

# Legal at Last!

parterre box [the queer opera zine]  
presents its 21<sup>st</sup> **bulging** issue:

Another Story: Patti LuPone in *Master Class*  
Dr. Repertoire's 10 Rules for Stage Directors  
**Queer-friendly Opera**

The Artist Formerly Known as Maria Ewing  
*Wagner, Spanking and Light Bondage*  
**Family Values: Incest is Best!**

The Stupid Pet Tricks of Maria Callas  
Thomas Hampson: *Bleating Man*

**The Most *Glamorous* Diva of them All**  
Heroin Chic at Bloomingdales  
*Fishbone at Carnegie Hall*

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

# parterre box

the queer opera zine



21: Legal at Last!

RENT

Now, Act II begins...

Exploitation of the suffering of those on the margins on society is easier than ever thanks to the brand-new collection of Unnecessary Objects designed by Eva Fruck Gankel. Look for glow-in-the-dark rubber hoses for tying off, wool watch caps to disguise hair loss due to illness and malnutrition, and sleazy 'seventies castoffs to inspire johns to pay more for unsafe sex. If there's a more revolting marketing trend, we'd like to see it.

Here's to heartless style  
Seventh Avenue's guile  
and selling out with a smile.  
Here's to a trend that's ultra lame.  
La vie bohème.

bloomingdale's

# questo/ que11o

I DO HOPE YOU'RE SITTING DOWN! Word on the street is that **The Artist Formerly Known as Maria Ewing** is about to make a MAJOR career move, following in the footsteps of such opera supernovae as **Ezio Pinza**, **Helen Traubel** and **Cris Groenendaal**. A reliable source reports that **The Artist Formerly Known...** Fuck it, let's just keep life simple and refer to her as



... anyway, SHE will follow up what will doubtless prove to be a TRIUMPH in the Met's new *Wozzeck* with a crossover debut--- on the musical comedy stage, replacing **Petula Clark** in the London production of *Sunset Blvd.* And I say, book your tickets NOW!

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I mean, I'm not opposed in principle to opera singers doing musicals. Look at **Shirley Verrett**'s big personal success in *Carousel*. And, to give just one more example, I thought **Patrice Munsel** was fabulous (and so leggy!) when I saw her do *Mame!* (La Cieca was only 12 at the time, but she was already plenty gay enough to be a good judge of **Jerry Herman**!) The secret to successful

crossover is, as we all know, casting, casting, casting. So I asked an expert (**Dr. Repertoire**, if you must know) for a few foolproof crossovers, and he came back with:

*The Desert Song* with Dawn Upshaw (Margo), Dwayne Croft (The Red Shadow), Jerry Hadley (Paul), Bryn Terfel (Ali Ben Ali), Paul Groves (Sid el Kar) and, (oh, what the hell!), Susan Lucci as "Azzuri."

*Lady in the Dark* with Frederica von Stade.

*The King and I* with Kiri te Kanawa (Anna), Patrick Stewart (The King) and Grace Bumbry (Lady Thiang).<sup>1</sup>

*Cats* with Jon Vickers (Old Deuteronomy), Jochen Kowalski (Rum Tum Tugger), and Teresa Stratas (Grizzabella)

*The Rink*, with Catherine Malfitano (Anna) and Cecilia Bartoli (Angel)

And, (think about it before you laugh too loud!)

*Most Happy Fella* . . . with Luciano Pavarotti

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On the other hand, EMI really missed the boat with that new **Thomas Hampson** crossover CD. Shouldn't it be called

**Bleating Man?** Yep, the baritone's voice is in **tatters**: he can't manage even a rudimentary legato in "If Ever I Would Leave You," a warhorse so beautifully written for the voice it practically sings **itself**. But that's just the cherry on the cake. Earlier on this misbegotten disc, for reasons best known to himself, the baritone attempts a VERY extended version of "Music of the Night." It's transposed down into the basement in an obvious attempt to help him cope with the "wide" vocal

<sup>1</sup> It does seem a pity to lavish La Bumabarina on a role with only one song, so Dr. Rep suggests this interpolation: In Act 1, when Anna and her son first arrive at the palace, we hear the crash of a gong, and Lady Thiang is brought in on a litter. She cries, "Welcome, Mrs. Anna, to the palace of the King!" And sings:

SIAM! DON'T UNDERESTIMATE SIAM!  
SIAM! YOU MUST INVESTIGATE SIAM!

Hey, it could work.

range of this piece-- that is to say, wider than the octave or so over which Hampson still retains some measure of control. True, the song is schlock, but it can achieve to a certain tacky grandeur when sung with balls and big sloppy portamenti. But he just pecks at the notes, like it was by Hugo Wolf. In this repertoire he's about as persuasive as Elisabeth Schwartzkopf wailing "When a Man Loves a Woman." And you won't believe the cracked, wobbly excuse for head voice (literally a bleat!) Hampson affects for the line "let your spirit SOAR."

It gets worse. A REAL leading man, **John Raitt**, shows up for the reprise of "Hey There." And this veteran performer, who is surely over 75, sounds better, fresher, younger and, God knows, way butch-er than Wideload Tommy. A pity Mr. Raitt's voice couldn't have been looped in the last page of "Soliloquy", too-- Hampson pushes so hard he turns the climactic "Steal it, or take it or DIIIIIIIE" into so much hog-calling.

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**Speaking of pork**, it looks like **Matthew Epstein** is a shoo-in to head Chicago Lyric. Will Mr. Superagent enjoy more success in Hogtown than he did in his stint as impresario of the Welsh National Opera? Or does this mean, in the words of **Enzo Bordello**, "the end of civilization as we know it?" Stay tuned.

\*\*\*\*\*

Boy, you've got to hand it to the promoters of the Next Wave Festival at BAM. Just when everyone else is still stuck in the seventies, the festival this fall will leap headlong into the **eighties** with new operas by two budding composers whose works have **no** New York exposure at **all**, **Meredith Monk** and **Philip Glass**.<sup>2</sup> La Cieca hears next year they're renaming the event the "Previous Wave Festival" and scheduling a concert featuring **A Flock of Seagulls**, **Laura Brannigan** and **Air Supply**. Grab your power suit and your cocaine and meet me there!

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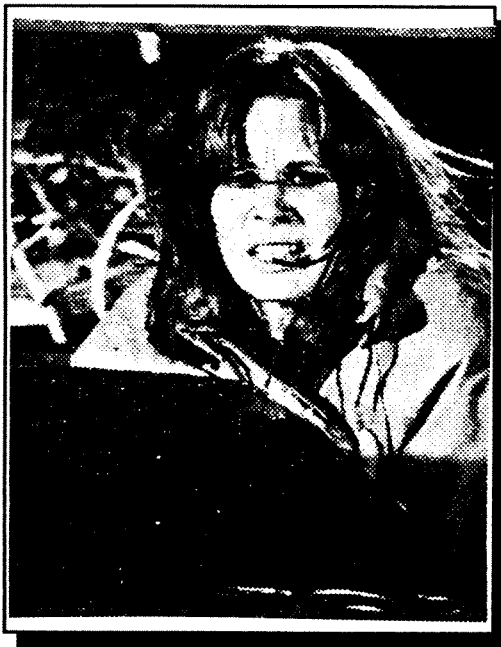
**More late-breaking news:** mean, moody, magnificent **Mignon Dunn** has joined the cast of NYCO's already tantalizing ("Can they really make **Sherrill Milnes** look fat?") production of *Falstaff* opening this fall. Cool, eh? La Cieca and Mignon go back a long way, you know. The

<sup>2</sup> Mr. Glass has come up with another of those scores you listen to while watching a movie with the sound turned off. Call it *Mystery Science Opera 3000*.

veteran mezzo was a fixture at New Orleans Opera back in the '70's when La Cieca was first spreading her operatic wings. La Dunn offered her Big Easy public (and boy, were they ever...but that's another story!) such rarities as *Hérodiade* (opposite Marisa Galvany and the aptly-named Jean Bonhomme) and *La Favorite* in the original. A couple years later I hitchhiked to Dallas to hear the Met on tour and caught Mignon's superhumanly diabolic Ortrud and Amneris, performances that defined for my generation the dying art of *épaulage*. So, you ask, will her Dame Quickly be funny? Honey, obviously you have never seen her lafforama interpretation of Herodias (primping using the silberschussel as a mirror is one of the SUBTLER gags!) Mignon gets more laughs in Salome than some mezzos do in *L'Italiana in Algeri*! See you in the First Ring!

