers, most of whom must be skillful actors as well. The Met's recent production provided a painful example of just how hard *Forza* is to cast. I was astonished that James Levine, that staunch advocate of absolute fidelity to the score, should have so thoroughly rearranged the score for the use of divo in distress Plácido Domingo. Now, be it understood that this writer does not subscribe to the unrealistic Teutonic belief that the score is the Verbum to be followed without a hint of personal input. He is perfectly aware that the moment of creation does not conclude when the composer sets down his pen, but continues through each performance. He detests "by-the-book" performances of Baroque or Belcanto operas without a hint of improvised ornamentation, Mozart without appoggiature, and daccapi deprived of variation or even cut altogether, as it still happens at the Met. This writer believes it is perfectly legitimate for a performer to adjust the score to his individual strengths and shortcomings. But in the later Verdi scores, wholesale cuts and transpositions are simply unforgivable.

Imagine the composer's fury had he attended the Met's new *Forza*, in which Mr. Domingo lowered by a semitone the aria "O tu in seno agli angeli" and the duet "Sleale!" and moreover imposed massive cuts (the duet ended so abruptly as to make the finale of *Il Trovatore* sound leisurely), and, most grave of all, altered the order of the numbers in Act 3 so he could rest up and then finish the act with his solo? Ironically, even this drastic rearrangement failed to suit the score to Mr. Domingo's current vocal means: he tiptoed around the many (transposed) high notes, and cracked the unwritten B-flat on "Uscite!" in the last act. This

performance ranks with Pavarotti's debacle in *La Fille du Régiment* as a classic case of *hybris*: too bad the Met audience is so rarely disposed to condemn it.

Sharon Sweet brought powerful high notes and little else to the role of Leonora. Biggest and most disturbing of her shortcoming was her difficulty in sustaining long phrases, owing to her flawed breathing technique and frankly rather rudimentary rubato. She conveyed nothing of the heroine's torment and remorse; standing and singing is simply not enough for one of the most psychologically challenging heroines in the Verdi canon.

The rest of the cast scored far better. Vladimir Chernov, though deprived of some of the weight and ring of his debut *Trovatore*, still flaunts a solid baritone and a solid understanding of the music. Robert Scandiuzzi, one of the best basses in the world today, was an excellent Padre Guardiano, but the biggest success in the production went to Bruno Pola as Melitone. Too often this vital role is assigned to a comprimario or to an over-the-hill buffo; Pola is instead exactly the primo baritono with a flair for comedy Verdi recommended.

James Levine's brisk and exciting tempi were apparently not to the liking of Mr. Domingo or Ms. Sweet, who dragged far behind. Perhaps Mr. Levine should sacrifice his desire to show off his virtuosity for the sake of a decent balance between stage and pit.

When staging operas in America, Giancarlo Del Monaco avoids the scandalously "updated" productions that have made his reputation in Germany. Aware of the basic conservatism of the Met authorities and the Met audience, the director has produced an effective, psychologically developed and visually impressive production, one of the best at the Met in recent years. Particularly fine were the Velletri and monastery scenes, and the idea of having Carlo and Leonora die on stage (as in the original). Although the gentlemen of the cast were scenically believable (especially Chernov, who stalked around Domingo in the last act like a lion pursuing his prey), the ladies looked ill-at-ease. Mr. del Monaco should be blamed for the Junoesque Gloria Scalchi's unflattering hyperactivity as Preziosilla, but nothing could be done to make Sharon Sweet look good. Del Monaco settled for keeping her in the dark.

BAM's presentation of Monteverdi's final masterpiece *L'incoronazione di Poppea* emerged as an uneven but highly fascinating production, in which Jonathan Miller's *mise-en-scene*, originally created for Glimmerglass, turned out to be the most striking element. The British producer, whose resume is saturated with "controversial" productions (La Scala's *Fra Diavolo* or the Florence "Nazi" *Tosca*, to name but two) has here created an exquisite *Poppea*, both simple in its modest scale (John Conklin designed a single set representing the facade of a Renaissance

Italian palace) and rich and fertile for the complexity of psychologically elaborate interaction among the characters, revealing itself in a myriad of intriguing details (including suggestions of Nerone's bisexuality). The costumes were lavish but somber, the only exception being in the use of gaudy colors for the protagonist.

The musical aspects of the performance were, on the other hand, less memorable and more open to criticism. *Poppea* has come down to us as two quite different scores, the "Venice" and "Naples" versions. It is the task of modern arrangers to "realize" the skeletal voice and basso continuo lines, resulting in orchestrations that run the gamut from a full classical orchestra to a tiny band of original instruments. Conductor Jane Glover chose the lean version of Alan Curtis, successfully avoiding dryness, sterility or (in a word) boredom by imposing decidedly "modern" tempi, resulting in a tense but thrilling performance. I regret, though, that so much wonderful music fell under the merciless blows of Ms. Glover's editing ax: several characters, including La Nutrice and La Damigella, were expurgated altogether. Such brutal editing might have passed muster 40 years ago, but hardly in these times of strict textual fidelity!

