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simply took over
the adolescent
void
called my life.

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22: a boy and his diva

questo e quello

This issue of *parterre* box is something completely different. No, it's not just that we've gone to press almost a month late (for, indeed, what's so different about that?); rather, the bulk of this admittedly bulky issue is devoted to a single extended article in which dear **Enzo Bordello** recalls in loving detail his apprenticeship as an opera queen in the New Orleans of the late 1970s. And you can take it from La Cieca, that was a time indeed! A time of rare revivals of such French *bonnes-bouches* as *Thais*, *Les Huguenots*, *Herodiade* and *La Juive*! A time when New Orleans' sleaziest and most notorious gay bathhouse was (conveniently) located only two minutes from the opera house! A time when legendary ladies of song like **Marisa Galvany**, **Bianca Berini**, **Carol Neblett** and **Rita Shane** regularly walked the streets of the French Quarter. Uh, you know what I mean.... Anyway, it's a distinct pleasure for La Cieca to recall those golden days of yore, for she too learned the rudiments of opera queenerie at The House that Mahalia Built. So don't miss Mr. Bordello's account of his exploits, fetchingly entitled "**Ou va la jeune andouille?**"

Also beginning in this special issue is "**A Boy and His Diva**", an ongoing project in which gay men tell the story of their first time. No, I don't mean that; what I am referring to is a gay rite of passage far more momentous than mere deflowerment. I speak of that ecstatic instant when one experiences for the first time the glory that is diva, that opera queen's equivalent of the mystical process dear Sarah Bernhard described so well with the simple yet incantatory phrase, "*Le dieu est venu!*" You will hear queer men discussing their earliest diva experiences-- and how that thing called "diva" changed their lives forever.

La Cieca's other news (and she is quite the harbinger this month, isn't she?) is that **James** our editor finally got the lead out and purchased a pc. Which means that, first of all, there is now a *parterre* box homepage on the Web (www.anaserve.com/~parterre) where you will find archived such *pb* classics as the queer takes on *Salome* and *Un ballo in maschera*, reviews by **Enzo Bordello** and **Little Stevie**, a truly subversive take on That Opera Quiz Program by **Richard Breath** as well as a heaping helping of La Cieca's own mouthwatering blend of invective, innuendo and whimsy (mm-mm-good!) And you surely don't want to miss Dr. Repertoire's chef d'oeuvre, "The Multimedia Opera

Queen's Lexicon", offering not only text but graphics and sound clips to illustrate the terms "Barihunk", "Lady from Sveden", "Moffo Throat", "Stepford Soprano" and so many others. Coming soon to the Web courtesy of the box is a series of multimedia sites honoring those singers who have achieved the exalted rank of Gay Icon; first up is **Astrid Varnay**, who is (as I believe you know) like a sister to La Cieca.

Ever since the pc arrived, Dr. Repertoire has been monopolizing the modem, making his presence known (and, truth to be told, dreaded) in several of the Web's swankest newsgroups, including the celebrated **Opera-L** listserver. Now, La Cieca warned Dr. Rep to take it slow and easy, to lurk for a while before shooting off his mouth, to take care not to offend anyone. But, as you surely have gathered by now, moderation is just not Dr. Repertoire's style. He's currently in the midst of a frank and lively exchange of ideas(i.e., a flame war) on at least a dozen topics ranging from **Joseph Volpe's** incumbency as General Manager of the Met to **Renee Fleming's** taste in evening gowns. This situation, while not perhaps taken in with pleasure by everyone involved, has (to paraphrase **La Callas's** famous dictum about the Rome Walkout) given Dr. Repertoire "a chance to count his friends." La Cieca would just like to add one little thing: sorry, folks. He's not like this when he remembers to take his medication.

NEW YORK--- **Andre Previn** has been commissioned to write a new opera for the Metropolitan Opera's 2001-2002 season, Met General Manager **Joseph Volpe** announced today. Previn has already begun work on the new opera, *Valley of the Dolls*, in collaboration with librettist **Charles Busch**. The composer states that the work will be "based closely" on the best-selling novel by **Jacqueline Susann**.

Volpe announced the production will be conducted by **James Levine** and staged by **Mark Lamos** in sets by **John Conklin**. **Issac Mizrahi** will make his Met debut designing the costumes. Tentative casting is as follows:

Anne Welles.....	Sylvia McNair
Jennifer North.....	Ruth Ann Swenson
Neely O'Hara.....	Harolyn Blackwell
Lyon Burke.....	Dwayne Croft
Tony Polar.....	Jerry Hadley
Miriam Polar.....	Anne Sophie von Otter
Ted Casablanca.....	Thomas Hampson
Miss Steinberg.....	Marilyn Horne
George Jessel.....	Charles Anthony
Helen Lawson.....	Jessye Norman

At the press conference Previn stated, "Actually this opera is something I've been toying with ever since I wrote the song score for the critically-acclaimed 1966 film version. But only in the past year have we been able to secure the musical rights to the property."

Volpe added, "I'm looking forward to working with Mr. Previn in a very proactive, hands-on kind of way. The negotiations for the rights to this property were lengthy and difficult and I did most of the work. Hey, you with the camera, you want to learn some manners, or do I have break your freaking head?"

The Met has come to an agreement with the French music publishers Editions Choudens who own the rights to a previous setting of Susann's novel, *Le Vallon des pourceps*, with music by **Francis Poulenc** and libretto by **Jean Cocteau**. This opera was poorly received at its premiere at the Paris Opera Comique in 1957, despite a cast that included **Denise Duval**, **Regine Crespin** and **Geori Boue**.

Previn's other works for voice and orchestra include a cycle of settings of poems by **A. A. Milne**, *Hunny* and *Roo*.

Miss Norman's costumes will be executed by **Barbara Matera**.

Truth is stranger than fiction: the **New York City Opera's** schedule for 1997-98 looks even more exotic than the preceding bit of foolishness: new productions of *Macbeth*, *Seerse*, *Entfuhrung*, *La Perichole* (**Frederica von Stade** guests), Britten's *Paul Bunyan*, a new *Cav/Pag*, something called *The Return of Marco Polo* [an opera set in a swimming pool?] and, if all goes well, a telecast of this year's hit *Falstaff* with **Sherrill Milnes**.

La Cieca confesses that she was one of the faithless few who feared Mr. Milnes' first New York *Falstaff* might not come off, but happily she was wrong, wrong, wrong, as usual. The Big Guy came late to Verdi's only comedy, but it hardly shows: his legendary baritone is still in fine fettle, and, contrary to my expectations, at least, he's genuinely funny. No, he's not what you'd call roly-poly, more like a star college quarterback gone wildly to seed, with a (well-designed) gut projecting a yard before him. Milnes obviously shares my opinion that *Falstaff* is a role that is to be sung, not faked: virtually every phrase was on the voice and well-supported, emphasizing the rich harvest of melody in this score. Even a moment of discomfiture in the final scene (his antlers got tangled in the Oak of Herne) fit in with his fully fleshed-out (sorry!) conception of the character.

NYCO paid their guest star the compliment of pulling together a ensemble first-class cast. If **Melanie Helton's** Alice was rather a non-starter (except for a spot-on "Cioè" in the seduction scene), **Pat Johnson's** Nannetta was a charmer from the word go, even daring to take the last phrase of "Sul fil d'un soffio" in a single breath! **Bruce Fowler** confirmed the strong impression he made at Opera Orchestra of New York's "Armida" last year, spinning out Fenton's sonnetta in a silvery lyric tenor-- and it sure doesn't hurt that he is so boy-next-door cute! **Mark Delavan's** solidly-sung Ford was undermined by the (director's?) decision to play the character wired to the point of psychosis. As you might guess, he had nowhere to go dramatically with "E sogno o realta?" And he might just as well have avoided trying to outsing Mr. Milnes on those F-sharps-- a fool's errand for sure!

This performance marked **Mignon Dunn's** first-ever-anywhere Dame Quickly, and it was an altogether worthy debut. The mezzo took a while to warm up vocally, finally contributing some plush tones to Act 3. Her take on the character was more worldly-wise and witty than farcical, evoking appreciative smirks from her audience when she teased Sir John by flaunting her celebrated gazongas.

That "band of merry players" staging concept of director **Fabrizio Melano** worked well enough, though surely it would make more sense to put supers (instead of cardboard cutouts) in those mock stage boxes. Otherwise, a bit of hyperactivity for Bardolph and Pistol aside, Melano played the usual jokes with efficiency and charm. He avoided the trap of overdoing the "Tormenting of Falstaff" business in the last act, for which he is to be thanked. Guido Ajmone-Marsan conducted with great accuracy and more than a little style. I question his tempo for the final fugue, surely the fleetest since Bernstein's, but otherwise nothing went wrong. To say that about a "Falstaff" done with no prompter is high praise indeed.

La Cieca has heard nothing but praise for Chicago Lyric's gala honoring **Ardis Krainik**. Apparently there was not a dry eye in the house when **Sam Ramey** helped the retiring impresaria onto the stage in her wheelchair and the entire assembled company (**Catherine Malfitano**, **Placido Domingo**, **June Anderson**, **Marilyn Horne**, **Barbara Daniels**, **Eva Marton**, **Daniel Barenboim**, **Vladimir Chernov**, **Carol Vaness**, etc.) sang the "Make Our Garden Grow" finale from *Candide*. One spectator attributed the success of the gala to three factors:

- the honoree sat back and was honored (i.e., instead of conducting the whole show)
- everyone on the program was intimately associated with Chicago Lyric (i.e., no one who had sung only two performances of Donna Anna at the house was given pride of place)
- no half-hour Wagner scenes

It was one of those fabulous nights-- even though it was only 1:30 pm-- when *Fedora* returned to the Met after seventy-odd years of neglect. To tell the truth, I don't think anyone much missed her. The story makes no sense at all (the haughty Princess wears a poisoned crucifix for no reason other than the fact she just might need to commit suicide on short notice; practically the whole Swiss postal service shows up at an isolated chalet at one point or another to deliver the myriad letters demanded by the plot.) But *Fedora* does function efficiently as a pure star vehicle in the **Joan Crawford** mold, sending its heroine jumping through hoops in a series of to-die-for ballgowns.