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Erstwhile nightingale **June Anderson** (surely still reeling from her most recent New York season-- who could forget her *Fille du Régiment*, *Fledermaus*, *Giovanna d'Arco*, or, for that matter, that dress at the Levine Gala?) is continuing her exploration of more dramatic repertoire in the summer of 1997 when she is scheduled to star in a rare revival of **Luigi Dallapiccola's** *Volo di notte* at the Teatro Comunale di Bologna. In an updated version entitled *Aeroporto sessanta cinque*, La Anderson will play a flight attendant who must land a 747 passenger jet after the pilot succumbs to food poisoning. Joining Anderson in the cast are the young Italian mezzo-soprano **Elena Pronta** (who portrays a guitar-playing nun) and operatic legend **Magda Olivero**, who will emerge from retirement yet once more to grace the cameo role of passenger "Gloria Cignocanto."



Is it just me, or do **Dwayne** and **Richard Croft** remind you of the guys on *Frazier*?

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If the launch party was any indication, CRI's spiffy new compilation of works by **Gay American Composers** should be a *mad wild* success. The bash, sponsored by *Out* magazine and **Chip Duckett**, was a model of warm, unpressured softsell. A very charming gay and straight crossection (no model types, thank you SO very much!) enjoyed cocktails and nibbly bits before repairing downstairs at Fez for an informal concert by **David del Tredici** and **Robert Helps**. Now, you understand, contemporary classical music is not EXACTLY La Cieca's cuppa tea, but perfect date **Little Stevie** is ready to back me up, so, here goes. The del Tredici piano piece dazzled, certainly, as did its composer's virtuoso keyboard work. But Mr. Helps' "Reminiscences" just turned me to butter. Don't ask me if it's the dancer or the dance, but I have never heard such melting lyricism well out of a piano-- you see before you an abject Robert Helps fan. I recommend you start with his pieces when you sample this CD, before you go on to the more "difficult" others. (And the unusually literate liner notes, in which the composers debate the influence of their sexuality on their music, will also repay close study.) Congratulations to dear **Jody Dalton** of CRI and all these brave and talented and OUT!!!! gentlemen represented on this landmark disc! And, despite her usual opposition to such things, La Cieca is in **LOVE!!!!** with that semi-nekkid [and irresistibly fukked-up looking] piece of gogo meat on the album cover. He's just **SCRUMMY!**

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Did Pay-Per-View really advertise the 3 Tenors as a "Heavyweight Explosion?" Hey, what a concept! Interspersing a little wrestling among the medleys might, in fact, attract a whole **new** audience to opera.

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**How'm I doing?** Do let La Cieca and the rest of the gang here at *parterre box* know what you think about the zine. Like it? Loathe it? Got something to get off your chest? Or (best of all!), got any dirt for the column? Write to **parterre box**, 174 W. 76th St. #12G, New York, NY 10023, or call 917-953-2685. Best tip each month wins a coveted **parterre box** t-shirt!

—La Cieca

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Honey, it's more fun than singing in thirds!

A few years ago Terrence McNally spoke at the Lesbian and Gay Community Center about how the subject of his next play had just come to him. At a benefit for the Manhattan Theatre Club, he heard Nathan Lane do a monologue from *Lisbon Traviata* followed by a speech by Zoe Caldwell. That's all McNally needed: his next play would be based on the life of Maria Callas, to star Ms. Caldwell. The play wrote itself from then on, he said.

But *Master Class* is no valentine from a Callas-obsessed opera queen. It's a much stronger, more mature piece than McNally's usual work. Avoiding the trap of simply transcribing the events of the celebrated Juilliard classes of 1971-72, McNally concerned his play more with the facts of Callas's stormy life, peppering the narrative with the kind of biting divaspeak all Callasites wish she had used ("You there, in the third row. You don't have a "look." Get one!")

... but that's another story!

Although most of those who knew Callas assure us she lacked any sense of humor, *Master Class* is a very funny play; I thought Zoe Caldwell was practically bawdy. The heart of the play is a pair of immense flashback monologues recalling the diva's life with Meneghini and later Onassis as well as her stage triumphs. McNally creates great theatre in these scenes: I was totally drawn into the magic of Callas reliving the finale of *La sonnambula*, with a giant projection of the famous theater behind her and the voice of the real Callas blasting out "Ah, non giunge!" Also powerful is the scene when the voiceless Callas speaks the text of "Ah, non credea mirarti" to demonstrate to a student the emotional content of the aria.

When I saw Ms. Caldwell perform this role last year, I had no doubt I was witnessing a great portrayal by a wonderful actress, but I kept wishing for more of the "real" Maria. Caldwell excelled in the comic moments, also presenting a striking portrait of a broken woman struggling to stay in the moment but succumbing to her memories. Missing, however, was the tenacity, the example of discipline she was to her students, and the hidden quality of victimized bewilderment Callas carried through her last years.

Enter Patti LuPone. True, the physical resemblance is striking, but I had my doubts. Her work in New York has been primarily in musicals, and her television and film roles offered no clue whether she could carry such a huge role without the help of music. On the heels of her million-dollar *Sunset Blvd.* scandal and a successful New York concert engage-

ment, she was the surprise of the season when she was announced to succeed La Caldwell. And what a surprise she is! Ms. LuPone is super as Callas, dramatic, committed and powerful. If Caldwell entered as a wounded diva, LuPone strides on stage ready to kick ass. Here we see the fighting Maria, still riding the legend, not knowing what to do with "no voice, no Ari," but never admitting defeat. The actress brought vitality and passion to her scenes with the students, beautifully masking the diva's frustrated anger at not being understood. LuPone scores big in the two big set-pieces, registering the pain of wanting to escape, but never being allowed to free herself of the star persona-- the diva trapped in divadom. But what I liked best was the crafty way she delivered McNally's comic dialogue with a complete absence of humor-- just as Callas would have done. She found an ultra-serious quality that made Maria seem forbidding, but never at the expense of the flow of the dialogue.

LuPone's approach made more believable some moments that in Caldwell's hands sounded fluffy or inappropriate. When she quotes Onassis saying, "You give me class; I give you cock, my big, uncut Greek dick," LuPone's face is a wonder of shock and desire: she's obviously turned on, but the guy is such a pig! I can't help feeling the real Maria would have reacted just the same. (I really have to say that moments like this one seem totally out of character with the play as a whole. I know McNally wanted to portray Onassis as a slimeball, but instead he makes the Greek tycoon sound like a grade-B gay porn star.) I have always believed that Callas obsessed over this guy because he was the best (maybe the only!) fuck she ever had, and LuPone certainly plays that attraction, but without abandoning Callas's defensive aloofness.

She has put her singing voice to good use, too, croaking out a phrase of "Ambizioso spirito" in a hollow, pitiable tone that shocks everyone into silence for a moment, forcing us to remember that if the voice were there, she wouldn't be teaching in the first place. I thought it was a brilliantly painful addition to the original conception of the play.

I must say I was baffled by Vincent Canby's mixed review of Ms. LuPone in the *Times*. His criticism of the fit of the actress's Chanel pantsuit was pointless-- that is surely more the costumer's responsibility than Ms. LuPone's. More importantly, Canby seemed to overlook the fact that Callas herself was really rather common-- undereducated, humorless and unrefined. When she tried to act well-bred, she came off aloof and arch. Patti LuPone captures that quality perfectly. If at times that makes the audience uncomfortable, it is nonetheless accurate.

*Master Class* is worth a look, even if you've already been. And it's required viewing for anyone who loves La Divina.