The major failing of this production derived from the casting: only a couple of the singers could offer the combination of secure vocal technique and dramatic involvement so vital for Monteverdi's characters. Phyllis Pancella portrayed a memorable Ottavia, impressive for roundness of tone and committed acting and Lisa Saffer (one of the few "international" singers in the cast) was a heartfelt Drusilla. Dana Hanchard offered a dramatically commendable characterization of *Poppea*, though lacking in voice; the same judgment applies to Daniel Sumegi's Seneca.

Miscasting marred three major roles. Arnalta was assigned to a tenor. Though it appears to have been a tradition in baroque opera to assign such "old maid" roles to tenors, the very low tessitura of this particular role strongly suggests the role must have been created by a contralto. (It should be noted as well that the tenor-en-travesti tradition actually dates from rather later in the century.) Casting counter-tenors in the two leading male roles was not only stylistically false (these roles were written to be sung by castrati or else women en travesti), but musically feeble, since counter-tenors simply cannot produce the combination of brilliance, power and virtuosity of properly-trained female voices. Drew Minter (Ottone) in particular was almost embarrassing in his faulty intonation and limp tone (Italians would say he is "arrivato alla frutta"). David Daniels made more of Nerone, despite an ungainly and tasteless register break.

--Nick Fishbone

The James Levine Anniversary Gala 1996:

"Ritual of Obedience"

Overture	to "Rienzi"
Lucia duet	Pavarotti/Swenson
Wozzeck	Behrens
Romeo duet	Alagna & Gheorgiu
Italian Song	Bergonzi
Depuis le jour	Fleming
Ghosts @ Versailles	Stratas & others
Moon song	Benackova
Largo al factotum	Chernov
Non più mesta	Bartoli
Figaro aria	Upshaw
Pearl Fishers	Alagna & Terfel
Werther	Kraus
Liebestod	Waltraud Meier
Mon coeur	Bumbry
Norma trio	Sweet, Zajick, Leech
In questa reggia	Gwyneth
Nemico	Milnes
Dich teure halle	Eaglen
Cat duet	Norman & Ludwig
Meine lippen die küssen so heiss	Cotrubas
Io son l'umile	Lee Price
Must the winter cum so soon	Von Stade
Alabama Song	Stratas
Che farò	Horne
Yak yak yak	Nilsson
Willow Song & Ave Maria	Caballe
Per pietà from Così	te Kanawa
Rosenkavalier trio	Fleming, von Otter, Grant-Murphy
Faust duet	Domingo/Ramey
Là ci darem	Bartoli/Terfel

Singing until 2:00 a.m. Dress: Heavy

readers want

Dearest Box,

Disaster! I don't have your number. I had wanted to phone you after the *OTELLO* broadcast to dissect the remains, but the number is not at hand. Oh well... good for the word processor. I'll have to stop stroking my pussy for a while. Oh dear!

We are starting a new performer category: BEYOND RETIREMENT. This is special probationary status for the likes of Sherrill Milnes and, after today's radio broadcast of *Otello*, APRILE MILLO. I'm sure you can think of others of the recent past - Mme Cossotto, Sig. Bergonzi, the former Beverly Sills and for sure Miss Horne, Miss Daniels and Mme Kabaivanska. I don't wish to be too hard on these venerable dragons but BEYOND RETIREMENT means you are too far over the hill to be enjoyable, but you won't quit! Foolish, foolish, frivolous, wasteful and obscene!

Today Miss Millo was truly BEYOND RETIREMENT. She gave us the most bizarre array of sub-technical effects I've ever heard. The pitch came and went ON THE SAME NOTES, even in the final scene. Talk about passaggio problems -- this lady had beginning and middle and end problems, from Port Authority to 30th Street Station. Poor wretched girl! She must be desperate. A whole series of Es, Fs, and Gs in the Willow Song and Ave Maria scene proved entirely unpredictable - we did not know and I guess she didn't, what was going to happen next. And such clearing of the throat; shades of late-Lisa Della Casa. Most tellingly, Millo brought the head voice ultra way down in the lower mid-range and chest, at moments a la Milanov; but, perversely, she still took, as she is always wont to do, the 'body' voice up into the upper mid and top ranges with the usual abandonment of pitch. Talk about cart-before-horse and commuter trains crashing head-on; whew! She's a vocal wreck. Yet, withal, in unstressed mid-voice moments there was some lovely tonal quality, in those times when the plangent vibrato was not cutting short her efforts for legato (assuming she was making any). Some momentary lovely remains of a once

splendid instrument. It's so sad. She's not even 45. If Tebaldi was her example it was a very bad choice. Damn!