Mirella Freni, supernaturally well-preserved of face and figure, swore vengeance in deep teal silk brocade, confronted an alleged murderer in décolletée rose peau-de-soie, and finally shook off her mortal coil in pale mauve lace. Her warm and powerful singing almost completely obscured the fact that she is miscast in this role every way except vocally. *Fedora* is a seriously underwritten opera compared to, say, *Tosca*, and the performer has to work very hard to suggest the atmosphere of glamour and intrigue the composer and librettist never got around to creating. For example, in Act One, *Fedora* insists the witnesses to the murder be interrogated in her presence, which is to say on stage. The scene that ensues affords the prima donna ample opportunity to make faces, gasp, burst into tears and generally ham it up as she reacts to the questioning; Miss Freni gave a pretty good imitation of a soprano waiting patiently for a cue. She never exactly did anything *wrong*, but, let's face it, the last thing this opera calls for is understated good taste. (Frankly, what this show really needs is **Faye Dunaway**, but she's busy at the moment with another claptrap melodrama called *Master Class*.)

On the other hand, the soprano did find some pretty things to do during the Act Two interlude (indecision/infatuation/determination), and *Fedora*'s protracted bout of remorse in Act Three was vintage Freni. I may have seen more moving death scenes, but not often. Look: the the opera's frequent bursts of melody

flatter her legendary voice, and she looks charming, so I say she at least gets away with it.

A surprisingly fresh-voiced **Placido Domingo** partnered her. Once past a nervously rushed "*Amor ti vieta*," the tenor settled into one of his increasingly-rare involved and passionate performances-- just like the old days. His gripping last-act confrontation with *Fedora* (the music shamelessly cribbed from *Otello*) proves what a real artist can do with third-rate material. **Dwayne Croft** cut a dashing figure in the pointless role of De Siriex-- he's a real star with a luscious lyric baritone. Imagine my surprise when the much-hyped **Ainhwa Arteta** lived up to her reputation-- a glittering lirico-leggero voice, real stage savvy, and pretty to boot. A born Musetta, and I mean that as a good thing.

Beppe de Tomasi's production achieved its end of flattering the prima donna in **Ferruccio Villagrossi**'s too-beautiful-to-be-true sets, though I must say I doubt the celebrated piano virtuoso "**Boleslao Lazinski**" (**Jean-Yves Thibaudet** was most girly in this cameo role) would be so willing to play cocktail-party piano. **Wayne Chouinard**'s crisp if unobtrusive lighting was a welcome relief from the glum designs of some of the Met's regular designers. The orchestra sounded underrehearsed and brassy, though **Roberto Abbado** should be commended for his attentiveness to his diva and divo.

For *La Cieca*, the camp highlight of the afternoon was the scene when De Siriex "outs" Lazinski:

DE SIRIEX: This virtuoso of yours has such blond hair, and he's as pretty as a girl, and so... delicate. And he never seems to get romantic with you. Have you ever thought he might be...

OGLA: What?

DE SIRIEX: ...a spy?

The news about *Fedora* just keeps getting more exciting: first come the tidings that the opera is being videotaped for presentation next year on PBS; and now we hear a rumor that 61-year-old Signorina Freni is in discussion with Met management about "future projects", which possibly include a revival of *Queen of Spades* (as Lisa, of course! You should be ashamed of yourself!)

Another story of a woman's obsession, *The Turn of the Screw*, showed off the New York City Opera at its best. Conductor **Robert Duerr** has proven himself a worthy successor to **Julius Rudel** and **Christopher Keene**, coaxing a taut but lyrical performance from the once-derided NYCO orchestra. The sweetness of the woodwind writing in Act 1 will stay in my memory.

The opera was cast from strength. **Lauren Flanigan** has become a thrilling singing actress, and the Governess may well be her finest role yet. She really sang the part without faking, at least until late in the second act when she tired some. (Someone needs to talk her out of Abigaille and into the big Mozart ladies-- her **Fiordiligi** would be awesome.) She also deserves praise for throwing herself whole-heartedly into the staging she was given to do; it's not her fault if net result was more twitching than you'd see at a **Sandy Dennis** retrospective. Perhaps even more impressive vocally was the debutante **Alexandra Hughes**, whose granite mezzo-soprano and intense involvement elevated the role of Mrs. Grose far above comprimario status-- what an **Augusta Tabor** she would make! If **Robin Leigh Massie** overdid the kid-voice as **Flora**, the awesomely talented **Zachary Wissner-Gross** just simply blew me away as **Miles**. I'm now convinced the role is not impossible after all. The ghosts were perhaps too busy voguing to pay much attention to vocal values, though sleek **Christine Abraham** came off better than did **Adam Klein**.

I will not go into detail over **Mark Lamos's** overpraised (except by the always-perceptive **Peter G. Davis**) production except to say that I think his concept of transforming the entire action into a **Vincente Minnelli** dream-ballet mad-scene effectively drowns the ambiguity which surely is the point of the opera. The slickness of several of the effects (**Miss Jessel's** first entrance, tilted at an angle of 45 degrees, was stunning) does not begin to make up for so arty and "look-at-me-I'm-avant-garde" a production. Soon, one hopes, New York will tire of **John Conklin's** seen-it-before postmodernisms. Until then, just shut your eyes: this is world-class opera. NYCO is on a roll.

Dear **Giuseppe Verdi** once said a propos of opera composition "Torniamo all' antico; sara un progresso", or "Let's go back to the past; it will be a step forward." This sentiment, however oddly reminiscent of **Bob Dole's** convention acceptance speech, is altogether applicable to the current crop of opera recordings. Of several outstanding releases **La Cieca** has enjoyed in recent weeks, only one is truly new: the rest are "live" performances from decades past.

Kent Nagano and the forces of L'Opera de Lyon take a crisp, very French; approach to **Stravinsky's Rake's Progress**; (Erato 063012715-2), keeping the textures lean and placing the emphasis on the neo more than the classic. As with his **Met Carmelites** a few years ago, Nagano's approach is cool but never cold; there's plenty of heart in this music, especially as it's sung

here by the finest **Tom Rakewell** of our time, **Jerry Hadley**. I have been underwhelmed by many of this tenor's recent efforts in the standard lyric roles: his **Rodolfo**, **Nemorino** and **Duke of Mantua** are all acceptable but generic-sounding. But he really wakes up for English-language repertoire: his **Ravenal** in EMI's *Showboat*; is probably the best on record, and he's enjoyed considerable personal success in the usually thankless title part of **Bernstein's** overrated *Candide*. Not only can he sustain a lyric line in Tom's sometimes ungainly vocal part, he strikes a satisfying balance of pathos and parody in this complex character. **Stravinsky's Rake** may just be **Jerry Hadley's** great role.

In the role of **Nick Shadow**, **Sam Ramey's** voice is a luxury, which is to say it's gorgeous but unnecessary. A characterful baritone makes more sense in this admittedly lowish music. Conversely, **Dawn Upshaw**, one of my very favorite current singers, lacks only a touch of vocal glamour to embody a perfect **Anne Trulove**; her soubrette-weight soprano has a way of making this archetypal figure seem too, well, human. On the other hand, Upshaw commands scrupulous musicianship and an ability to color words almost syllable-by-syllable without going all precious on us; her coloratura is accurate and shapely, and she crowns "I go to him" with a perfectly-tuned high C.

But for me the star of this set is the unsinkable **Grace Bumbry**, who has some serious fun with the role of **Baba the Turk**, camping it like mad in the diva-parody bits with that trademark foghorn chest voice, and underlining the bearded lady's exoticism with her **St. Louis Woman** accent ("Wha' don't you tawk?") Even more impressive is her quiet, sustained and heartfelt singing in her renunciation scene with **Anne**-- she finds an honest woman's heart inside this freakish caricature. **La Bumbry** is now, I think, solidly launched on a third career as character singer after her thirty-five years as dramatic mezzo and singing actress. Go on, girl!

We have **Legato Recordings** to thank for a performance I wasn't even aware of until a few months ago: a gala *Cavalleria Rusticana* from Munich with the stupendous **Leonie Rysanek** at the absolute top of her form as **Santuzza**. The diva was into her "second" career by then, reinventing herself as a singing actress at an age (fifty-something) when most sopranos begin to cut back to their most surefire parts. The result is a big, take-no-prisoners portrayal that builds from strength to strength. From her first "Dite, Mamma Lucia" (sung with that trancelike intensity for which she is famous) to a blood-curdling scream of a high C at the final curtain, **Rysanek** delivers a red-meat per-

formance, served blood-rare. The diva's sometimes-uneven voice has rarely been heard in better estate, with little of the hooting and under-pitch crooning that some critics hear in her singing. Even better, her sense of style and musicianship are convincing if untraditional, and just listen to her confident use of Italianate portamento in the "No, Turridu" section of the big duet!

Did I mention La Rysanek is partnered by no less than **Placido Domingo**? And that the tenor is at his own personal best, involved, passionate, and--best of all--in dynamite voice? Turridu was always one of the younger Domingo's best roles: perhaps he could identify then with this horny Sicilian studlet the way he identifies with Otello now. Even 20 years ago, Placido was not always "there" for a guest performance-- you got the body and the voice without the the soul. That's not the case in Munich this night. Whether he was inspired by the competition of live-wire Rysanek on her home turf or simply by artistic conscience, he's giving 100%: a classic Domingo performance.

It's probably best to overlook the washout of an Alfio and move down the cast list to **Astrid Varnay**'s monolithic Mamma Lucia, who comes off like Kostelnicka's older sister (the pretty one), exactly the right scale for Rysanek's Greek-tragedy heroine. **Ruth Falcon**'s unformed spinto is odd casting for Lola, but she does get good and spitting mad in her confrontation with Santuzza. Conductor **Nello Santi**, whose recent work has been variable to say the least, was in altogether better form twenty years ago. His approach is idiomatic but responsive to his singers, allowing him to follow La Rysanek's ecstatic rubato there and back.