-- Little Stevie

# Vēc Metropolitus

<The following top-secret document was snatched from the bowels of the mighty Met (itself) by an intrepid *parterre box* reporter who broke into the file room and scaled a rickety and unsecured 40-foot ladder to obtain for us the following details of the **Metropolitan Opera's 1997-98 Season**:>

**September 22.** *Carmen* (Domingo) opens the season. Also that first week: *Manon* with Fleming, *Ariadne* with Voigt, *Turandot* with Pavarotti (Sweet and/or Eaglen as the Princess). **October 16.** The new production of *Cenerentola* with Bartoli and Araiza [??] opens; also in the rep that month are *Tannhauser* with Domingo (yeah, right), and *Barbiere di Siviglia*. **November 20.** *Rake's Progress* (Hadley, Upshaw) returns to the Met, unless rumored budget cuts scuttle this show. Meanwhile, *Clemenza* with Vaness and *Don G* with nobody in particular. **December 13.** The Pav reprises Calaf (just in time for the broadcast, dig?) Look for revivals of *Peter Grimes*, *Boris* (with Ramey and Borodina) and *Don Carlos* (with the Alagnas). **January 12.** Dame Kiri headlines the Met's first-ever *Capriccio*. **January 30.** Bryn Terfel is the *raison d'être* for a *Hoffman* revival. In between these *sternstunden*, ho-hum revivals of *Trovatore*, *L'elisir* and *Flute*-- well, it's better than leaving the theater dark three nights a week. **February 13.** Domingo is the new *Samson* (opposite Borodina); the electric Gorchakova is unimaginatively cast as *Butterfly* starting the 19th. **March 9.** After a season's absence, Ben Heppner returns for a new *Lohengrin* opposite Voigt. Other March activity: more Alagneria when *Romeo et Juliette* is exhumed yet again, Malfitano returns to *Butterfly*, Placido moves over to *Stiffelio*. **April 6.** Big finish: *Meistersinger* opens. Save the date: **April 11** Malfitano does *Makropulos Case*, with repeats on the 13th, 16th and 18th. That's right, four times only-- so don't blink. Farther away: *Moses und Aron* in 1998; Heppner and Eaglen do *Tristan* (1999). And a new *Ring* will open the 21st century.



## the most glamorous diva of them all ...



... can be heard in all her glory on the new CD *Régine Crespin: ses plus grands rôles* (Laserlight 14263). This compilation of live material showcases the French soprano at her vocal peak, roughly 1957-1963, with samplings of her legendary Desdemona, Kundry, Marschallin and Fidelio, as well as rare Mozart (Fiordiligi in French!) A blazing *Ballo* duet with Franco Corelli concludes this Honey of a Disc.

After this you'll be hungry for more Crespin for sure, so check out the lavish 4-CD *Portrait* on EMI CDMD 64434. Here you'll find tasty excerpts from *Troyens*, *Damnation de Faust*, *Hérodiade*, *Guillaume Tell*, the big Wagner and Verdi parts (her "O don fatale" is like the crack of a whip!), and extended scenes from a French *Tosca*. One whole disc is given over to her refreshingly un-

mannered readings of songs by Schumann, Duparc and Faure. But the crown of this set is her ravishingly feminine take on the Wesdendonk Lieder—delicious! More Crespin in song can be found on London 417 813-2: this *Shéhérazade* is almost too sexy for public performance; her womanly rendition of *Les nuits d'été* also radiates warmth. (And don't miss her campy Poulenc *Hôtel*!) The soprano's operatic versatility is showcased on London 440 416-2— who else can take on La Perichole and "O ma lyre immortelle" with equal ease? You might also check out her Hunter College recital from 1966 on Melodram MEL 18028. Accompanied by John Wustman, she is in superb form in a long and demanding program. Among her complete opera sets, the "original cast" recording of *Les Dialogues des Carmélites* on EMI is an absolute must, as is *Die Walküre* on Decca. Her *Rosenkavalier* for the same label is a bit more controversial, but certainly among the best on disc. Her RCA *Carmen*, though perhaps recorded a few years too late, is a textbook on French style and acting with the voice—the classiest gypsy you'll ever hear. On the top of my wish list: the telecast of *Carmélites* from the Met. Mme. Crespin is joined by Jessye Norman and Maria Ewing for this thrilling performance that (for no good reason I can think of) is not currently available. —JJ

## Dr. Repertoire's Ten Simple Rules for Stage Directors

Surprisingly enough, those old farts like Verdi and Wagner and Rossini and Mozart actually worked in *real theaters* (didja know that?) and along the way learned a little something about what works and what doesn't. One thing they all knew: the overture is there to get the audience in the mood, to draw them in gradually.

A mimed prologue, besides distracting the audience's attention from the music, rarely adds anything to their understanding of the drama. How many *Cavallieras* have begun with Turridu and Lola making out in the middle of the town square? (At New York City Opera, she's running down the street in her skivvies!) Yes, I

### Don't stage the overture.

get it. They're boinking on the sly. But this is all information we find out in our own good time later in the show. And meanwhile, the striking effect of

the Siciliana sung as part of the prelude gets lost. This rule holds true for other instrumental pieces, too: no dream ballet during Siegfried's Funeral March, please. And have you noticed, those directors who stage the overture never seem to get around to blocking important scenes later in the show?

Some operas are stronger than others, we all know that. And some operas need a little dressing up to cover up their flaws. But if you feel you have to overhaul the opera completely, then leave it alone. Usually it's the "light" works that directors feel need tarding up, like they're not really interesting because they're not Great Art. (German directors believe "French" automatically equals "light," so even *Carmen* gets the treatment.) They hope to distract you from

the "triviality" of  
the work by piling  
on the old razzle-  
dazzle: acrobats  
during Handel  
arias; Merry  
Groups of Strolling  
Players mooching

for applause in Rossini; and, worst of all, anachronistic in-jokes  
like that done-to-death Tenor With The Hanky gag that shows up  
in every operetta. Try to think of your production as nouvelle  
cuisine: choose fresh, top-quality ingredients and prepare them  
simply but creatively. And go easy on the sauces.

Act 4 *Bohème* in a German production: Poor indigent Mimì is  
suffering downstage. Meanwhile, upstage, in the apartment  
across the street, a doctor shows up and makes a little rich girl all  
better. She's frolicking with *la famille* as Mimì expires. This  
message about affordable medical care was brought to you at the  
expense of the emotional meaning of the work. Now, don't get Dr.  
R. wrong. I am in agreement with Mr. Peter Sellars' dictum "All  
art is political," which is to say I believe that even the lightest or

## If you want to send a message, use email.

most "culinary" work  
has some serious  
meaning. But first the  
show has to be  
entertaining. That's  
what the audience is  
there for. If they realize  
you're preaching at  
them, they'll either stop paying attention or else they'll get angry  
in a non-righteous kind of way. Either way you've lost them. But,  
if you make your points subtly and entertainingly, the audience  
will not realize you're doing it. They'll go home and think about  
the issues you have raised. Their opinions will be changed in  
subtle and interesting ways-- but they will think they came up  
with these new and delightful insights all by themselves. So  
everybody wins, see?

Human behavior is like analog recording: it contains an infinite  
amount of data. Lighting effects, moving sets, smoke machines  
and, yes, even giant puppets with Ara Berberian's voice, delightful

## Trust the work or get the hell out of the theater.

though they may be, are finite, and  
thus just not as interesting or  
as moving as humans acting human.  
So, please, a little *Personenregie*. It's  
not as hard as it looks, if you'll just  
take the trouble to find out what the  
artists can do-- most opera singers are  
really warm and heartfelt actors when they're well cast. Look, one  
of the most moving acting performances on any stage had to be  
Luciano Pavarotti's Rodolfo (if you caught him on a good night,  
that is). He simply was a sweet, nice ordinary kid in over his head  
emotionally. Where this performance came from (other than the  
Pav's heart, that is) I can't say. But it should be our job as stage  
directors to find this kind of truth and develop it. Sure, playing  
with lasers is fun, too. But is the stage of an opera house really an  
appropriate place for boys and their toys?

A properly-designed set will encourage interesting and meaning-  
ful movement from the performers; a crappy set will just leave  
them standing there (these days, most likely in the dark). In

## You can't do Mozart without benches.

operas with lots of "reflective"  
ensembles like the big Mozarts, it's  
nice to have the option of sitting now  
and then, if only for the sake of  
varying the stage picture, and  
benches are handy, portable, and  
comfy. And, honestly, do you really  
think Donna Anna would sit on the  
floor? I know that every "traditional"  
Mozart production has the benches,  
and that you just can't hold your head up at the Stage Director's  
Club unless you do the opera COMPLETELY differently than it's  
ever been done before, but-- consider. Maybe the reason some of  
those traditions became so traditional is that they always worked.

So, when you're innovating, try not to dismiss out of hand such  
cliches as the Mozart benches. (Corollary to this rule: You can't do

*Traviata* without a chaise longue.)

## It's the characters, stupid.



"I just don't understand HOW that red dress looked so ugly on Montserrat. I mean, it was *charming* on Hildegard!" No, you don't often hear that, do you? But, what some directors don't realize is: even more so than costumes, blocking and business developed for one artist will not necessarily work for another. Surely you've noticed that, for over twenty years now, every Nedda at the Metropolitan Opera has had to attempt the hyperactive staging devised for Teresa Stratas' version of the Ballatella.