Poor Aprile: Shouldn't rich opera homos everywhere pass the hat and buy the woman her retirement if she can't afford it? And, hey, somebody gotta hit the fagbar circuit in lieu of Bette Midler! 'Lypsinka' is not really cutting it; Aprile, go get 'em!!!! Imagine the final scene of Act I of *Rosenkavalier* at a lovely, smoke free, fagolino piano bar. I can't wait. If 'Prillo can't float that final 'G,' well Flora will volunteer. And all the old Dietrich songs! Boys in the back room get ready! [Did you ever ejaculate into a warm vibrating mouth while a soprano takes a fff high A in the front room? Or vicy versy? Well, hon, try it!! But, I always think a high B-natural is better!]

Domingo should quit, pronto, right now, before he slips into BEYOND RETIREMENT syndrome == he's *almost* there. They say he has sung Otello 203 times; that's 153 too many. I found him devoid of nuance, a loud and squally termagant. His Otello was so instantly jealous, so paranoid-on-demand, I had to take him, immediately, as a neurotic and lost interest. In Act II he was so soon enraged he had no place to go; no growth was possible. This Otello could take a lesson from even such blast-boxes as del Monaco who always managed to put a little something aside in Act II for later on. Isn't a tragic hero supposed to be a great man BUT with a flaw that ultimately brings him down? Well this old Spanish Otello was the other way around; this was no tragic hero - he was a neurotic fool almost at once! Iago says that Desdemona should be tired of that 'savage' by now; gosh, I was tired of him right away. Weren't you? Can a nice Venetian girl get tired of a big ol' Afro dick so soon? Maybe he had sexual dysfunction?! Aside from all that, (delicious irony), they say Domingo has a tiny peter; a really little ol' uncut cock. A female opera singer said all the girls know. And I believe it. He protests too much. Regular prostatic massage might improve his Otello.

Gad, James Morris! Gimmie a break. What is that staccato high note in the Act I 'drinking song?' -- an F# maybe? He did not even try; Warren used to savor it, even Merrill did. So... who wants to hear a bass sing Iago anyway? And they gave him a silver tray; maybe he will get the hint. Say, you know, I wonder why we don't hear Morris in Wagner any more? I have always heard once you sing Wagner, "you can't go back." But ol' cigarette-smoking Jimmy has gone entirely back and is trying Puccini and Verdi and zut alors, Mozart! Well, it's too late. The mouth and the vowel sounds are flapping open, flat and unresonant - waaaaaa; the blat of a squalling brat. I don't need to hear it; I wonder why did he abandon resonant tone? One thought: He sings down out of the lower right corner of his mouth and pushes the lower jaw way down; this moves his placement away from the mask and so he loses tone and quality. Hvrostovsky is doing the very same thing; he's still got a bit of youthful 'velvet' in his tone, but if young Dima does not reform his vocal placement he will soon enough be a character singer. If he's smart enough. [I wonder if he has a huge uncut Siberian dick? Something tells me so. (I actually prefer cut and always remember

what I was told in the Downtown Y in Houston, "anything more 'n a mouthful is a waste." Ummmm. I wonder.)]

Some rich old opera homo should take Dima in hand (?) and trundle him off to a really good American voice teacher (I know of two). Get that boy better technique. "In singing technique becomes the art..." the Lady said. How many know that?

Flora (Filled With Doubt)

Flora, amica... You're so much calmer now that the estrogen replacement is kicking in. As for Mr. Domingo's "Dick Johnson," well, send us a photo, Placido; we'll print it. -- JJ

Hey JJ,

Life has been hectic. Not much to report from the boring-as-fuck Hague operawise thus far. Saw an unbelievably shitty *Norma* with the traveling National Opera of Latvia (I kid you not!) We stood up and booed and told them not to take their dog show on the road to Italia; we were escorted out by the Dutch burghers who disapproved strongly of our antics and had to explain ourselves at the local bus tram to avoid having herring (wet, slimy and OH SO DELICIOUS!) forcibly fed to us.