Two **Renata Tebaldi** stjernstunden are documented in a Tosca from Brussels and a *Falstaff* from Chicago. The diva headlined an a-list cast in the **Puccini** as part of La Scala's participation in a World's Fair devoted to the performing arts. She is in marginally less creamy voice here than in the familiar Met pirate from 1956, but her intonation (especially above the staff) is rather more secure. One sometimes forgets just how lush the Tebaldi voice was: huge and meaty, besides being "merely" beautiful; it is also pleasant to note that she aces the difficult transition from dramatic to lyric singing for "Vissi d'arte." The effect of suddenly reining in the voice at this point is a stunning tour de force, like interpolating "Ah non credea mirarti" into a performance of Elektra. And her commitment is electrifying; those who accept the Callasite canard about Tebaldi's lack of temperament on stage need only sample the last five minutes of the opera, when La Tebaldi's groans, yells and screams

skirt the border of cattivo gusto, climaxing in a hair-raising shriek as she hurls herself from the parapet.

It is a shibboleth that Tosca is a sporting event: you needn't come in first, but you sure as hell don't want to finish last. **Giuseppe di Stefano** and **Ettore Bastianini** do their damndest to make this particular race a three-way tie. Again, some may question the taste of some of diStefano's wilder singing in Act Two (as for me, I thrive on it!), but no one with an ear in his head could find fault with the his "E lucevan le stelle," certainly the equal of any on disc. The tenor obviously banks everything on this aria, and wins handsomely-- his diminuendo and especially his rapturous rubato is almost unbearably moving. This artist knows more about loss than most men, and he's not afraid to show it. It is a particular pleasure to hear DiStefano and Tebaldi together, an experience all too rare, owing to these artists' exclusive recording contracts and various disputes with management. Bastianini offers a bel canto Scarpia that bristles with velvet-gloved menace and seethes with scarcely-submerged sexuality. My God, but he sounds hot! Every diva's favorite conductor **Gianandrea Gavazzeni** (whose last assignment before his recent death was Freni's Fedora) attunes his orchestra to the white-hot events on stage. Unlike certain swell-headed modern baton-wielders, he is humble enough to realize that the singers' musicality is just as valid as his own.

Perfectly acceptable broadcast sound, although the melee in the final moments sounds like a cattle stampede. Miraculously, though, the pursuers freeze in their tracks at the very moment La Tosca attacks her high Bb: bad cops, perhaps, but very good colleagues.

The sound quality is more problematic in a *Falstaff* performance from Chicago in which Tebaldi is a member of an ensemble that includes **Tito Gobbi**, **Anna Moffo**, **Giulietta Simionato** and **Cornell MacNeil** under the baton of **Tullio Serafin**. Or, as Renata herself puts it, "Not a bad cast." Alas, the poorish quality of the source tape conceals much of the detail of this filigreed score. What little we can hear of Miss Moffo's soft-grained soprano (including a heart-stopping long-breathed phrase at the end of Nannetta's aria) suggests she must have been delectable on the night. More robust voices fare somewhat better, especially Simionato's robust Quickly, offering vocalism of Dalila-esque richness in Act 3. Cornell MacNeil, in strong and youthful voice, is a luxurious Ford, and one can hear as well the Cheshire-cat smile in Tebaldi's voice during the Act 2 seduction scene. However, casting such distinctive voices does favors to the close-harmony writing for the Merry Wives: some

of the chords the quartet produces cannot be found in nature.

Tito Gobbi's take on Falstaff is distinctive: mercurial, moody, bitter, a thwarted poet. Whatever else Sir John is, he's not slow: the bastard really thinks he can get away with it! Gobbi's acid tone and snarling vocal inflections may not be to your taste; after all, this is not *Pagliacci*. But for me his crisp musicality and vivid characterization make up for what he lacks in vocal glamour. The other cast members seem solid enough, though you couldn't prove it by me: Bardolph and Pistol emerge from the murk only for the occasional *ff* exclamation. For the same reason, all I can say about Serafin's conducting is that it sounds crisply rhythmic. This recording of what was doubtless a wonderful performance is an important document, certainly, but I hesitate to recommend it for casual listening.

(I should note that both these 2-disc sets include generous helpings of fill-up material, including a wrenching *Manon Lescaut* Act Four with the Puccini and a selection of early Gobbi recordings with the Verdi. The baritone's "Zaza, piccola zingara" is a real curiosity, combining ultra-stylish phrasing and the wrongest timbre possible.)

Just as we went to press we received a delightful CD called *Mutiny at the Matinee*, a recital of operatic parody by **The Derivative Duo**. This pair of Sapphic sopranos (**Barb Glenn** and **Susan Nivert**) offer witty and understated new lyrics set to familiar aria tunes ranging from "Mein Herr Marquis" (transformed into a panicky denial of same-sex hanky-panky) to "Una furtiva lagrima" (a lament of self-love by Fabio) to "Casta diva" (retitled "Pasta diva", and offered as a tribute to culinary goddess Julia Child). This cabaret team's voices are as polished as their lyrics; these dyke divas have a glorious future ahead of them. How to reach the Derivative Duo? Write to **342 NW 79th Street, Seattle, WA, 98117-4015**. Their email address is **dduo@wolfenet.com**. In the meantime, visit their webpage (<http://www.nwlink.com/~ranier/duo.html>), which, by the way, contains downloadable samples of these ladies' art.

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La Cieca

FESTIVE occasions

My other half and I took a weekend out of an absurdly busy August to head over to Glimmerglass, to see what there was to see. We decided to catch three out of the four performances (we gave *Don Pasquale*, this year's standard repertory piece, a miss, though reports were favorable). We'd never been, though friends had set our expectations quite high. Pleasantly, our experience thoroughly confirmed the good reports, and more. Everything we saw was lots more creative than anything I've caught in New York lately, with fresh voices and innovative stagings. Most importantly, every performance entertained us from beginning to end—and offered up some pretty queer doings besides.

For other first-time Glimmerglassers (Glimmerglasswegians?), a preliminary warning—there is **no food** in Cooperstown. None. The local restaurants cater to the Baseball Hall of Fame crowd of parents and pre-teens, so it's virtually impossible to find anything that isn't in the shape of a wiener (though there are worse things than that, I suppose). There was one nice-looking place that tried hard, but they thought "cioppino" meant broiled lobster, and the pasta with ostrich-meat topping just didn't cut it. Bring your own food, or order ahead and get one of the charming and tres elegant picnic meals delivered to the theatre two hours before each performance.

The queerest evening by far was this year's baroque extravaganza, Francesco Cavalli's 1651 *La Calisto*. This opera is already a pretty queer piece, and it was given an even queerer staging by my favorite out actor, Simon "Three Weddings and a Funeral" Callow. *Calisto* is a fairly typical early baroque opera in the Monteverdi school (the performance premiered a new edition of the score prepared by conductor Jane Glover)—plot from classical mythology, lots of recitative, not a lot of flashy arias, not quite comedy and not quite tragedy. The main story recounts one of Jupiter's (here Giove) many randy adventures; he has the hots for the nymph Calisto, but she's a virginal follower of Diana, so Giove disguises himself in drag as Diana so he can get into Calisto's pants (as one woman sitting behind us, reciting the plot to her elderly mother, put it, "It's kind of a fake lesbian thing"). Meanwhile the real Diana, in spite of her purported virginity, has the hots for the shepherd Endimione, which gets him into trouble with Pan, who's been trying to seduce Diana himself. In the end Juno (Giunone) comes down, gets pissed off at Calisto for fooling around with her husband, and turns the nymph into a bear, but Giove saves the day and retransforms her into a constellation (Ursa Major, of course).

Callow staged this sex-and-transvestism fest with gusto, and a lot of bare flesh. In the first act Giove, sung by bass-baritone Bernard Deletre looking like an aging hippie, spills his guts to messenger-god Mercurio. And quite a god he was—the fetching and amply muscled baritone Eugene Perry, wearing a very skimpy pair of shorts and nothing else. With pecs like those, who could pay attention to the music? Callow staged the Giove-Mercurio

relationship with subtle erotic undertones, sort of a muscular daddy-son thing. In a similar state of undress was countertenor Drew Minter as Endimione--alas, to considerably less effect. Not that Minter is overweight, and he does have a cute face, but he also sports a rather oddly-shaped torso (a result of countertenorial lung contortions?) that detracted from the overall effect. It was, however, delightfully queer to see a nearly-naked countertenor. No one could pretend that he was anything other than male, and when he first opened his mouth there was an audible buzz of shock and suppressed giggles in the audience. Minter has a pleasant voice, if a little thin, but that seemed appropriate to the gentle lyricism (and, arguably, effeminacy) of his role. He also, unfortunately, has an exceptionally ugly break just before he hits the bottom of his range.

Callow reduplicated the opera's queerness on the distaff side. The title role was brilliantly cast in soprano Lisa Saffer. Not only could she sing the part, but physically she made an ideal nymph: petite, rail-thin, short-haired, and just a little butch--in other words, the perfect baby dyke. She made a delightful contrast to mezzo Christine Abraham's tall, blondelipstick lesbian Diana (Abraham also doubled as Giove-cum-Diana--unfortunately, no bass-baritones in drag here). Abraham and Saffer made a charming couple, their chemistry generating the most powerful eroticism of the evening. Also intriguing was Callow's interpretation of Linfea, Diana's aging horny sidekick, sung by a countertenor who looked for all the world like one of Monty Python's old biddies. Or so I thought; in fact, the man in drag was Elaine Bonazzi. Maybe I was so caught up in the production's pervasive gender fuck that I simply lost my moorings.

Outstripping all these amusing goings-on, however, were the over-the-top performances of Pan and his band of satyrs. These were no cute little Disneyesque goatkins; Callow envisioned them as a pack of hairy, horny, topless, butch goat-men in full rut. They all did a fine job, but most remarkable of all was the performance of countertenor (yes another one--Glimmerglass is becoming the place to be for men who can do things with their falsettos) David A. Walker, a member of the Glimmerglass Young American Artists program. Walker is someone to watch out for. Even in countertenor range he has a powerful set of lungs, and a flashy stage personality to match. Frankly, he sang circles around Minter, though in his exuberant energy and kamikaze acting style he occasionally sacrificed accuracy of pitch. But he was clearly the find of the evening. (We were concerned, though, that he did not come out for his curtain call and, as we left the theatre, we saw an ambulance pulling up--let's hope there were no major problems.)