You know: run, jump, skip, leap, whirl, dance with the kids. . . and end up so winded that the A# goes to hell. Don't blame Mr. Zeffirelli: this stuff looked **fabulous** on La Stratas and in fact probably was the only reason she could get through the piece at all: you know, she tenses up really fast when she has to stand still. But that's no reason for everyone else to have to go aerobic. Birgit Nilsson used to say that a great stage director (she had in mind Wieland Wagner) is like a great couturier: he adapts his ideas to the individual. Smart woman.

Sure, lots of operas are sad. Or, more accurately, that's how the audience is supposed to feel. But not the characters, please.

When little Mimì is saying Addio or wishing for warm hands, she doesn't feel sorry for herself-- she's not that selfish. Sorrow is not a particularly energizing emotion; in fact, it tends to suck the force out of anyone's performance. It's also an

## **Sad is bad.**

invitation to the performer to react to the character instead of acting. So encourage the singers to find something else to play: angry or bitter or defiant or brave. But **not** sad, unless you want all the crying to happen on stage and none in the audience.

Other than giving the costumer a chance to indulge in flights of gay mad fancy, what exactly is gained by setting, say, *Così* in the Edwardian period? Are audiences really that much more familiar with the habits and mores of the 1910's than the 1780's? And updating means risking major distortion of the social background of the piece: the relationship between master and servant, for

## **One size doesn't fit all.**

example. (What employer in 1985 New York would dare hassle such smart, hard-working and, let's face it, *white* servants as Figaro and Susanna?) Or contemporary attitudes toward sexuality. (Don Giovanni in Victorian garb is not funny at all-- so all that lighthearted music is really rather out of place, isn't it? Well, one could cut it, I suppose. . .) The best bet is to stick to the original period (without getting too carried away and turning the opera into a historical costume parade) or else to use simple sets and costumes suggesting no period at all, what Dr. Repertoire calls "Star Trek" clothes.

Creation in the theater is a collaborative process, with no room for dictators. You really should keep in mind that when a singer questions one of your ideas, it may not be personal. It just may be a lousy idea. Bend.

## **Let the games not begin.**

Compromise. Talk it out.

And for God's sake, stop picking on that poor girl who's doing Susanna. Look, I'll make it simple. If you're

directing because you're into the power trip, do us all a favor and go to an S&M club instead. Or, better yet, a psychiatrist.

No effect is worth injuring a singer. Or a chorister. Or a super. Or a stagehand. If they're concerned about the possible hazards of some element of the production, it's your job to make it

ABSOLUTELY safe. You be there when that blank pistol is loaded. You walk that set and make sure it's solid. You do a fall on that rake and see how close you come to rolling into the pit. You take a good lungful of that smoke and say honestly that it's not irritating.

And then you let your cast give it a try. And if they still refuse, think of a different way to produce the effect. It is **not** fair to whine, to bully, to call a singer a coward, or, worst of all, to threaten, "If you don't do it, we'll hire another singer who will." Better you should hire another **director**. One who has a higher regard for human life.

- Dr. Repertoire

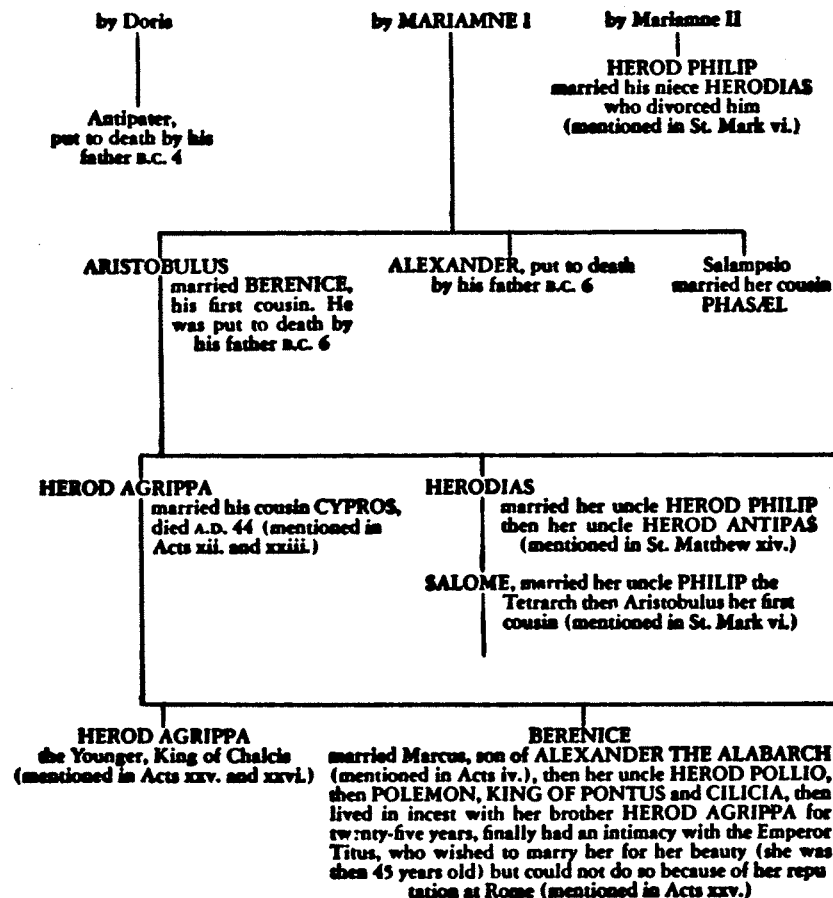
## **Updated is outdated.**

## **Safety last. And first. And always.**

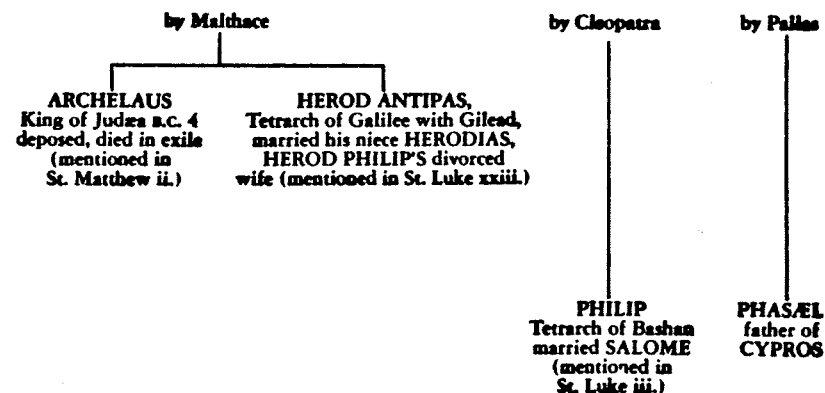
**HEROD THE GREAT**, son of Antipater, Governor of Judaea, and an Arabian Princess  
(mentioned in St. Matthew ii.)

- married
1. Doris
  2. MARIAMNE I, granddaughter of King Hyrcanus
  3. { Two nieces, names unknown
  4. {
  5. Mariamne II, daughter of Simon, the High Priest
  6. Malthace, a Samaritan
  7. Cleopatra of Jerusalem
  8. Pallas
  9. Phædra, mother of one Roxana
  10. Elpis, mother of one Salome

and had children



## The Royal Family of the Herods



AI married SAMPSI

married Master th

### FAMILY VALUES:

It looks like Oscar Wilde and Richard Strauss left out the *really* juicy stuff. According to this chart (from Robert Graves' *Claudius the God*), Herodias was not only Herod's brother's ex-wife, she was their NIECE as well! And the real-life Salome survived her run-in with John the B. to marry. . . you guessed it, her uncle. (You'll be happy to hear that she later cleaned up her act and wedded a first cousin.)

JSUS young

# readers rrrrrant

Dear Chaps [well, I am English!],

After the way James gushed over my little effort [THE CALLAS CIRCLE], how could I resist taking pen to paper for *parterre box*. Well, I couldn't! But what to write? It simply has to be my pet-subject, CALLAS. But what shall I write about her that you don't already know? Hmm.