Next on our hit list was De Nederlandse Oper's *Der Fliegende Hollander* in Amsterdam's notorious Stopera arts conglomeration. A perfectly good waste of a perfectly good gothic neighborhood, torn down to create yet another 20 century Arts Shopping Centre Monolith Behemoth. Senta was Karen Huffstodt aka LA CANTATRICE CHAUVE (see her picture in the program as a skinhead Salome) or else The Voice without a Centre (maybe she should sing the Woman without a Shadow instead of Gabrielle Schnaut, affectionately known to us queens as Gabrielle Shout after hearing her Isolde in SanFran in 1991, who unfortunately we missed lately in one lifetime to hear Ellen Shade (what's in a name, hey?) sing the Senta. Sorry to digress. The Dutchman was the respectable Wolfgang Schone who did managed to avert turning Wagner's shipwreck into a trainwreck with his believable coping. But best of all was the Humpy Little Steuermann, soon to be Parsifal in Antwerpen's production & I'll be damned if Queen Bee can remember his name. Buns to remember--huggahugga hunkamunka. I'll let him steer my ship any day.

(Sorry but this PC is being taken over by an actual biological female (QUEEN BEE as Fausto is busily engaged elsewhere.)

The highpoint of the lowlands was DEFINITELY the Riccardo Chailly-led Amsterdam Christmas Concert which featured the 3d & 4th Acts of Rossini's *Guillaume Tell*. Timothy Noble with a ratty ponytail and dumb earring trying to be Marvin the Hells Angel as Tell. Fat, dowdy shrieking

bad-hair-day-for-her Francoise Pollet (or shall we say Poulett because that's what it sounded like!) as Mathilde. Best of all a veritable Gigli soundalike Mr. Stuart Neill. STOP THE PRESSES THIS GUY IS THE REAL THING. Ugly as a dog but boy can he Sail the High Seas. Domingo would give his right nut to have those notes, in fact both nuts. This Guy has got to be heard as Arnold to be believed. We will see him next week in Rotten Damn in the Berlioz *Tedium* with Valery Gergiev and the Kirov Opera Chorus backing him up.

Also not reviewed at press time, the Kirov Opera is in the Hague (or, as the locals call it, the Hag) for Borodin's Prince Igor and Prokofiev's Gambler. QB & her liegeman Fausto are sure to crash (Tix \$80 - \$100 already sold out). Hardly wait to see Gergiev.

Coming up-- Gwyneth Jones in Duisberg as O MALVINA a one woman salute show in which Dame Gwyn channels the diva who was the 1st Isolde & shrieks out numerous deadly high A#s in Ortruds Invocation. Gwyneth should never stop-- lets freeze her and have her come back.

Speaking of, WHERE ARE THE DRAMATIC SOPRANOS OF YORE? Karen Huffstodt records *La Vestale* with Riccardo (Hunky) Muti alla Scala? Is nothing sacred? Where is the shade of Maria Callas to slash her throat at "Master Class"?????

O where o where are Rosa Ponselle and Iva Pacetti?????

And the question that tantalizes all New York: who will be Brunnhilde 2000? Gabriele Shout? Hildy Behrens?

Whatever happened to that blonde beautiful and stupid as a cow Jeannine Altmeyer? At least she looked good.

Maybe we should get Magda Olivero for Brunnhilde.

I promise you a serious pensee on the state of La Lirica & music in general. (The body of this mail was really written by a live biological female. I swear.)

With a song in my heart and a kiss for your ass,

Greg Munna

Ya know, I miss Jeannine too. I remember a 1989 Met Walkure in which she resembled an economy size Ann-Margret-- Family Circle Standing room retitled the opera Kitten with a Spear. That was the nite she dropped the aforesaid weapon during the 1st Hojotoho and it rolled down the rake. The Dramatic Soprano's Nightmare.-- JJ

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I hate Romans!

cries the Princess. She tears the silver sandals from her lovely little dovelike feet and hurls them over the railing. And just misses beaming Naaman in the process. Oh, yes, she's out of control, this daughter of Herodias. Spoiled. Bored. And the most fun we've had at the Met this whole year. Cathy Malfitano is back and we New Yorkers are indeed privileged to kneel slavelike in adoration of her utter glory as Salome, her greatest role.

No, I don't count last year's Butterfly as a real return. That was an *aufspring*, and a very heroic one, too-- the eyes of the world were on that new production, and Cathy saved it from total crash-and-burn when Carol Vaness (with infinite wisdom, so it turned out) cancelled. No, Malfitano didn't come off so well-- her singing-actress voice is not what New York thinks of as a Puccini instrument, and, at the risk of repeating myself, Giancarlo del Monaco's direction was stupid and depressing. Were Ms. Malfitano rather less even-keeled than she obviously is, she might well have hissed about this revival, "It's a RETURN, not a comeback. I hate that word!" Goodness knows, it was a very important picture, uh, opera-- the story of Salome. What a woman! And what a woman Malfitano is! Sleek, swirling, eerily at ease on the Met's sleazebare set, she introduced almost too much physical activity: was she short of breath once or twice? No matter. This was the kind of total performance that opera fans (and, God knows, opera directors) dream of.