If *La Calisto* revels in its alternative sexuality, Jack Beeson's 1965 *Lezzie*, er, *Lizzie Borden* presents precisely the opposite image, a dark and brooding exploration of sexual desire crushed under the weight of 19th-century puritanism. This was my first time with Beeson's work, and I found it quite gripping and emotionally involving. The opera works from the assumption that Lizzie did, in fact, do it, and tries to justify her murders by her mounting anger at, and jealousy of, her repressive father, usurping step-mother, and

hopelessly normal younger sister. Nothing overtly homosexual here, but it is certainly not hard to see Lizzie as a repressed lesbian, especially with the libretto's heavy Freudian suggestions of shunted erotic desire both for her forbidding father and her floozie step-mother (as well as for sister Margret's sea captain fiancée). Rhoda Levine's staging beautifully reinforced the air of repression, with strong help from John Conklin's angular unit set. I had heard someone, a fan of the opera, lamenting that Levine had been chosen as director, based on her recent NYCO fiascos. But her directing here was utterly compelling--simple, straightforward, and finely tuned to the nuances of the characters.

Rumor has it that Brenda Lewis, the singer who created the role of Lizzie, blames this opera for wrecking her voice. Phyllis Pancella, however, seemed to have no trouble with the role, making it sound quite effortless. The role has some wonderful moments, especially a gut-wrenching solo scene at the end of Act II, which Pancella played and sang to the hilt (enhanced by some striking lighting effects by Robert Wierzel).

The rest of the six-member cast, three of whom were also members of the Young Artist's Program, did themselves proud with the difficult, though often surprisingly lyrical, score, beautifully performed under Stewart Robertson's able baton. The greatest entertainment, though, came in the high-camp performance of cult diva Sheri Greenawald as Lizzie's step-mother Abigail. Greenawald had the crowd in the palm of her hand at her first appearance without singing a note; she emerges from bed and has a silent confrontation with Lizzie that spoke volumes. She made Abigail's greed and lust tangible, yet also succeeded in making the character sympathetic, a necessary foil to Pancella's portrait of repressed desire.

Mark Lamos's production of the early Mozart romp *La finta giardiniera* didn't match the electric qualities of these two performances, but it was an amusing evening's diversion. Nothing especially queer here, except for the character of Ramiro, a drag role that clearly prefigures Cherubino, sung charmingly by mezzo Marguerite Krull. The rest is youthful Mozartean foolery, staged by Lamos with child-like energy and precision in a cartoon-fantasy set. There were a few moments of directorial interest, especially a nightmarish staging of the scene in which the two leading characters lose their sanity. Lamos also had a young performer dressed as the boy Mozart popping in and out of the production, sometimes to comic effect, sometimes to the audience's general bafflement. Generally strong singing throughout, with my favorite being bass-baritone Philip Cokorinos as the loyal servant Roberto. Cokorinos displays a rich and resonant voice, and an appealing stage demeanor--let's hope the Met makes more use of him in the future. You can catch this production again this year at Washington Opera at the Kennedy Center in January and February.

Hearty congratulations to Paul Kellogg and his Glimmerglass forces for these terrific, often daring productions--and here's hoping he brings the same spirit and level of quality to his new job at NYCO.

-- La Cantatrice Chauve

a boy and his diva:

parterre box asked gay men to recount that thrilling rite of queer passage, the first transcendent diva experience. Following are some of their stories:

"The addiction simply took over the adolescent void called my life..."

I think I would have to put my first "diva experience" into three categories:

- "I think I finally know why I'm alive"
- "LP got worn out playing this phrase 5,000 times"
- "So it can be like *this*!"

Each was vivid and each contributed to changing my life.

When I was 15, I was dragged (pun fully intended) to the opera by a high school chum whose parents actually loved opera. Such a thing was previously unknown to me in Brooklyn (Yes, unlike Maria, Vera was born in Brooklyn. In a finished basement, to be exact.) I had been to a number of Broadway shows with **diva resonance**: *Gypsy*, Mary Martin's *Peter Pan*, *Jamaica* with Lena Horne, etc. But the bug didn't quite bite in that way on the great white way. (My high school chum, by the way, became a research doctor in Florida with a wife and two children. I became... well, never mind.) meanwhile, back at the Old Met, we tried to go, for my first opera, to *La fanciulla del West* with Leontyne Price and Richard Tucker (I'd heard of him) but the standing room places were all gone when we got there. Strike one. A short time later, however, we did get into a *Bohème* with Lucine Amara, Daniele Barioni, Laurel Hurley and Lorenzo Testi. Yes, Lorenzo Testi. A Golden Age indeed. Lucine was lovely (she still is), but this did not provide **catharsis**. (I remember, though, that Lucine used to have a fan magazine called *LucineArama*.) Anyway, strike two. Three strikes and I would probably now be retired from the New York City school system with a lovely pension and a country home. But no such luck; on the third try the bug bit bigtime. It was Joan Sutherland's debut season in *Lucia*. The old production, you've all seen it gentlemen. Not until Renata Scotto in *Vespri* did a staircase mean so much. If you never saw the young Sutherland, slim (well, for an opera singer), striking, with that **amazing mountain of red hair**, nearly six feet of tone-producing tartan column, towering over the bewigged Scottish cantor, well, you haven't lived. In the Mad Scene she was completely marvelous: voice, body, spirit, all of it. Darting around like a crazed moth, with that wonderful jaw pointed heavenward, and the hand raised, palm forward, just beneath the face—you know the pose from countless album covers to come. She made a sound that was at once otherworldly and superreal. It was huge, warm and so agile that only her warmth and that of the instrument saved it from sounding mechanical.

There was simply no end to what she could do, or so it seemed. And she was **radiant**, very much in the first flush of incredible success. At the end of the Mad Scene there was a half hour of carrying on, and remember this was 1961,

pre hype, pre standing ovulations. This crowd meant it. I had no idea what I was hearing, my status being pre-neophyte. And yet somehow I knew. I had never heard anything like that before from a throat, nor from an audience. I remember finding Tucker rather moving in the tomb scene that evening. Or maybe it was that great tune "Bell'alma innamorata." Or maybe it was the glow from the astonishing experience which had just preceded it. Who knows and who cares? That was it. The beginning. Life was never the same; my radio never returned to AM, my Broadway records grew dusty. I became a regular on the standing room line (how can the word "regular" be applied to the people on the standing room line?) There was no looking back. The addiction simply took over the adolescent void called my life. Everything was either openly or secretly planned to cater to the need to be at that house and to see whatever I could afford to see, which wasn't much. Since my first experience was a diva experience, as opposed to a Wagner experience or a libretto experience or a production experience, I thought opera was this thing about divas. This odd (is it?) slant was reinforced unwittingly by my brother, who gave me a gift for being the best man at his wedding a month later. The gift was *The Art of the Prima Donna*, Joan's sensational 16-aria collection of showpieces. This 2-record set (remember them?) contained **NO TEXTS** at all. That is to say, no libretti. The notes were a rundown of the various dive associated with the various arie. That clinched it: **Opera is about Divas and Tunes and Florid Music**. The End. After wearing *The Art of the PD* down to a grooveless platter in no time, I tormented my parents into thinking it might be nice to hear a seventeenth aria. So, as a birthday present, they coughed up the enormous sum of \$15 dollars and pointed me in the direction of E.J. Korvette's and the new complete Joan Sutherland *Lucia*. But Korvette's was out of the *Lucia*. Despondent, I combed the bins. There it was. With that face on the cover. Even Andrea Charmant, the school slut, never used that much eyeliner. And the disc was "highlights" so I was left with **cash**. I asked my friend Bob the expert, who said he had her in *Cavalleria* but that was another story vocally. I had no clue what he was talking about, so I bought it. My first Callas record: highlights from the '59 *Lucia*. **Oops**. Well. I had certainly never heard sounds like that before. My first response was: has she no shame? Any lady in the chorus can sing better than that! Then: there's something wrong with the turntable. But Harvey the repairman said there was nothing wrong with the turntable; there was something wrong with that woman. But a strange thing began to happen. As I had all of two opera recording, I was forced to play the Callas *Lucia* simply to provide variety from the sixteen arias. What began to happen was that I had to hear certain phrases again and again. "L'ombra mostrarsi a me" and "Alfin son tua, alfin sei mio." Over and over and over. **I was lost forever**. A far deeper place had been tapped, and there was not turning back. I had to have everything Callas recorded.

In 1965 when I first heard Callas "live" and I heard my first pirate Callas (Dallas *Medea*) a subcategory of the Buzz occurred. No commercial recording equalled this. Ten seconds into the final scene, I flew off the Richter goosebump scale. And that brings me to part 3, the Leonie experience. Now a diehard Callas lunatic, critical of Joan's diction, this one's this and that one's that (problem: they weren't Maria), I attended an *Otello*: McCracken, Rysanek, Merrill. Everything from her hypnotic entrance, fixated on Otello as if walking in an erotic dream, to the heartwrenching third act duet concluding with the bloodcurdling screams as he dragged her offstage, to the soaring (that wonderfully slightly sharp pitch)

high notes of the third act ensemble, to the hooty and eerie Willow Song, to the simply terrifying murder scene (unlike Zinka, Leonie did not sit up while being strangled in order to cover her ankles, then lie back down and continue to be murdered)-- this was an experience unlike any other I had previously had. **Incredible dementia followed:** Callas's Toscas, Scotto's first Butterflies, Caballe's surprise Carnegie debut sensation, more Leonie roles, Zeani, Olivero. But Leonie was my first in-house sampling and it changed the course of my life, my work and my operatic tastes forever.

Ira Siff

“...this was **DRAMA** beyond all imagining...”

I've been an opera queen since age 8 when I discovered a copy of the 1936 edition of *The Victor Book of the Opera* in my aunt's bookcase. **It was the plots and the theatricality that hooked me at first.** Not until late adolescence did I really begin to fully appreciate the musical and vocal aspects of the art. There were plenty of divas whose recordings I enjoyed-- Tebaldi, Price, De Los Angeles.