Hands up who knows about what fan-mail Maria used to keep, all wrapped up in neat little bundles tied with red ribbon. Well, if you have read Renzo Allegri's book LA VERA STORIA DI MARIA CALLAS [The True Story of Maria Callas] you know that Maria did not keep the adulatory reams written by those who loved and idolised her. Oh, no! she kept the hate-mail, carefully preserving the most vile rantings of her most antipathetic correspondents. Allegri prints an astonishing number of these letters. I translate one for you now:

To the most swollen ball in the world,  
Maria Meneghini Callas,  
c/o Theater of Many Dogs "La Scala", Milan

Hail oh Callas, Empress of that sewer of moral and artistic leprosy that, fed by the stench that springs from Ghiringhelli the street vendor and from Oldani the lurid profiteering ruffian, is the theatre "at the ladder." It would be better, maybe, to have for you a stinking latrine, where you can try to correct the noises that come out of that hole in your arse of a face.

Dramatic soprano? Lirico spinto?!?! Lyric?!?! Light?!?! Or mezzo-soprano?!?! You are a joke of nature and a woman deformed, "Genoveffa the deformed"!! You should use the millions of that

imbecile your husband to cure the hatred of the Tebaldiani who chew on you and eat you!

Stop your noise! Shut up! The vegetable homage was due to you alone [these are old ways] because the homage your personality really deserves would be a sackful of shit! Farewell, Callas, truly callous. May your reign soon end among the turds!

And it goes on like that, page after page of obscenities and threats..

**Oddity Corner:** I guess that many of you know about Callas and her party-piece with the poodle [ no, not that one... I do that!] Well, she used to do duets with the little pooch. Yeah, that's right. Duets. Maria would vocalise and the doggy would join in with a howl or two. I am here to tell you, girls, that I am a proud owner of PROOF of this. In 1968 Maria was interviewed by Lord Harewood; I have been supplied with audio tapes of the UNEDITED version of this interview. Tapes are about twice as long as the more familiar "finished" version. At on point "Toy" gets into the room, the interview is halted, and Maria and friend go into their "doggy-duet" routine. It's hysterical. And it's recorded for posterity.

**Sex at the opera, part 1.** My first sex at the opera occurred during SIEGFRIED at Covent Garden about 10 years ago. I [how shall I put this?] "became acquainted" with a 22-year-old Frenchman in the first interval and one thing led to another. Later, at his flat, he was very much into being told how naughty he was whilst being spanked on his bare arse. Perhaps it was all that Wagner. If we'd met at, say, COSI FAN TUTTE, we probably wouldn't have gone any farther than a little light masturbation. The only other thing I remember about that performance was that Anne Evans sang Brunnhilde.

Ciao gioia,  
Steve

[Steven Mathers is the editor of the indispensable fanzine  
THE CALLAS CIRCLE.]





Dear Box,

I was a New York opera queen from 1959 to 1991 when I retired and came back home to Vermont. I caught the very end of Milanov, Bjoerling and Warren, Licia and MDM and all the Golden Age II that followed—debuts of Dame Joan, Birgit, Leontyne/Franco. Then Scotto (her Butterfly is unsurpassed!) Mirella, Montserrat, Horne, the 3 Tenors, etc. It was marvelous time to be in New York and I was at the Met (standing) 2 or 3 times a week.

My favorite singers are Callas, Corelli, Bastianini, Simionato, Birgit, Dame Joan, Siepi, Olivero, Merrill, and the 3 Tenors. I liked Régine too (remember *Werther* with her and Franco? And I was THE Gencer queen in New York. I had sources in Italy that chased her all over the place and taped everything she did—they'd send me copies and I'd spread them around. Leyla had a big following in New York but all she did there was *Cornaro* at Carnegie with Silipigni's group, and an *Attila* in Newark, also with Silipigni. Roberto Bauer, Bing's scout in Milan, hated her, so she was never asked to sing at the Met.

The singer I really hated the most was Leonie in Italian opera, but as much as I hated her Desdemona and Tosca and *Ballo* (scum!) I adored her in Strauss and Wagner. I caught her Aida in Chicago with Bjoerling, the only time he sang Radames on stage. The Nile froze! Dalis was a toilet. I avoided Tucker when I could—a great tenor voice but I just didn't care for it. There were also some scummy tenors from Italy who didn't last long. Mario Ortica-Bowl was one.

This is the first year I didn't tape ONE Met broadcast. Even the *Forza* which held such great promise, truly disappointed. Placido was dull and ordinary.

Is it true that Luciano's girlfriend is only 27 years old? What does that big cow do with a kid like that? How would you like to have HIM sit on your face? Or maybe she sits on his face. More than one way to skin a cat. Anyway, I really believe his career has ended, but he WAS glorious. Remember all those high C's he popped off in those *Filles du Regiment* with Joan? GLORIOUS!

A.B.

Considering her affinity for the belcanto works of Donizetti and Bellini, it is curious that in first twenty-five years of activity with her Opera Orchestra of New York, Maestro Eve Queler tackled only two operas by Rossini, *Guglielmo Tell* and *Tancredi*. But we should keep in mind that Queler's repertoire choices largely depend on the availability of star singers who wish to present a favorite role to their New York public. Consequently, *Tell* was revived due to the presence of Nicolai Gedda and *Tancredi* at the behest of Marilyn Home. This season's *Armida* was a vehicle for the new darling of New York operagoers, Renee Fleming, who knew one of her first and biggest international successes in the role of the Rossini enchantress at the Pesaro Opera Festival a few years ago.

*Armida* is one Rossini's most difficult works to cast. The first striking element is the presence of six tenor roles. However, not only are two of them comprimari in size and vocal demands, but also two tenors can be assigned two roles each, a practice which Rossini himself introduced. On the other hand, the title role is vocally one of the most demanding among those written for Isabella Colbran, its tessitura being slightly higher, and the range of emotions to be expressed remarkably wide, from cunning seduction to ecstatic love to mad vindictive rage. The rediscovery and revaluation of this magnificent opera is thanks to Maria Callas, who sang it in Florence in 1952. Although it has not enjoyed the same popular success and consequent frequency of revival bestowed on operas like *Semiramide* or even *La donna del lago*, *Armida* has been heard relatively frequently over the last three decades. Its most illustrious interpreters have included primadonnas like Christina Deutekom, June Anderson, Katia Ricciarelli, and now Renee Fleming.

This American soprano is gifted with a voice of rare opulence and lushness, supported by a first-class technique. Her range is impressive (*Armida* requires the soprano to sink to a low G) and her ability to spin a note remarkable. Two stylistic factors, however, prevented her performance from being utterly convincing. Her phrasing was often affected and mannered; particularly distracting and disturbing is her habit of

fishbone primavera

overstressing the first note of each phrase and reducing the sound on the second and third notes in a most brusque fashion, thus creating the impression of someone abruptly turning off the volume of a radio. Second, her coloratura, although sufficiently precise and accurate, is essentially "di grazia", whereas Rossini mostly requires the so-called coloratura "di forza", where each single note is tackled with vigor and "mordente". If one is unable to confer to the coloratura all its necessary vehemence and tension, most Rossini roles (especially the "opera seria") lose their *raison d'être* and become just collections of pretty tunes fit for mechanical nightingales.

Of the six tenor roles, only three require star singers. Interestingly enough, Rinaldo, the male protagonist, has no formal arias to sing. His three duets with Armida contain, however, gorgeous music of rare sensuality, and the third act *In quale aspetto imbelles*, technically a trio, is in effect a cabaletta for Rinaldo with pertichini. Goffredo and Gernando are each assigned a formal cavatina with cabaletta. Contrary to most of Rossini's Neapolitan operas which contrasted baritenor with contraltino roles, all the tenor roles in *Armida* belong to the "baritenor" category.\* Unfortunately, all the tenors featured in the Carnegie Hall performances seemed more the contraltino type. Gregory Kunde, although in better shape than last season's *Puritani*, confirmed the precariousness of his vocal technique, revealing the usual register breaks as well as a dry, glassy sound. Furthermore his coloratura was botched and aspirated. Bruce Fowler showed more reliable and sufficiently refined vocal abilities, even if his voice was too light for the role of Gernando. This impression was confirmed by his lack of incisiveness - and consequently of credibility - in the quarrel and duel with Rinaldo. The same judgement could be applied to the Goffredo of Robert Chafin, a tenorino with an unusually soft-grained and lightweight voice.

Eve Queler should have prevented the singers from ending their set pieces on the upper octave, as this practice, abhorred in Rossini's times, became customary only in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Otherwise, her greatest achievement was expressing the sensuality of the score with a masterly use of orchestral colors and timbres.