And, no, it's not really quite a Salome voice, in the sense of a Nilsson or a Rysanek, or even a Caballe. Malfitano is a smart lyric who knows when to push and when to save herself. The voice has always been hardish, a little glassy: a singing actress's sound. Unlike many lighter-voiced Salomes, it is to her credit that she doesn't try to finesse the role-- she throws away nothing, not even the "I hate Romans" chitchat at the top of the show. She was beautiful in my own personal favorite portion of the role, the approach-avoidance scene with Jokanaan. The vocal writing here is every bit as luscious as the finale, but without the need for sheer brute vocal force. Malfitano found the girlishness, the fun that makes Salome's

obsession so creepy— exactly when **does** she cross the line between adolescent crush and fatal obsession? (About the time she fails to notice Narraboth's suicide, I would say. Others might disagree.)

But Princesses of Judea are judged on exactly two events: swimsuit (the dance) and talent (the final scene): Malfitano aces both. I don't know how to describe the dance except to say it's just a fucking dream come true: the dance you've always wanted to see: you don't have to meet her halfway or imagine what she's leaving out. The pinnacle of the scene had to be her unsupported backbend off the fire escape, swishing her silky hair in Herod's face. But the number wasn't just a series of erotic images: I have never seen even a real dancer-dancer do anything like the "emotional striptease" Malfitano laid on us. It was a whole psychosexual history in choreography: Lucinda Childs must know more about Salome than Wilde himself. My god, how does Malfitano do it? If vegetarianism can make you so intense, so involved, and (yow) so ripped, then pass me the tempeh. (And, FYI, she didn't go all the way; her "Maggie the Cat" silk slip was way sexier than nudity.)

The singer blithely refreshed herself with a flute of "Champagne" (more likely Gatorade!) and sneaked down into the cistern for a couple of minutes of well-deserved rest before sailing into the finale. Yes, I will admit at a couple of points I thought, she's not going to make it. But she did, just. Sympathetic conducting from Donald Runnicles helped more than a little. But what really got Malfitano through the killer final scene (this is when being an Isolde comes in handy!) was her committed, organic, on-the-body approach to the role: you couldn't separate singing from acting from thought. She **was** the performance. That state of total integration is what all singers (well, all the singers I know) seek— it's like being possessed by a god. It's what being an artist is all about.

And the Met paid her the compliment of giving her A-list support. Hanna Schwarz actually **sang** Herodias: what a difference it makes to hear a voice in its prime doing this role! (Here is the next great Klytemnestra. Keep an eye on her.) If she lacked the ultimate hauteur of her predecessor Helga Dernesch in the role, she wore that gold lame dress with pride, accessorizing her ensemble with an expressionistic makeup and punk-red wig, looking like Ziggy Stardust crashing off speed. Her performance was strong enough for her to risk omitting the traditional interpolated shrieks and groans, another welcome novelty. She's a strong comedienne too: with the help of the MetTitles, she won laughs for several of her drop-dead lines. ("My daughter and I are of noble birth. Your father was a camel-driver!")

Ms. Schwarz and Jacque Trussel made a younger-than-usual couple— the Herods in mid-life crisis. (I had the great good fortune of missing Kenneth Riegel, who bellowed and slurped his way through the broadcast a couple weeks later. His stage performance was described to me as "like Dom Deluise.") Trussel was a terrifically physical Tetrarch with a solid voice and impeccable musicianship, giving in his own way as persuasive a performance as Ms. Malfitano's. I'll bet he's a killer Peter Grimes.

Bernd Weikl sounded a little uninvolved as Jokanaan. His buttery voice is a bit leaner these days, and the top is not quite so easy. But he still produces a smooth and persuasive line, never resorting to rant. Alas, he now looks rather too bourgeois and comfortable for the emaciated prophet, and his stage demeanor is similarly lacking in fanaticism. *Gemütlichkeit* has always been his strong suit anyway, so maybe it's time for him to move on to other more congenial roles.

I have to say I didn't remember all that making out between Narraboth and the page the last time around— Mark Baker and Charlotte Hellekant were singularly believable in their homoerotic loveplay. This role fits Mr. Baker like a glove, or should I say, like a tight-fitting motorcycle jacket. The tenor wore his leather with pride, looking as humpy as he sounded. If Ms. Hellekant's warm lyric mezzo and striking good looks made the Page a little **too** attractive (with those cheekbones he could have his choice of all the boys in the palace), her butch take on the role made an interesting choice, quite unlike the wimp the character usually is.