But when I moved from opera-starved LA to New York at the age of 24, I was able to experience opera performances, staged and in concert, on a regular basis. And it was then, at the 1979 Carnegie Hall performance of Strauss's *Die Aegyptische Helena*, that I discovered **Gwyneth Jones**. Call me mad. It was Dame Gwyneth that revealed to me that night that **the ridiculous and the sublime, could coexist and create catharsis.** This glamorous, regal-looking woman, attired like a true Grecian heroine in a one-shoulder clinging silk gown embroidered with pearls, sang some of Strauss's wildest music in a voice that was even wilder. Unfurling her legendary wobble like a banner flapping in the breeze, struggling to hit a pitch, any pitch, and just hang on, throwing herself into her character as if her very life depended on it-- **this was drama beyond all imagining.** I fell in love with her from that night on, and the love affair has only grown as each passing year has brought her voice a whole new cornucopia of defects.


For me, nothing matches the delirious, absurd pleasure I receive in hearing Dame Gwyneth wobble away with that enormous sound

while she gives some of the most grippingly acted operatic performances I can ever hope to see.. I know of only one or two other opera queens who share my all-embracing affection for Dame Gwyneth. I'm frankly amazed that all of you Callas queens can adore La Divina at her most defective and still not “get” Gwyneth. It's your loss, guys, and I'll bet you that one of these days you'll find yourselves missing her. Or do you really think you're going to get a valid theatrical experience out of Sharon Sweet?

Eric Myers

“What, I asked myself, could **possibly** top this moment?”

November 1969, Dallas: I had not seen much opera, just some bread-and-butter Verdi and Puccini. I was such a young pup anyway. I had never seen any **superstars**. Then came the night that changed my life. I know nothing about Fedora, and I had never heard of Magda Olivero. The first act seemed tedious: after her entrance aria, which she sang prayerfully on her knees, a few people shouted “Brava!” During intermission, when someone asked an old fart behind me what he thought, he twanged, “Ah guess it wuz good, but not good'nuff to yell about!” I overheard someone say the soprano was over 60 years old. The second act really took off. Bruno Prevedi brought down the house; I had never heard so much applause and cheering. A few minutes later, we were in the middle of a Big Love Duet. Magda was animated and tense, stalking the stage in agitation. I realized my eyes were glued to her even when Prevedi was singing. **Suddenly, it was apparent we had reached a climax:** Prevedi was at the footlights pouring out a glorious stream of melody; then Magda took up the same phrase and let loose with this incredibly loud high C, which she held and held. People yelled “brava” and applause started. I thought it was il-legal to interrupt the music, but the applause just swelled and swelled. You could tell Magda was still singing, but the audience drowned her out. The music grew louder; the lovers sang in unison. Curtain. The audience went apeshit. Time and time again, the curtain rose and fell, rose and fell, and the singers bowed at the footlights. The audience cheered and cheered: a marathon event. **What, I asked myself, could possibly top this moment?** During intermission, I overheard people talking about how this woman was over 60; no, she was over 70 and she made her debut during World War I. I couldn't believe Act 3. The second soprano was riding around on a bicycle--too absurd for words. More filler. Then we



got to the final scene. Magda swallowed the slowest-acting poison ever. I swear she went on dying for half an hour, rolling around on the floor, gasping, sobbing, sighing. And then she was on her face, moaning and groaning at Prevedi's feet.

It never occurred to me that singer do such things-- I was used to them standing at the footlights and staring at the conductor. And here was Magda, lying on her back, her hands covering her face, singing up Prevedi's pants leg. It would have been comical, had it not been so mesmerizing. At long last, she died and the curtain fell. The bows were an orgy of cheers and bouquets. **Madga knelt as the flowers rained down upon her.** The sustained roar of the audience was thunderous. No, it was volcanic. I got the most incredible chills, wondering why I had never seen anything like this before-- and would I ever get to again. I vowed I would spend the rest of my life searching for prolonged curtain calls and manic audience demonstrations. Over the years, I've found what I was looking for, thanks to Magda-- and especially Leonie. It's been expensive, but worth it! Thank you Magda, for starting me on the road to Paradise!

"Richard Breath"

"But mostly I was Gwyneth"

The very first diva I became aware of was Saluna of the kids' TV show "Villa Alegre." She was definitely the most soignée resident of that imaginary Mexican village. I can picture her rendition of the song "Saluna's Habitat," which she sang dreamily as she slunk around her softly-lit, breezy apartment finally settling herself into a wicker chair, fanning her neck slowly. I'll never forget it. I must have been about 4 years old. Am I the only one who remembers her?

But I presume we're talking about Opera Divas. I was drawn into opera mainly by the appeal of its music and the sound of its voices; it took me a while to appreciate the stage activity. So my indoctrination came through recordings. Nothing in my adolescence could have prepared me for the sound of the "Sutherland E-flat." I heard it first in "Sempre libera" from her full Traviata recording of the late '70's. **It was like an emanation from beyond,** a sound that defied you to believe that it came out of the mouth of what appeared to be merely a cheerful, matronly music hall warbler (though I later realized Joan is far more than that!) I played it over and over, my innards buzzing with each repetition. During the months that followed, I would race home from school every day to devour "Coloratura Spectacular-- Death Defying

Bravura Arias (or something like that)-- a Sutherland LP I borrowed from my piano teacher and wore completely smooth.

If you count television, there was that 1986 Gala of Stars from the Wiener Staatsoper. The dreary proceedings were really schlepping until Bubbles introduced Gwyneth Jones ("Whoops, I mean DAME Gwyneth," Sills giggled) The Dame moved out on stage to sing "In questa reggia." **It was big, it was forbidding, it was like a great ship sailing off to war.** Only it was womanly and artistic too. I was a goner over that voice and the story it told. But things only got better after the music ended. The audience hollered and Gwyneth curtsied to the floor. The house lights came up. Jimmy kissed one of her hands, and she let the other hand droop to the concertmaster who rose to take it in his own.

The tableau culminated in a shot from behind of Gwyneth slowly raising both arms out to the audience. You know I spent a lot of time reliving the whole thing in front of a mirror. **Sometimes I was Levine, sometimes the concertmaster, sometimes the audience. But mostly I was Gwyneth.** [That telecast is not to be compared with her Levine Gayla appearance: Gwyneth cannot be assumed to be consistent over the course of 10 days, let alone 10 seasons. She indeed has her off days, and that goes for her wardrobe as well as her voice. I have it from the highest possible authority that she had to fend for herself that night without any assistance from Gay Friends.

But, if we must talk about live performance attended in person and everything, then I'm going to have to confess to an unpardonable lapse of sanity of which I'm not at all proud: my first diva experience "in the house was triggered by Kathleen Battle. Hey, look, I never liked her before and I never liked her since, but for that one night of my life, she was The Diva. I was given a last-minute comp to Ariadne auf Naxos, and I had no time to prepare for it-- read the score, learn the story, listen to a recording, nothing. Now, do you remember the first time YOU heard "Großmächtige Prinzessin"? Well, imagine little unsuspecting me in the side orchestra, gazing up at Miss Kathy playing the coquette with her subtle but obnoxious superiority and listened to her coast through that music from another planet. **What wet-behind-the-ears teen queen wouldn't eat it up?**

I was only 15 at the time, if that's any excuse.

"Yenta Hollander"



Tuesday operas offer a little for everyone

This month's *Tuesday Night At The Opera* (7 p.m. Tuesdays on KPAC) schedule seems to offer a little for everyone this month.

Join host Nathan Cone as he starts the month July 2 with some American performances to celebrate the 4th of July. We'll feature Leonard Bernstein's "On The Town" as well as "Trouble in Tahiti" featuring members of the original Broadway cast with the New York Philharmonic, Leonard Bernstein conducting.

July 9, it will be Strauss' *Salome* featuring Sumi Jo, accompanied by the English Chamber Orchestra, Richard Bonyngue conducting.

July 23, we'll bring you Gioacchino Rossini's *La Donna del Lago* and July 30, we'll conclude...

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Robert Durr, conductor
NEW YORK STATE THEATER
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NEW YORK PHILHARMONIC
Leonard Statler, conductor
Lieberson: Fire (World Premiere:
150th Anniversary Commission)
Dinner Symphony No. 6

This means their relationship becomes doubly charged.' Hampson continues; 'There are moments when it becomes very intimate and tender, especially in the original French version of the text' - (which Bondy's staging uses in preference to Verdi's later Italian translation) - 'and one notices the way that he calls Carlos tu only when they are absolutely alone. This sort of male bonding is one of those universals of human nature which opera deals with powerfully, and I find it very moving - it reminds me of the notion of "comrades" in Walt Whitman's poetry. No, I don't believe there's necessarily any erotic content to it. I've no wish to knock the sexual revolution, but isn't it time now to accept that romantic emotion and dependence can be an even deeper motivation than physical lust?'

The experience of working



QUESTIONS FOR:

Maria Ewing

An American operatic soprano, Ewing will sing in concert this week with the New York Philharmonic.

Q: You're famous for the title role of Richard Strauss's "Salome." Salome gets her fondest wish - the head of John the Baptist - by per-

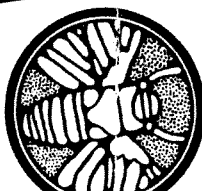
forming the seductive Dance of the Seven Veils for her stepfather, Herod. Your version ends in total nudity, which one London reviewer called "a curious artistic aberration." Why did you decide to do it?

A: It was my own idea to do the dance naked. I felt that it was somehow essential to express the truth of that moment - a moment of frustration, longing and self-discovery for Salome. For me, the scene wouldn't work any other way.

Q: Are you aware that there are pictures of you doing this on the Internet?

A: Oh, gracious me. The Internet is like aliens landing on the planet and we can do nothing about it. I don't like that at all.

NO COMMENT!



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

OU VA LA JEUNE ANDOUILLE?