In her 25 years heading the Opera Orchestra of New York, Queler has extensively explored the Verdi opus, and particularly his pre-*Rigoletto* works, offering operas like *I Lombardi alla prima crociata* (twice, and in both cases

\* Mr. Fishbone explained to me that a "baritenor" was a lower, more dramatic voice which nonetheless had the flexibility for florid music and an extension as far as high D. Almaguerra and Pollione are both baritenor roles. A rare modern example of this type of voice would be Chris Merritt (ten years ago, at his best). A "contraltino," on the other hand, is what we would call a "tenorino," very light in weight, capable of extremely high tessitura. Most "Rossini tenors" are, more or less, contraltinos.-- JJ

it! I kept saying to myself, tightening my w... talk... on a fire stretched between myself and the...

charm of opera is this... extravagant recreation... tion.

with stellar casts: Scotto and Carreras in 1972-73, and Millo and Bergonzi in 1985-86), *I Masnadieri*, *Aroldo*, *I due Foscari*, *Nabucco*, *La battaglia di Legnano*, *I Vespri siciliani*, and now *Giovanna d'Arco*. The seventh opera in Verdi's canon, *Giovanna d'Arco*, has not yet enjoyed the post-war fortune which has smiled upon more or less coeval works like *I due Foscari*, *Attila*, and particularly *Macbeth*. Nobody, scholars and opera lovers, has ever failed to thrash the libretto, unanimously held as the chief cause for the lack of success of the opera. As a matter of fact the libretto, forged by Temistocle Solera, who vehemently denied any Schillerian debt, is simply ill-favored, so ugly indeed that it manages to acquire a beauty of its own. There are things in this world which are so horrendous that they succeed in inducing some sort of attraction. *Giovanna d'Arco*'s libretto, in its "ugliness" and absurdity, ends by becoming likable and in its way enjoyable. How can one not take a liking to those little demons who, singing verses of a marked folk flair, produce an effect completely antithetical to the one either composer and librettist hoped for? And if Giovanna and Carlo are strongly drawn characters, the role of Giacomo, the heroine's father, is not much more than an exercise in sketch writing and borders on the limits of plausibility.

Fortunately Verdi bestowed pages of superb music on this character, particularly the third act duet with Giovanna, one of the many examples of father-daughter confrontations which deck the entire Verdian output. Besides this duet, numerous other pieces bear traces of the best Verdi: for example the orchestral introduction to Giovanna's first appearance in the Prologue, with its chilling and eerie atmosphere evocative of the storm in the first version of *La forza del destino*, which did not make it into the final version of that work. And how could one not admire pages like Giovanna's unconventional cabaletta in the Prologue, which becomes a duet and then an a cappella trio, or Carlo's heavenly solo *Qual piu fido ancor*, with its highly poetic melody supported by a masterfully articulated bass?

As with all contemporary Verdi operas, *Giovanna d'Arco* turns out to be vocally quite a task for its interpreters. The title role, composed for Erminia Frezzolini (the role of Carlo was created by her husband, Antonio Poggi), requires a soprano with a remarkable range, perfect legato, energetic attack to face pages like the cabaletta, as well as a certain facility in coloratura. June Anderson was a pale protagonist. Along with her usual defects, including her annoying tendency to sing off pitch and to attack the notes from below (the so-called "sliding" or "glissato" attack), Ms. Anderson revealed a worryingly worn vocal instrument. Her agility is no longer what it used to be, and even her trademark upper range above high C sounds eroded and stiff.

The two male protagonists offered exciting, first-class performances. Gegam Grigorian's voice is very Italianate in sound, with a meaty yet clear middle register, which he wisely does not artificially thicken. His elegant phrasing reminds one now and then of Carlo Bergonzi. Grigorian furthermore

revealed himself to be an imaginative interpreter, giving his best in the sublime romanza *Qual piu fido ancor*, rendered with moving musical pathos, as if it were a veritable "death scene". No less impressive was Carlo Guelfi, exhibiting a big, dark and warm instrument, secure in every register. In short, Guelfi one of the most satisfying baritones currently on the market.

As usual, Queler paid more attention to the sound balance among the instruments than to the choice of tempi, which were not always convincing. In particular, one did not feel a sufficient rhythmic differentiation among the several sections forming the end of the Prologue, one of the most original moments in the whole score: the trio cabaletta following the a cappella section was not at all martial, sounding dangerously slack. On the other hand the care given to the orchestral fabric as well as the accompaniment to some of the arias were noteworthy; the overture was also expertly shaped. The chorus, the Princeton Pro Musica, gave an excellent performance, and the stereophonic effect created by the distribution of the chorus in several locations throughout Carnegie Hall was highly gratifying.

Statistics show that *La Cenerentola* has become Rossini's most performed opera in the past two or three decades in North America, second only to that unsinkable giant which is *Il barbiere di Siviglia*. Of late, major opera houses like Houston or San Francisco have staged it; more recently the Canadian Opera Company has seen it fit to reintroduce it to its audience after a 17-year interval.

The legendary Ponnelle production was chosen. First unveiled in 1969 in San Francisco, it has toured all over the world for almost 30 years, and now shows undeniable signs of its age. Although Albert Takazachas, the director in charge of reviving it in Toronto, was never associated with Ponnelle, and did not even try to recreate the latter's original blocking, the sense of *deja vu* was however fluttering in the air, with hardly any situations which the average operagoer could not have foreseen or expected. The problem lies in Ponnelle's very particular (in its time absolutely innovative) and therefore immediately recognizable style, from which dozens and dozens of producers have "borrowed" copiously over the past three decades, not least being Ponnelle himself in a few of his last and less original productions.

One feared the worst while Randall Behr conducted the overture in a pedantic and wooden manner, with the orchestra appearing to be reticent in following his baton. Surprisingly, things improved enormously during the course of the opera, and Behr's attention to the singers' needs was particularly noteworthy. Vocally speaking, this *Cenerentola* had several interesting things to offer. Not least was Enzo Dara, who despite his reduced vocal means proved once again why he has been considered the most prestigious exponent of the role of Don Magnifico for over 20 years. His "declamato" style is still impeccable and his comic timing never misses the target. The

two step-sisters, Sally Dibblee and Anita Krause, showed promising talent, with the latter revealing a velvety, creamy soft-grained mezzosoprano. Jorge Lopez-Yanez (Ramiro) would be heard to better advantage in lyric roles like *Traviata*, *Boheme* or *Rigoletto*. Rossini, particularly in roles like this one and Lindoro, requires a flexibility and an extreme ease in the upper regions of the tenor voice which Mr. Lopez-Yanez does not seem to enjoy. Umberto Chiummo was an admirable Alidoro, although he was perhaps too young-looking. However, this role should not to be assigned to comprimari or aging basses, as his *La del ciel nell'arcano profondo*..... is a veritable "opera seria" aria requiring agility and range, qualities which Mr. Chiummo sufficiently displayed. The only major disappointment was Brent Ellis's Dandini, sung with botched coloratura, limited range and extremely poor Italian diction.

All the attention was focused, however, on Anna Caterina Antonacci's first bite at the title role. Although she is unmistakably a soprano, she possesses a captivatingly dark low register that allows her to tackle some roles usually assigned to mezzosopranos. And, although this writer prefers her in tragic roles which give her the opportunity to show her immense *tragedienne* virtues and grandiose classical stage presence, she was completely convincing as the heroine, depicting Angelina's psychological progress from humble ash-girl to princess without ever indulging in the coquettish simpering and artificial posiness typical of the best-known current interpreter of the role. Vocally, her Angelina was a lesson in pure belcanto, secure over the wide range required by the role, from an impressive low extension to the astonishing high Bs of the final rondo, all of this adorned with the most imaginative variations. The audience shared my opinion and bestowed a triumph on her."