Again I repeat my praise, admiration and love for Nikolaus Lehnhoff's mise-en-scene, as close to a perfect solution for this show as we are ever likely to see. The several changes, large and small, introduced to suit Ms. Malfitano only reinforced the nightmarish two-in-the-morning quality of the production. In particular, draping the head with a cloth until halfway through the final scene is a stroke of genius— when Salome finally unwrapped her prize, you could feel the thrill of horror ripple through the theater. I know it's too late now (the Met has probably already junked the sets), but the anticlimactic ending (the only real problem with the staging) is so easy to fix: have the musclegod executioner strangle Salome with his bare hands. Think what La Malfitano would look like flailing away!

claimed production of "Ecstasy."

LuPone Without the Song

"For years, people have told me that I remind them of Callas," Patti LuPone was saying over the phone. Now, she will give them another reminder. On July 2, Ms. LuPone is to take over the part of Maria Callas, created by Zoe Caldwell, in "Master Class," at the John Golden Theater.

Earlier this season, Ms. LuPone was on Broadway, performing in her own one-woman show. Taking on the role of Callas — she's signed on for four months — strikes her as the perfect conclusion to her year. "I started the season singing, and I'm ending it in a straight play," she said.

PERENNIAL DIVA

WHEN the soprano Jessye Norman arrived the other day at the New York Botanical Garden, in the Bronx, she looked queenly and radiant—just the way



Jessye Norman

she looks in "Ariadne auf Naxos," only without a tiara. After a stroll through some displays of herbs and perennials, she sat on a wooden bench and talked about her passion for gardening. "When I was very young, back in Augusta, I planted my own cucumbers," she said. "They're perfect for a kid to watch—they grow so fast." Now Norman is partial to the orchids and

Die Frau ohne Schatten

Opera by George Whyte
Music by Jost Meier

Inspired by 'Rent'

Bloomingdale's, caught flat-footed last year by the fashion phenomenon of the film "Clueless," will be on top of the hurricane of hype for the rock opera "Rent." The store plans to open a boutique, called For Rent, on the second floor of its New York store and fill it with clothes inspired by the show. It will hold a cast party on April 29, the night the musical moves from Off Broadway to Broadway, and to promote the new collection in its windows that week, said Kal Rutenstein, the store's senior vice president of fashion direction.

Mr. Rutenstein said that when he saw the show, he responded to "the idea of people who look stylish wearing old clothes, recycled clothes with new mixed in, young people in an urban environment."

He then asked Andy Gluck Frankel

Road Kill

Peter Hunter and Richard Breath got their 1996 off to an interesting start by driving from San Antonio to Dallas to catch the Dallas Civic Opera's *Elektra* starring Marilyn Zschau, Nadine Secunde and Helga Dernesch. The argument en route always concerns which opera cassettes to play during the long drive, although now that the Texas speed limit has been raised to 145, they don't need to play a Kurt Herbert Adler *Meistersinger* to fill the time void. Peter wanted to play one of his 32 Rysanek *Frau ohne Schatters*, but it's Richard's classic restored black Corvette, so they listened for the umpteenth time to his 1956 La Scala *Fedora* with Callas and Corelli, you know, the one where Corelli sounds so loud you'd swear he was wearing the mike cord as a cockring. So, somewhere north of Waco, as Richard hit the rewind button for the tenth time to hear yet again the final six minutes of Act Two, Peter screamed that they needed to hear some Strauss to get in the mood for *Elektra*, so they listened to the soundtrack as conducted by Böhm, sung by Rysanek and caterwauled by Secunde, which made Richard fear what her voice would sound like now.

For some reason, the *Elektra* was set in what looked like a prison camp in Nazi-occupied France. Barbed wire and gendarme uniform contrasted with a festive party atmosphere in the Palace. Orest donned a tux to slaughter Mommy. Clytemnestra hobbled around on modern polio crutches. Overhead floodlights were turned off and on by a central circuit breaker. *Elektra* tormented Aegisth and the first 20 rows of the audience with a flashlight.

Marilyn Zschau sported a wild mane of Diana Ross disco hair, and while many of her loud high notes were lasers of pain, her singing was committed and riveted. When she taunted her mother by kicking away the crutches and hovering over her collapsed body, the effect was thrilling. Later, when Clytemnestra heard the inaccurate news of her son's death, she herself threw away the crutches and rushed up the steps. Dernesch had a field day. Her middle and lower voice was great, but the frequent high notes degenerated into screamfests of overacted ham. Nadine Secunde was in splendid form. She looked young and often

No comment!

sounded rapturous, as if she had taken her prescribed Rysanek medicine in large doses.

Because this was a John Copley production, we had to have giant statuary and a splash of bright red. The latter was a velvet gown worn by Dernes. The former was a gigantic broken Agamemnon head upon which Zschau stood, knelt, perched, danced lay, climbed and, finally, died.