Le nom de la première . . . yes, loyal readers, here are *Les Contes de Bordello*, the youthful recounting of my life and loves as a junior opera queen. And where did these exploits take place? Roma? Milano? No, in New Orleans, of all places! Enzo's humble origins are not truly Italian but Cajun Coon Ass. The New Orleans Opera was a unique place to cut one's aficionado teeth. Performances, then as now, take place in the Mahalia Jackson Performing Arts Center. For many years, the opera house was conveniently located just a stone's throw away from a French Quarter bathhouse. Well, the bathhouse has long since shut its doors but here are my memories of those happier days, culled from twenty five years of experience as an audience member, production assistant and, now that I no longer live in the City That Care Forgot, a long-distance supporter. What follows is a veritable A to Z roster of the divas and divos that left lasting impressions, both the good and the bad. Laissez les bon temps rouler, girlfriend!:

The first conte is **June Anderson**, who appeared to be a prospective La Dementia, not the successor to La Stupenda. My subsequent work with her as a production assistant only served to confirm the initial impression. The Amazonian Anderson arrived for a staging rehearsal of *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* wearing a sexless poncho with enormous jewelry right out of Pasolini's *Medea*. Her hairstyle was courtesy of a light socket. A wide-eyed, hysterical expression only added to her crazy demeanor. Anderson had previously appeared with the New Orleans Opera in 1979 as the Queen of the Night. Although still a rookie diva then, Anderson apparently supplied prima donna antics aplenty. Reportedly, she refused to sing "O zittre nìcht" from the platform she had been directed to ascend, bringing the orchestra dress rehearsal to a grinding halt. General director Arthur Cosenza, fearful of overtime expenses and tanked up on martinis, came rushing down the aisle in orchestra seating and screamed across the orchestra pit: "Young lady, you get on that fucking piece of wood or you are finished in this business." Anderson did as she was told.

Loony June continued her shenanigans during a return engagement in 1983 as Rosina. By this time, however, she had the operatic world at her feet. Anderson had been catapulted to international fame the year before when she substituted at the last minute for an indisposed Montserrat Caballe in *Semiramide*. She was the hottest soprano property around. Immediately prior to these *Barbiere* performances in New Orleans, Anderson had debuted in several important Italian houses. Italians love their divas raw and Anderson's petulant ways were well-received in Venice and Milan. Unfortunately, screaming and foot stomping just look bitchy and stupid in New Orleans.

I remember a rehearsal where Renato Capecchi, serving double duty as Bartolo and stage director for the production, insisted Anderson play with a doll during "Una voce poco fa." Anderson was hesitant to try this idea and Capecchi explained why it was a good piece of business. Anderson sniffed and replied: "I wouldn't know. I've never worked with any good

directors." Capecchi countered: "That may be, madame. But I've worked with many insecure singers." Nostrils flaring, Anderson stormed into the ladies bathroom, screaming that she was quitting the production. Capecchi, furious, shouted: "Go, then! Go!" The stage manager knew Anderson well from their joint years at New York City Opera and spent the next hour prying Anderson out of the john.

At the first dress rehearsal, Anderson took one look in the mirror at makeup and wig designer Joe Marino's work and started throwing things: "I look like a drag queen," she shrieked. Exactly. That's all Joe knew how to create, since his only previous experience had been creating makeup for gay Mardi Gras balls. Anderson took her Dulcinea wig and industrial strength eyebrows quite personally and refused to let Marino come near her for the duration of the run.

What about the performance, you ask? I recall a lot of cold, hard tone, a shitty trill, lobotomized acting—but great high notes. And, honey, did she fret over them high notes! I remember her singing high E flats over and over again in her dressing room, which could explain why she looked and sounded so sleepy on stage.

As an administrative assistant, it was my job to drive La Anderson to her various commitments in my beat up Ford Fairmont. We stopped for lunch one day at an Italian dive on Rampart Street. Over a salad, Anderson proceeded to dish every singer in the universe, living or dead. Most divas engage in a fair amount of good-natured gossip. Anderson was chillingly serious with her venomous comments. She admired not one of her peers at City Opera: Gianna Rolandi was "vulgar" and Ashley Putnam dismissed as "a pothead." She resented comparisons with Joan Sutherland but conceded La Stupenda's *Daughter of the Regiment* was "cute." Her comments regarding Renata Scotto were particularly vile but she softened their impact somewhat by allowing that Scotto's Desdemona was more tolerable than her usual "dreadful" performances. She spoke kindly only of Alfredo Kraus, from whom Anderson appeared to receive a paternally nurturing interest.

Anderson's real-life mad scenes were not only pathetic, but unpredictable. During performances, I used to hand Anderson a prop candle that she carried on stage during the Act Two storm music. One night, she exited into the wings, took the candle and calmly reflected, "You know, I'm glad my career is so promising because my private life is the pits." Without missing a beat, Anderson walked right back on stage while I stood dumbfounded at her disclosure. With behavior like hers, no wonder the diva's private life was the pits. She could keep a therapist in business for years. And that promising career? Forget it. It never happened. Now the high notes are gone and la sua repertoire is molto bizzarro: Ernani? Please

Carlo Bergonzi was the first great star I ever worked with. Appearing in a 1981 Un Ballo in Maschera, he was then entering the twilight years of a great career. The tenor was a quiet, conscientious man who fell to his knees behind the set and crossed himself minutes before his first entrance on stage. That's Italian!

I approached Bergonzi once during rehearsals and asked him to autograph my copies of his classic Boheme and Butterfly recordings with Tebaldi. As he stood in the dim light, he silently took my pen and did as I requested. He handed the box sets back and asked, "What do you think of the recordings?" I thought I was going to die. Carlo Bergonzi is asking me what I think of his work! I told Bergonzi they were my first recordings (they were) and I had cherished them since the age of eight. "Davvero, giovanetto? Grazie."

Bergonzi never seemed satisfied with his work; I would often notice him leaving for the day with a sad shake of his head. So I was honored to step in at staging rehearsals for the absent Erie Mills and support Bergonzi in his death throes. You could wait a lifetime to hear singing as eloquent as Bergonzi offered in the last act. The voice showed the inevitable ravages of time but the sound was still liquid gold. I stood in the wings every chance I could to hear this hero of my opera queen beginnings. In those unforgettable moments, the junior queen and impressionable queer boy stood as one, transcending time, united and inspired by the indelible artistry of the great Bergonzi.

Fiorenza Cossotto represents a paradoxical disparity between the public and private personas of any artist. On stage, Cossotto was a figure of mystery and fascination, an impression enhanced by that immense powerhouse of a voice. Up close and in person, Cossotto was a thoroughly unpleasant little fireplug of a woman, obsessed with her own need for attention via awed responses. As assistant stage manager for a 1982 production of Samson et Dalila, I had numerous occasions to witness both aspects of the Italian mezzo-soprano.

It was my job to meet Cossotto and her husband Ivo Vinco at their hotel in the French Quarter and escort both of them to the opera house. On the morning of the first sitzprobe, I waited nervously in the hotel lobby for this legendary duo. Good Lord, I ruminated, the fate of two of the biggest names in Italian opera is in my hands. Cossotto and Vinco had sung Norma with Maria Callas. Cossotto was the reigning mezzo-soprano of La Scala, a favorite of such maestros as Karajan, Muti, Levine and Pretre. I was terrified the three of us would be mugged on the way to the theater (not a rare occurrence in the French Quarter). How would I explain that one? Well, one look at La Cossotto and I knew any prospective mugger would regret accosting this diva. "Andiam," Cossotto commanded and I timidly set off in the direction of the opera house. She walked briskly, plying me with questions about the production. Who was singing Samson, she asked. Richard Cassilly? Ah, yes, she had just sung the opera with Cassilly in Hamburg. They were scheduled to sing Samson et Dalila at the Met the year before but a strike had sabotaged that plan. "Che vergogna," sighed Cossotto.

I was struck by how tiny she was. She wore huge spike heels to compensate for her short stature but she could not have been any taller than five feet. She lacked nothing in grandezza, however, and as we walked past winos and prostitutes, she exuded all the regal character of Eboli or Amneris.

Safely inside the opera house, Cossotto sailed through the sitzprobe with a flawlessly sung account of Dalila's music. I will never forget her attack on the high B "Lachel" near the end of Act Two. It was ringing, rock-solid and massive. My eardrums vibrated for hours afterwards. It's hard for the junior queens to understand what the impact of such a voice is like. But once experienced, you never forget it.

If only my subsequent impressions of Cossotto were such positive ones! Alas, the mezzo soon revealed her true character, a self-absorbed narcissist unaware and unconcerned for the feelings of others. She screamed with rage at the costume ladies for not hiding her flabby arms with the requisite cape. She didn't even stop when they burst into tears. Christ, these were old housewives from the suburbs! They couldn't even begin to make sense of Cossotto's Italian-only diatribe. They didn't even know Cossotto wanted a cape. They would gladly have supplied one without the bitch fit.

Cossotto hounded the old French maestro Jean Fournet after every rehearsal. She told him she had coached the role with Pretre, who was a much better conductor, and the tempos were all wrong. She heaped scorn on the set designer, "Che cos'e questo pasticcio?" was her first comment upon sighting the Act Two scenery.

She was snarly with me, as well. My primary function, she informed me, was to bring her glasses of water backstage and to keep changing the cassettes in her tape recorder set up in the wings. She did get along splendidly with the make up designer, who, for once, had a diva who enjoyed looking like a drag queen.

Ironically, Vinco was a relaxed, soft-spoken man who took his wife's verbal abuse in stride. He arrived at the height of a huge conflict between Cossotto and the director carrying a plastic Woolworth's bag and beaming ecstatically. "Deodorant is so cheap here," he stated cheerfully. Cossotto berated him for this inappropriate intrusion and the bass shrugged his shoulders good-naturedly, departing to savor his savings on toilet items.

I asked Vinco about Cossotto's relations with Callas. He said Zeffirelli had painted a false picture of his wife. Callas and Cossotto were the best of colleagues. "Fiorenza would do anything for Maria," he explained. "She worshiped her." Vinco even claimed Callas had requested Cossotto as her Adalgisa for the final Normas in Paris. Based on my personal observations of Cossotto's behavior, I felt Vinco's defense of his wife was simplistic and naive.

Still, it was hard to stay angry with Cossotto once she started to sing. The voice was magnificent, an evenly produced mezzo-soprano of lush amplitude. On the other hand, her acting was campy beyond belief. While Samson was blinded by the Philistines, Cossotto jumped up on the bed with his sheared locks, waved them over her head like a lasso, threw them down on the pillows and stomped them with her infamous wedgies.