After a disappointing (because badly sung) *Tamerlano* by Handel, the Manhattan School of Music has redeemed itself offering a most enjoyable production of two Donizetti small comic masterpieces rarely heard in the United States. *L'ajo nell'imbarazzo*, premiered in 1824 at Teatro Valle in Rome, was Donizetti's first and unconditional breakthrough, after six years of fiascoes or lukewarm and ephemeral successes. One of the major reasons for the triumph of this opera was its well-crafted libretto by Jacopo Ferretti, based upon Giovanni Giraud's 1807 play, a biting satire of a bigoted and hypocritical aristocracy. Although most of the characters are still stock figures, Donizetti's music, already on its way towards a definite release from Rossinian forms and stylistic features,

"We are still impatiently awaiting a New York debut for this exciting artist who reportedly burned the place down as Ermione at Glyndebourne last summer. Perhaps the Met can offer her Adina in 2004. -JJ

remember  
and danger

exciting and making

about when  
and



*Il campanello*, on the other hand, is a product of the mature Donizetti, who by 1836 had already left to history a number of absolute masterpieces including *Lucia*. In contrast to *L'ajo nell'imbarazzo*, a so-called "melodramma giocoso," *Il campanello* possesses all the intrinsic features of a "farsa." Donizetti does not even try to deepen his characters' psychology; his sole purpose is to give life to a whirl of jests and jokes stuffed with amusing *double entendres* as well as witty touches like the famous paraphrase of Rossini's aria for Desdemona *Assisa a piè d'un salice*, which here becomes a *gelso* (mulberry-tree).

The most interesting element of this New York production was Renato Capecchi's staging, convincing proof that one does not necessarily need tons of money to create a brilliant and at times ingenious *mise-en-scene*. Capecchi's staging, supported by Claudia Stephens' beautiful costumes and the simple but pleasant sets of Jane Epperson, yielded a lively, dynamic and charming show. Its only flaw was that characters like Leonarda and Don Gregorio in *Laio nell'imbarazzo* and Don Annibale in *Il campanello* were too young-looking to be believable. Christopher Larkin's appropriately brisk tempi contributed to the overall sense of sprightliness that characterized the whole performance.

The cast, composed as usual of students of the Manhattan School of Music, was considerably uneven in quality. Instead of dwelling upon the vocal deficiencies of some of the singers, I would rather mention those who showed a certain potential for a future career: Stacy Tappan as Giulia exhibited good training and a pleasant voice, Pedro Rosales (the *Aio nell'imbarazzo* Enrico) displayed a high and soft-grained tenorino, and Shon Sims, who as Enrico in *Il campanello* (a role created by Antonio Tamburini, who was also the first interpreter of Don Giulio in *L'ao nell'imbarazzo*) showed off an agreeable *baritono brillante* with a good range.

The only singer of truly superior quality however was Madeline Bander, whom I remember as most effectively cast in Nicolai's *Die Lustigen Weiber von Windsor* last season. This soprano, gifted with a creamy lyric voice and remarkably fluent coloratura ability, is clearly ready for more important theatres. It was regrettable to see her wasted in the insignificant role of Serafina.

**-- Nick Fishbone**

# The Texaco Opera Queens

Good afternoon, Peter Allin. I'm Edward Dunce and we have a vastly knowledgeable and thoroughly closeted panel of experts with us here today. **Albert Innamorato** is a noted playwright and confirmed bachelor who is currently working on a play called *A Master Class with Renata Tebaldi*. **Father M. Owen Spree** is a professor of classics well-known for his hands-on application of the Socratic method. And joining us for the first time on the Opera Queens is **Cyril St. John DeWinter**, known as "Bunny," a former doorman at Covent Garden who is now head of Artists and Repertoire in the classical division of London Records. So, panel, let's get started. Our first question comes from Mr. Richard Breath of San Antonio, Texas. He asks, "Can you name the famous diva who over the years has had a string of high-class callboys at her service and has now finally married one of them? The two are currently trying to whitewash his colorful past."

**Mr. Innamorato:** I don't know, but I'd like to take this opportunity to say that I'm terribly bitter about Terrence McNally's recent success.

**Mr. Duncie:** Thank you for that insight, Mr. Innamorato. Now, here's a query from a Mr. Peter Hunter of Enid, Oklahoma, who wants to know if you can name the talented young American baritone who, let it be known, did NOT sing at the Levine gala, and whose nose-candy habit may well spell a quick end to his promising future?

**Mr. DeWinter:** I'm stymied. Does he sing at the English National Opera?


**Mr. Dunce:** No, I'm afraid he doesn't. But neither does anyone else. And now a question in a slightly different vein. Vic MacRapolus of Hell's Kitchen, New York, asks, "What was the ONLY accurate detail in the otherwise dreadful movie *It's My Party?*" I think Father Spree got his up first.

**Father Spree:** The only thing that film got right was the fact that there are NO opera queens in L.A.

**Mr. Dunce:** Excellent! Here's one from a Mrs. Phyllis Stein of Montréal, Québec. "Can you name the major magazine that has just

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killed a big story that analyzed the pro-Nazi leanings of a half-dozen conductors who later became rich, revered superstars on both sides of the Atlantic?"

**Mr. Innamorato:** Are we talking about Karl Böhm? I don't want to miss the chance to badmouth him for no particular reason except that I'm so bitter.

**Mr. Dunce:** Yes, we know, Mr. Innamorato. We gave our panelists the following question earlier this week, so they could prepare detailed answers. "When Roberto Alagna sings pianissimo, he makes a very funny face. What do think that face most resembles?" Yes?

**Father Spree:** I think he looks like a fish with indigestion.

**Mr. DeWinter:** I think he looks like he's drinking lemon squash through a straw.

**Mr. Innamorato:** I think he looks like a blind man who knows he's about to get a blowjob.

**Mr. Dunce:** Thank you, Mr. Innamorato. I bow to your superior knowledge of the subject.

**Mr. Innamorato:** You'll bow to my superior dick, you old queen. You think you're so smart, sitting there week after week with the answers right there before you. And, as for that cunt Maria Jeritza...

**Mr. Dunce:** I believe Mr. DeWinter has a comment.

**Mr. DeWinter:** The listeners may not be aware that Mr. Alagna is married to an exclusive London artist, the lovely and talented Angela Gheorghiu, and...

**Mr. Dunce:** And those same listeners may also not be aware that the earth rotates around the sun. Give it a rest, Mr. DeWinter.

**Mr. DeWinter:** I'll give you *this*, you superannuated faggot... and pretty soon you'll be singing "Must DeWinter come so soon?"

**Mr. Innamorato:** This all makes me feel so bitter. You know, once, when I was just a fat little Italian kid, Alma Mahler said to me...

**Mr. De Winter and Father Spree:** For God's sake, SHUT UP!!!!

**Mr. Dunce:** Ladies, please! Mr. Gene Italia, of West Hollywood, California, asks, "Where is Susan Dunn appearing these days?"

**Father Spree:** That's easy. On the side of a milk carton.

**Mr. Dunce:** Meow! Actually, I believe she was last seen teaching at Indiana University.

**Father Spree:** Same difference.

**Mr. Dunce:** We have time for one more question. "What famous baritone has grown unpopular with wardrobe mistresses because of his habit of leaving brown stains in his white tights?" Mr. DeWinter, I believe your hand was up there first?

**Mr. DeWinter:** Oh, I don't know. I'm sure it wasn't John Shirley-Quirk.

**Mr. Innamorato:** You know, Claudia Muzio could sing better than any of these modern sopranos, and she really liked taking it up the ass, too.

**Mr. Dunce:** As you have informed us so many times before, Mr. Innamorato. And speaking of "so many times before", I'm afraid those chimes are telling us we have to return to the fourth act of Puccini's *La bohème*. Back to you, Peter Allin.

**Peter Allin:** Thank you, Edward Dunce. All listeners whose questions are used on the quiz will receive the following gift package:

- the *Let's Cast the Ring Cycle* CD-Rom "Bored" Game
- from Chandos Records, the CD *I Enjoy Being a Girl: 14 Closeted Baritones Sing French Arias*
- from Deutsche Grammophon, a 3-CD set entitled *Schrei, Schrei My Darling: Great Screams of Leonie Rysanek*
- from Sony Classics, the "crossover" CD *Waltraud Meier Sings Bernstein, Weill, and Whatever Else Daniel Barenboim Feels Like Hearing*
- John Ardoin's classic study of operatic masterclasses, entitled *Was That a Trill or Were You Just Gargling?*
- an exclusive video tour of the most notorious tearooms of European opera houses, narrated by Sir John Gielgud
- and, from the Met Gift Shop, a copy of *James Levine's Little Black Book*, and its companion volume, *James Levine's Little Brown Book*.