Wild ovations for the three ladies led to manic curtain call antics by the super-charged Zschau: high-fiving the descending curtain, peeking out to applaud the orchestra during conductor Graeme Jenkins' solo bow. (The program noted that Zschau will return to the Met next season as the Witch in *Hansel and Gretel*. What, was Helmwig already cast?)

As we donned our coats and filed out, we overheard a well-dressed Dallasite whine to her companion, "So how long is this intermission?" Dallas is not a Strauss town. The drive back from Dallas to San Antonio involved a Nilsson-Rysanek *Elektra* from Paris, complete with those prolonged ovations that define the phrase Golden Age," now usurped by so much Tinfoil and Plastic.

Once again Peter and Richard set sail for Houston for a double dose of the overly familiar (*La Bohème*) and the ultra-obscure (*Four Saints in Three Acts*). The *Bohème* was billed as a "traditional" production, which these days means only that Mimi and Musetta were sung by women. Herbert Ross, film director of such middlebrow hits as *Steel Magnolias* and *The Turning Point*, decided to cinematize *Bohème* with dissolves: Act Four started out on a street with Marcello and Rodolfo riding bicycles, with visions of Mimi and Musetta behind the scrim during the duet. Then the scene changed to rooftop of the building. (Ross updated the action to the 1890s, so we were treated to the Eiffel Tower, a car, Art Nouveau posters, and those bicycles.)

He also added freeze frames and some other things that just didn't make sense, something that seems to happen a lot when movie directors take on opera. Characters who had considerable difficulty descending ladders in Act One were able to sprint into the wings and vacate the stage for Mimi's death. When Rodolfo asked his friends, "Why are you staring at me," they were a good fifty feet away on the roof top terrace, on the other side of a scrim representing the "invisible fourth wall" of the garret. Or maybe there was no wall to begin with. Than could explain why the apartment is so drafty.

The voices were not memorable: Cecilia Gasdia was an OK Mimi and Vincenzo La Scola (Vincenzo, as he was called in the Houston Opera Cues magazine) was sometimes good. The program, by the way, promised only one intermission, but the big heavy cinematic sets required an extra break after all.

Four Saint in Three Acts as staged by Robert Wilson turned out to be a case of the Emperor's New Clothes. People pretended to believe they were seeing a brilliant masterpiece, but only the Male Ponytail/Black Turtleneck crowd really seemed to enjoy this intermissionless 90 minutes of Dada. Granted, Wilson created some stunning images, mostly during the long pantomime that went on while the audience was filing into the auditorium. The opera went downhill,

though, once the music started. Lots of cartoon cutouts dropped from above or slid in from the wings: Giraffe necks. Trees. Sheep. One palm tree slowly turning upside down. And all those saints gliding and sliding and grouping and posturing. Wilson banished surtitles on the pretext that the audience would spend too much time pondering the "meaning" of such lines as "dead led wed to bed the dead wed" or whatever the hell it was those thirty saints kept moaning. Houston was very cold to it all; New York will probably cheer. This production will be seen this summer as part of the Lincoln Center Festival. You have been warned.

This opera blows its wad in the first ten minutes and then goes nowhere fast. Brief bursts of hymnlike chorales quickly dissolve into repeats that don't develop. Even Philip Glass knows to affix his toodle-doodle-noodling to a plot with conflict. "Pigeons on the grass alas" made us think that at least we were going to hear a famous aria with a tune, but it turned out to be just a line of recitative. Gertrude Stein and Virgil Thompson might have been geniuses, but not in the field of opera, at least to judge by this work.

At the 60-minute point, the walkouts began, slamming the balcony doors behind them. Most of us, though, stuck it out until then end, hoping something would happen to justify all that went before.

Let 'em eat trendy!

Those loud noises you heard last week were the sounds of Houston Opera Subscription Renewal booklets hitting the wastebasket, as David Gockley unveiled next season's repertory and casting. Houston is the only company in the world that would dare to do two seasons in a row with no Verdi. Gockley had developed so arrogant an attitude toward his subscribers that he is now known as the Marie Antoinette of impresarios: The subscribers are hungry for Verdi? Let 'em eat trendy! 1996-1997 "highlights" include Galina Gorchakova as Tosca, Sheri Greenawald in Catan's *Florencia en los Amazonas*, Behrens as Salome, *Faust*, the original version of *Boris*, and a *Magic Flute* with Associate Artists. Gockley's most heinous sin is to announce tantalizing projects and then cancel them. For example, the *Tristan* announced last season abruptly became *Salome*. And so many other promising projects have also fizzled: the 1992 Rossini Festival failed to materialize, rumors of *I Capuleti ed I Montecchi* and *Forza del Destino* remained just that. The current buzz is Catherine Malfitano as Verdi's Lady Macbeth two seasons from now. How long before that turns into *Traviata*?