In the final analysis, Cossotto was an artist best experienced in the house, safely viewed through the haze of stage lights and aficionado enthusiasm. Up close, Cossotto the woman left a lingering bitterness that contrasts poorly with her undisputed talent.

La Cieca offered an affectionate tribute to **Mignon Dunn** in the last issue, so I'll keep my praises short and sweet. Dunn was instrumental in the revival of several rare operas at New Orleans Opera during the '70's. She was obviously looking for a showcase for her little-known talents in the bel canto and French repertoires. Didn't know Mignon had a great Donizetti portrayal in her, did ya know? I was lucky to have seen her only appearances as Leonore in La Favorite. The performance was en francais but Dunn brought her own Italianate touches to the part. Like the two-foot high black pizzeria wig. And lest we forgot Leonore was a woman of easy virtue, Dunn added chandelier earrings, platform shoes and a bodice open to her naval, accentuating her six-foot plus frame. Yes, my dears, this was Gina Lolabrigida on steroids, Patrick Swayze as Lucrezia Borgia. A **big** fucking girl.

Dunn proved an equally stylish interpreter of Massenet the following season when she sang the title role of Herodiade. This time Mignon sported an orange bouffant with turquoise diadem, shoulder pads and the same platform wedgies. Endora as Juno. Joan Crawford as the Empress Livia. The set was all stairs and Dunn wasted no time in workin' those steps. When Paul Plishka revealed that Herodiade was the mother of her rival Salome, Dunn threw herself down a staircase with a shriek of horror (well, if you found out Marisa Galvany was the fruit of your loins, wouldn't you?)

Dunn also brought her unfailing theatrical flair to the standard repertoire, as well. Her Carmen was fashion-conscious but, oh, so practical. If black is your color but it's too darn hot in Seville, what's a mezzo to do? Mignon solved the problem brilliantly by wearing a sleeveless black gown for the bullfight. And it was satin to boot. Cool fabric, cool dress, cool look. Dunn's outfit also came in handy for the wrestling match staging devised for her in the final duet. When Dunn threw Jose's ring away, she was straddling Ermanno Mauro and laughing like Regina Resnik as Klytemnestra. When Mauro got an arm free, he simply had to reach up and stab Dunn, who, naturally, fell on top of him, her dress covering both their heads. No one understands the requirements of realismo better than our Mignon.

Kidding aside, Dunn was a beloved artist of my youth. She defined the essence of queer operatic spirit: dangerous, exciting and unabashedly outre. Dunn was sometimes over the top but always committed and con amore in her approach. And her burnished, beautifully produced mezzo was a quality instrument. I'm so glad dear Mignon is still strutting her stuff in third career repertory (Quickly, Augusta Tabor, Mother Goose, etc.) A new generation of junior queens can appreciate her generous, heartfelt artistry. I know I did. You go, diva.

Pablo Elvira 's career remains a mystery to me. The voice was absolutely first-class: a suave, velvety lyric baritone that was heaven to hear in the bel canto repertoire. Some fellow regine that I respect highly tell me his Riccardo in I Puritani with June Anderson at City Opera was a very exciting performance.

And yet, Elvira never went any further than some modest successes on the international circuit. Could it be his medium-sized voice was found wanting in the big-gun roles like Rigoletto and Tonio that he was partial to? Or was his short, dumpy physique a handicap? Perhaps it was both factors. Or neither. Who knows? Whatever the problem, I still remember Elvira's frequent appearances in New Orleans with pleasure.

While he sang a wide variety of roles for us, ranging from the Count di Luna in *Il Trovatore* to Michonnet in *Adriana Lecouvreur*, I particularly cherish his superb Don Alphonse in *La Favorite*. Here, Elvira was really in his element, spinning a silky legato line in the hushed "Viens, Leonor." It wasn't his fault that he and Mignon Dunn looked like a circus act standing next to one another. With voices like these, you hardly even noticed. Elvira was a real gentlemen, too, kind, genial and sincere in his contacts with everyone around the opera house. When I worked with Elvira in *Ballo*, he signed my copy of his *Cavalleria* recording, "Your friend forever, Pablo." I will always remember this Puerto Rican mensch with fondness.

Ferruccio Furlanetto- Every summer, Arthur Cosenza would depart for Italy in order to scout for unknown talent. To be very cynical about it, Cosenza was trying to hoodwink subscribers into thinking they were hearing great artists by importing foreign singers with exotic sounding names who were willing to work for cheap. These operatic "Star Search" ventures netted just what you might expect: great names, lousy voices.

Year after year, impostors like Adriana Anelli, Giorgio Tieppo and Odabella Lacambra came to town, all plucked from their second year of study at some conservatory outside Civitavecchia or Francofonte. Needless to say, the audience and critical reception ranged from indifferent to hostile and the singers were shipped home, never to be heard from again (mercifully).

One exception to this annual turkey slaughter was the 1978 American debut of a young basso named Ferruccio Furlanetto. Furlanetto bowed as Zaccaria in *Nabucco* and immediately impressed with his imposing presence and voluminous, jet-black sound. He returned to New Orleans in 1982 for Pagano in *I Lombardi*, holding his own with co-stars Carlo Bergonzi and Christina Deutekom. Furlanetto went on to achieve well-deserved fame. For his sake, the New Orleans Opera "Star Search" ritual cannot be counted a total waste. I did take away one valuable lesson from it all: opera is about substance, not packaging.

Marisa Galvany, New Orleans' all-purpose dramatic soprano, appeared regularly in such classic *falcon* roles as Rachel in *La Juive* and Valentine in *Les Huguenots*, as well as in more standard repertoire. A tall, crazed-looking woman, Galvany brought a train-kicking, chest-pounding vehemence to everything she sang. This was an Elena Nicolai, *Notte a Napoli*, hairy armpits style of emoting that had Galvany's colleagues watching their backs.

Galvany's voice was even more weird than her stage deportment. Her soprano sported a metallic, edgy timbre combined with a freakish upper extension. In addition, Galvany employed all manner of vocal tricks (glottal attack, souped up chest register, etc.) Galvany even had her own Gallery of Grotesque moments, like when she interpolated an high E flat at the end of the Triumphal Scene and was greeted with laughter, not cheers. Or in *Macbeth*, when she diverted attention from problem passages by hitting a chorister or knocking a chair over.

Galvany was one of those artists who is three parts willingness, one part ability. Others of her ilk include such *donne di pazzie* as Adelaide Negri and Nelly Miriciou. Simultaneously campy and compelling, this type of high-voltage performer should not be dismissed lightly. So brace yourselves, New Yorkers--Galvany is back! La Cieca tells me she was let out of her cage this summer to sing *Lady Macbeth* in Central Park. Nuovo delitto! Nuovo delitto!

Rita Hunter holds a very special place in the affections of New Orleans Opera queens. Unfortunately, this has less to do with her vocal excellence than with her mirth-inspiring girth. Hunter debuted with the New Orleans Opera in 1976 as the *Walkure* Brunnhilde. As the curtain rose on Act Two, Hunter charged down a ramp, spear in hand, wearing a moss green gown with sequins. Someone in my row yelled: "What the hell is that?" A voice behind us responded: "It's Monkey Hill." It should be explained that Monkey Hill is the only elevated land mass in below sea-level New Orleans. A man-made endeavor, the elders of New Orleans built Monkey Hill so native children would know what elevated land looked like. Obviously, it still left everyone unprepared for poor Rita.

Hunter caused yet another stir in 1979 when she returned as the evil Abigaille in *Nabucco*. The audience had been tolerant of her afro wig, black face and basketball-size earrings, but when she was carted out for her death scene on a bier held aloft by half a dozen wobbly-kneed supers, they howled with laughter.

It's a shame La Hunter had to work so hard to overcome size prejudices. If memory serves me correctly, she sang the shit out of both roles and I remember shouting a hearty brava for her easy delivery of the fiendish cabaletta in *Nabucco*. If only some of today's Two-Ton Tessies were half as talented.

Isolde (as sung by **Johanna Meier**)- The steady and sturdy jugendlich sopran of New Orleans Opera was Johanna Meier, who appeared frequently with the company as Sieglinde, Senta and Elsa. Both in voice and presence, she projected a golden, gleaming aura. She always wore her own blonde hair for the Wagnerian ladies--up, down, braided, bouffant, whatever was required. This practicality reflects an even sensibility that one does not associate with the prima donna myth and may have, in some perverse way, worked against Meier.

Her biggest career coup was appearing at Bayreuth in the early '80's as Isolde. She brought her portrayal of the Irish princess to New Orleans in

1983. Observing Meier at work backstage, I saw the soprano's uncomplicated makeup. She rehearsed day and night without complaint. (Soloists were usually dismissed in the evening so the chorus could learn their blocking. However, because of Tristan's length and the minimal choral requirements, the soloists were asked to rehearse all day.) She wore flats and comfortable clothes, not diva wear. Meier was the most composed singer I ever worked with. She didn't have a neurotic bone in her body.

I found Meier's Isolde very effective. If she lacked the power and bite of Nilsson in this role, she brought a tender womanliness that illuminated many facets of the role. One final example of Meier's sensibility: The director and designer could not agree on the right visual image for the end of Isolde's Liebestod. Should she die standing up in a transfigured pose? Should there be some lighting effect to suggest oblivion? Meier interrupted and suggested, "What if I just do what's in the score?" And that's just what she did. When the Liebestod concluded, Meier lay down and died over Tristan's body. You have to admire the lady's integrity.

Siegfried Jerusalem-Boy, talk about a voice in the wilderness. I first heard Jerusalem in an absolutely ghastly Fidelio at New Orleans Opera in 1980. The sets were Wieland Wagner abstractions that had seen better days (and were crudely lit, to boot). The audience left en masse after the first scene, erroneously thinking an intermission was taking place. Despite every effort, very few were coaxed away from the bar and back into the house. They didn't miss much except the spectacle of Teresa Kubiak fucking up the scales in "Komm, Hoffnung" and giggling about it right there on stage.

I knew it would take a miracle to salvage this mess, but against all expectations, a miracle took place. A clear, focused, beautifully textured tenor sound penetrated the darkness of Florestan's prison. A buzz went around the house as this sweet, mellifluous voice only got bigger and more expressive. Pages started turning in programs, flashlights were switched on, the muttering swelled—who was this guy? Jerusalem was the name and Wagner, as we soon discovered, was his game.