(Ad

Richard Breath

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**Metrobeat NYC** is sortlike *Time Out* except without that snippy Brit-er than thou attitude. Plus it's online, so the listings are absolutely up to date, with much info on area opera events large & small, casting details, ticket availability, and weekly reviews and comment from such pundits as *parterre* box's own James Jorden. Explore Metrobeat NYC at [www.citysearch.com/nyc/mb](http://www.citysearch.com/nyc/mb)

The breezy **Celestial Clockwork** (at Carnegie Hall Cinema and elsewhere) restores to the Cinderella story all the magic Rossini and his librettist so carefully expunged from *La cenerentola*. A runaway bride flees Venezuela for one last chance at an operatic career, landing in a Paris where most everybody is psychic—and EVERYBODY's gay. Singing, dancing, and special effects ensue. Standout among a strong cast is Ariale Dombasle as the wickedest stepsister EVER.

**Opera in the Flesh** by Sam Abel. A thought-provoking queer analysis of the art, including essays on cross-dressing (i.e., trouser roles) and gender confusion (castrati and such). At its best, this book celebrates the ecstatic identification gay men have with opera. Westview Press.

What do  
money

STARVING queer opera zine publisher  
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**The Callas Circle** is THE Maria Callas fanzine. Each slick issue includes rare photos, transcripts of interviews, reviews of "pirate" and legit performances. A recent issue included a Q&A with Giulietta Simionato. THE CALLAS CIRCLE, 64 Empire Court North End Rd., Wembley Park, Middx HA9 0AQ, UK.

myself, tightening every muscle as if I were actually pulling on a wire stretched

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# queer-friendly opera

For their June productions, two of Manhattan's finest midsize companies (intentionally?) selected works altogether appropriate for Gay Pride Month. It's a pleasure to report that these queer-friendly productions were both successful—the most fun I've had at the opera this summer.

The dinosaur we call American Opera has spawned many and varied mutations:

the Portentous Schlockfest, featuring lots of repressed women in long dresses, often starring Evelyn Lear (e.g., MOURNING BECOMES ELEKTRA, LIZZIE BORDEN);

the Minimalist Mindfuck, featuring a less-is-more score and a more-is-barely-enough physical production, conceived and directed by a former enfant terrible. (AKHNATEN, NIXON IN CHINA);

the Disposable DocuOpera. Sort of like the USA Network Movie of the Week with lots of percussion (DEATH OF KLINGHOFFER, HARVEY MILK);

and (La Cieca's own particular bête noire) the Deluxe Apres-Moi-Le-Deluge Dragshow, bearing the inspiring message, "I'm in the closet, and I don't care who knows it!" (CANDIDE, GHOSTS AT VERSAILLES).

Among this horde of moribund monsters, it's all too easy to overlook the lean and mean charms of a true survivor like Conrad Susa's *Transformations*. But a superbly polished and deeply moving revival by the Center for Contemporary Opera (June 27) has made a strong case for this "entertainment." I'm ready to call it the Great American Opera.

*Transformations* can be disturbing: Anne Sexton's subtle and subversive poems treat on such controversial themes as "the ambivalent relationship of mother and daughter" and "the selfishness of the artist" in their wickedly witty retelling of Grimm tales. Besides, the music, though absolutely accessible, even tuneful in its campy/cool-jazz way, is MURDER for performers to learn—my very clever ex (who did this show in college a few years ago) tells me it's the toughest score he EVER worked on. So the CCO performance was a revelation: the company were not only beautifully prepared, but they achieved that rare and ecstatic level of performance when every note, every word, every gesture felt like an improvisation.

Tues  
8:00-11  
Badea:  
Morris

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Even during the trickiest musical sequences, these gifted singing actors were totally, organically involved in the work.

It's not fair to play favorites among an ensemble cast, but I should single out David Hawes, whose boyish tenor and unforced naiveté (not to mention his boy-next-door sandy-haired cuteness!) were ideal for his various "romantic-lead" roles, and Richard Holmes, whose solid baritone and intense presence made the horribly difficult and high-lying role of "Iron Hans" into a real tour de force.

Janna Baty coped heroically with the practically impossible demands of "Anne Sexton," a role that demands a combination of Teresa Stratas and Betty Buckley. Despite her impeccable musicianship and lovely soft-grained lyric soprano, Ms. Baty was just too young and too nice to be completely believable as a "middle-aged witch." Conversely, Mary Sophia Nessinger's attractive mezzo-soprano was lightish for Number 3 (a real contralto role), but she could give lessons in eyebrow-arching and lip-curling to Eve Arden herself.

I cannot praise Music Director Richard Marshall highly enough for his sensitive and accurate leadership of the soloists and his virtuoso chamber orchestra. (And let me blow a kiss to those tireless percussionists!) Stage Director Charles Maryan approached the drama with musical sensitivity and a refreshing avoidance of gimmickry, sending his performers lurking, prowling and cavorting over every square inch of Jane Mancini's simple and flexible set. Maryan's exceptional ability and flawless taste were particularly in evidence in the Straussian "Rapunzel" prologue-the trio of women slowly wound and unwound a bolt of fabric, suggesting both "women's work" folding clothes and Wagner's Norns manipulating the rope of fate. The climax of the scene-- when the white cloth "transformed" first into a sheet sheltering the lovemaking of aunt and niece, then into Rapunzel's long hair-- was understated but heartbreaking. Mr. Maryan is a poet. Boy, do we need more stage directors like him!

Everyone involved in this production deserves a special round of applause for their sensitive handling of the "difficult" themes explored in this opera. (Incest and sexual identity confusion were only two of Ms. Sexton's legion of demons.) It takes real maturity and no little guts to tackle such issues without stooping to sensationalism --if you don't believe me, recall that wretched mess THE DREYFUSS AFFAIR at New York City Opera!

This company's courage and commitment deserve more support than New York seems prepared to give them at present; the Kaye Playhouse was barely half full at the performance I attended! For information about the Center for Contemporary Opera's very interesting upcoming season (including two world premieres), call (212) 306-6728.

L'Opéra Français de New York has a reputation for queer-friendliness that was greatly enhanced by their lighthearted concert performances of two of the gayest of Francis Poulenc's works, the opera *Les Mamelles de Tirésias* and the monologue *Dame de Monte-Carlo*. And where better to spend a balmy June evening than on a never-never Riviera?

Yves Abel worked his customary voodoo with the scores, leading or accompanying or whatever it is he does-- it just looks so effortless and sounds so polished. I particularly relished the sinfully sweet orchestral and choral sound he brought to the C-major lament for Presto and Lacouf, all the more moving for its sheer pointlessness. (The characters refuse to stay dead, which is okay with me, because Joel Sorensen and Gerard Edery were both delightfully silly and seriously musical in these buffo roles. Mr. Sorensen even sang his part in the tricky Act 1 finale while rollerblading across the narrow apron of the stage.)

If Amy Burton (Tirésias) had no more to offer than her yummy lyric soprano, I would hardly feel cheated; but she's a vital and spunky actress to boot, every inch the protofeminist heroine of Apollinaire's politically-tinged text. Highlight of her performance was the dreamy waltz-song, performed while she was lounging in a deck chair and playing with her breasts. (Well, okay, playing with the balloons that symbolized her breasts, but it was still hot.) And she handled neatly those bitchy Cartomancienne cadenzas, including the repeated and difficult-to-approach high C's. Ms. Burton is one of the most promising young American singers I have heard in a long time. I look forward to hearing her in roles like Manon and perhaps Poulenc's own Blanche de la Force.

The soprano was fortunate to be surrounded by a menage of strong baritones. Brett Polegato as Le Mari was a standout, with a well-placed voice, superb French diction and the comic timing of an experienced farceur. He could hold his own in his scenes with the manic Jan Opalach (Le Gendarme), who stole everything but the music stands (I mean that in the most positive way. It's a broad role, and he played it just as written). I have to say I wasn't crazy about Nicholas Loren's oversung Directeur: his address to the audience made me think we were about to see Pagliacci instead. Vera Galupe-Borszkh was typecast as "La Dame élégante," later playing directly against type as "La grosse dame." Is she ineffable or what?

Christopher Alden coaxed detailed and stylish acting from the singers without ever violating the letter of the score. I'm not sure what that Berlin-cabaret lighting in the Presto-Lacouf scene was all about, but in general, the atmosphere was as relaxed and charming as the suggested seaside setting. A particular word of praise to Mr. Alden for modelsly keeping the staging minimal for the *Dame de Monte-Carlo*, allowing the audience to concentrate on the music and the text of a less-than-familiar work.

-- James Jorden

(A) Sillo

will be the U.S. premiere of Lenz's