Undeterred, the boys jetted to New Orleans before the Mardi Gras vomit had ly dried on the French Quarter sidewalks. Their purpose was twofold: to

celebrate their 11th anniversary and to see a performance of *Andrea Chenier*. If one is to believe the somewhat self-serving program book, New Orleans was the reigning opera capital of the Western hemisphere throughout the 18th and 19th centuries. But, then, can one really trust a program that boasts a photo captioned "Richard Tucker as Eléazar in *La June*"?

Stuffed with rice and beans, bread pudding in rum sauce, pralines, beignets and Tall boy mint juleps, Richard and Peter waddled into the opera house expecting High Glamour, but found Hooterville instead. Befurred, bejeweled doxies in expensive orchestra seats rattled chipped ice in plastic cups while the Contessa di Coigny and her guests tried to party.

This *Chenier* starred True Power diva Linda Roark-Strummer, fabulously loud and verismatic to the extreme. She had no trouble drowning out her colleagues (not to mention the orchestra) in one of those under-rehearsed productions that practically shriek, "Every man for himself!" The title role was executed by the strangest tenor of the 90s: Vahan Khanzadian. This man looks 5' 1", with a gigantic head and shortened legs. Danny DeVito as Napoleon. Even in his high-heeled pumps, he was dwarfed by Roark-Strummer. His voice was often good, with a nice sweet expressive middle and a loud clarion top. The highest exposed notes came out more ringing than pinched, so he survived his ordeal.

Gérard was Yalun Zhang, who sounded more basso than baritone but managed to uncork a few impressive high notes. His acting was 1930ish posturing: the Act 3 chase of Roark-Strummer around the table was familiar from many a *Tosca*.

The curtain calls after Act 3 were totally bizarro. Although the applause had died out completely, the curtain rose on the chorus, so their relatives applauded. Then the curtain fell again, and the applause stopped, but after ten seconds, the curtains parted and the comprimario singers came out for a bow, so everyone dutifully applauded again.

Even sophisticates who trash Giordano's tunes would have been thrilled by the final duet, when soprano and tenor battled mightily, pushing each other louder and higher. (Roark-Strummer won.) The audience, whipped into a frenzy by the final high notes, drowned out the postlude as what looked like Mother and Little Son hopped onto the tumbril for their final ride through downtown Paris.

The sets were provincial flats, but at least the setting was Revolutionary France, not Saddam's Iraq or Evita's Argentina. One wonders, though, if the production team and surtitle scribe ever sat down and read through the libretto together: in Act 1, Maddalenasays, "I'll wear a white dress with flowers in my hair," and then returned a few moments later dressed in yellow. The orchestra was adequately maestroed by Anton Coppola, who turned out to be even more petite than the tenor during curtain calls.

Richard and Peter regret that next season's lineup of *Werther*, *Rigoletto*, *Fledermaus* and *Tosca* sounds too lame to lure them back to New Orleans for their twelfth anniversary.

Richard & Peter

Lo-Lo Clo-Clo Jew-Jew (et moi!)

Making a list of all the things to hate about Whyte and Meier's flopera *The Dreyfus Affair* just isn't practical-- it would take a lot longer than the opera itself. (About the only good thing about this appalling piece of musiktheater is its brevity-- only ninety minutes. If the creators can manage to cut about an hour and a half, they will do us all a service.) But I do have one particular issue to address: in the second act, the crypto-fascist racism of *fin-de-siècle* Paris is symbolized by the appearance in the Moulin Rouge of a bevy of beefy drag queens singing the lilting "Yid Polka." Now, we're all adults here, and of course we all know that anti-Semitic transvestite can-can dancers are still a major threat to world peace. But, if I may be permitted to get politically serious for just a moment, I would like to ask what the fuck the Mr. Whyte (the librettist) and Laura Alley (the producer) are implying. Do they believe drag leads to racism? Or does racism lead to drag? Or do they believe both "vices" are merely functions of some larger underlying evil? Or... could it possibly be that the production team was fresh out of original ideas, and fell back on that dreariest of clichés, the use of cross-dressing as shorthand for "fascist decadence?" (Like, remember Joel Grey in *Cabaret*? Charlotte Rampling in *The Night Porter*? Helmut Berger in every film he ever made?) This "Nazis love drag" notion is purely a product of straight society (a hybrid of revulsion against effeminacy and fascination with gender confusion) and is purely false. Repressive political regimes always target "deviants" first, before even racial or religious minorities. Even in more liberal societies transvestites are still targets of prejudice, hatred and violence simply because they are "different." If Mr. Whyte and Ms. Alley seek to impart a message of tolerance and brotherhood, I suggest they first

cut out the fag-bashing!