By the time he returned to New Orleans in 1985 as Lohengrin, Jerusalem had begun to exhibit some of the vocal problems that to this day continue to compromise his many sterling qualities: shaky top notes, forcing, constricted tone, etc. However, Jerusalem's keen musical intelligence and subtle acting skills keep me in his corner. His Siegmund at Lyric Opera was marvelous: poetic, ardent, heroic, eloquent. All the same virtues that, long ago, lifted a wretched night at New Orleans Opera to a more exalted plane.

Whatever happened to Baby **Roberta Knie**? This youthful heldensopran, so promising in Wagner and Strauss, disappeared after a few brief seasons on the international scene. Her one and only appearance in New Orleans was as Salome. I saw her on the night of the

worst flooding the city had experienced in years. There really were more people on stage than in the house. The year was 1980 and Knie still had enough voice left to make a very positive impression. She was a hefty Jewish princess but becomingly gowned in a flowing white gown. Her interpretation was very intense but sparing with gestures and movement. Everything had a strongly concentrated impact. She braved her own dance and even ended up standing on the cistern nude, with her genitals facing upstage. This was a Salome as imagined by Reubens but even the way she bared her ass was convincing.

I remember that Knie and the evening's Herodias, Sheila Nadler, seemed unwilling to speak to each other throughout the rehearsals and performances. Years later, I heard that the ladies were ex-lovers and neither one of them liked the property settlement.

This Salome production was especially memorable for me because it featured a mouth-watering super named Bill who ignited a passion that no apples or wine could quench. Bill was a very dark daddy number with a moustache and hairy chest. He was chosen to play one of Herodias' pretty boys and was directed to stick his head up Nadler's dress. Bill was hot and I held a torch for him long after the Salome performances.

Bill and I met during my initial season as a production assistant with the company. He was still mouth-watering and he readily responded to my blatant flirtation. It still ranks as some of the best sex I've ever had. We made time to fuck at least once every season and if I saw him today, the chemistry would still be there. New Orleans Opera supers were the biggest gay presence backstage. Some were gorgeous, some were not, but they were my buddies and, in the apolitical gay community of New Orleans, they taught me a lot about brotherhood and belonging.

Although I missed **Evelyn Lear**'s 1972 debut with the company as Tosca (with Giuseppe Taddei, no less!), the diva returned to New Orleans in 1976 with her famed interpretation of the Marschallin. It was a stylish, seasoned portrayal that owed more than a little to Schwarzkopf. My favorite borrowed item from Fraulein Blackhead was the now de rigueur staging of the Marschallin's exit in Act Three. The blocking goes something like this: Marschallin sighs "Ja, ja," turns completely upstage, walks to the exit, stops, extends her left hand to Octavian, draws hand away swiftly as Octavian kisses it, makes sweeping exit.

Lear executed this business beautifully. To this day, I have not seen any singer make such eloquent use of their back and neck. The aristocratic posture, the elegant line of her arched neck and those exquisite shoulders all linger in the memory. Lear was a clever animal di palco who managed to transcend one of New Orleans Opera's more atrocious visual efforts (Octavian changed from his Mariandel drag into a fluorescent purple velour waistcoat and breeches).

I had occasion to encounter Lear under more favorable conditions in the years to come. She sang a moving Geschwitz opposite Catherine Malfitano's inspired Lulu at Lyric Opera. I interviewed her for one of the gay papers and she told me how frustrated she was with lesbophobe directors whose idea of an authentic dyke was a dominatrix in chaps,

cracking a whip. She defended her refreshingly ladylike portrayal of Geschwitz by declaring: "All the lesbians in my life are femme to the point of ridiculous. Look, honey, I'm straight and I'm the butchiest thing around."

God, wasn't **Sherrill Milnes** every junior opera queen's wet dream in the 70's? Milnes was a regular guest artist in my adolescent fantasies, a burly piece of beefcake envisioned in and out of a jockstrap. San Francisco fags are still talking about that Thais production with Sills where Milnes ran around in a loincloth during the storm sequences. I've been told that hordes of horny guys hung out at the stage door waiting to service the hunky baritone.

Given Milnes' abundant physical endowments, you might think the extent of my interest in him was purely sexual. Hardly. The term "larger than life" could have been invented for Milnes. He towered like a giant over everything around him--and that was artistic, not just physical, stature. A stage seemed to small a frame for this superman.

When Milnes debuted with the New Orleans Opera in 1973 as Rigoletto, I was floored by his immensita. You forgot about the sets, the costumes, the other singers--all you could focus on was this mighty outpouring of voice and spirit. His return visit in 1976 as Macbeth remains one of the greatest artistic experiences of my life. Here was catharsis--I wept, shuddered and died as Milnes charted the course of the Scottish tyrant's destiny. The final scenes were an epiphany of numbing intensity. Milnes, upon hearing of the death of his Lady, laughed bitterly at the absurdity and waste of life. Then, the news that Birnam Wood was on the move. Milnes saw the chance for restored honor and atonement in Macbeth's impending death and stormed into his final battle with the courage of a man redeemed. Milnes wasn't just my pin-up boy; he was an artist who shook me to my foundations.

Heady stuff for an awkward kid who could only wonder at the croce e delizia of life, aware but not yet enlightened. Milnes was my Amfortas, branding me forever with the fervor of his suffering.

I was not allowed to see **Carol Neblett**'s scandalous debut as Thais. My parents thought I was too young to view La Nebletto's strip tease routine. Yes, dear reader, I was that young. Given how I turned out, my parents are still banging their heads against the wall for not letting me see the Big Blonde in the buff. Her singing was reportedly variable, but in the words of Lanfranco Rasponi, she "delighted the audience by baring her breasts."

The Bourbon Street strippers were anything but delighted, however, and picketed Neblett outside the opera house. If they were required to wear panties and pasties by law, how did that soprano broad rate? Just whose dick, they mused, was she sucking? Well, we really haven't the space here to discuss that particular topic, but I have often wondered why ever she was cast the following season as Gounod's Marguerite. Now, Thais is one thing, but envisioning Neblett as the village virgin required some

unwilling suspension of disbelief: she sauntered into the Kermesse scene looking like some medieval Jayne Mansfield. Maybe the girl can't help it, but Neblett as Marguerite was all wrong. With a getup like that, no wonder Valentin was so worried.

"**O mio babbino caro**" (as sung by **Renata Scotto**)- La Scottisima never sang a staged opera for New Orleans Opera but she did appear under the auspices of the company in a gala concert with orchestra. The year was 1981 and the diminutive diva was traveling with the Met on the Deep South portion of its annual tour. So between performances of Manon Lescaut in Memphis and Dallas, Scotto jetted into town for this one-night-only extravaganza. My grandmother bought me an orchestra seat as an early birthday present. Decked out in a rented tux and toting armfuls of Scotto memorabilia, I set off on that beautiful May evening to see the great cantatrice of my junior opera queens years. Scotto's program was a brief one, interspersed with numerous overtures and interludes. She sang scenes from Otello and Ballo in the first half, verismo arias in the second. Her encores included "Un bel di," of course, but the one I remember best was a delectable "O mio babbino caro."

As she walked out from the wings, some queen yelled "Normal!" Scotto stopped in her tracks, winced, managed a pained smile, whispered "no" and proceeded to take her place next to the maestro. An elderly woman teetered up to the stage and offered Scotto a single flower, as if to make amends for the offending request. Scotto beamed, signaled the conductor and began the aria. As she caressed her cheek with the flower and flashed a charming smile, Scotto displayed a rarely seen girlishness that provided a welcome contrast to her usual haughty demeanor.

Backstage, Scotto struck me as a correct, polite woman who could also be aloof and a little chilly. As she signed my copy of her Norma recording, she spoke enthusiastically about her upcoming opening night at the Met in the same opera. Little did we know the fiasco that loomed in povera Renata's future. Before parting, I suggested to Scotto that Minnie in La Fanciulla del West might be a good role for her. She frowned and said, "I dun know. Is a heavy, heavy role for, how you say in America, a has been?" Perhaps she heard my suggestion as an insult. If so, that was not my intention. I adored Scotto. I have no praise high enough to offer this sublime donna who taught me what the pursuit of every artistic endeavor should be: la verita.

Delicate, lavender-colored lyric soprano **Jeanette Pilou** was a regularly featured artist of Bing's final seasons at the Met. A dark, exotic looking woman, she was the product of French and Egyptian parentage. She made some sporadic appearances at the Met during the 1980's (including a touching Melisande), but is now seldom remembered today.

'Tis a pity because Pilou did some notable work for New Orleans Opera. She sang Cio-Cio-San in 1973 and brought many individual touches to

her portrayal. She wore her long, black hair down at the top of Act Two, a daring innovation that caused a buzz among the seasoned opera goers. (Remember, this was a few years prior to the Ponnelle film and the concept of a self-Westernizing Butterfly was still unusual.) This performance was my first evening at the opera and Pilou led me to expect well-considered interpretation from all future divas, not just emoting by the numbers.

Pilou returned years later to sing a vocally troubled performance of Massenet's *Manon*. Her fragile voice had obviously suffered from incessant forcing and the top notes were now blowzy and effortful. When she emitted an eardrum-shattering war whoop in the Hotel Transylvanie scene, a dozing patron awoke, exclaiming: "I thought Jean Fenn was retired."

It seemed a wasted evening until the final scene. Then, the curtain rose on the most poetic setting I ever saw at New Orleans Opera, an autumnal scene of fallen leaves and woodland solitude. Here, Pilou died in the arms of her Des Grieux, a muted sunset silhouetting her final spasms. I wept at the fate of pauvre Manon that evening. As she poured out her guilt and shame for giving into all manner of forbidden impulses, I saw my own conflict as a gay man mirrored in Pilou's performance. How hard would society slam me for heeding the call of my own taboo desires? This *Manon* marked an important juncture in my coming out process and for that I will always appreciate Pilou, war whoops and all.

Sturdy, reliable **Louis Quilico** sang practically every New Orleans Opera season during my formative years. With his solid if unthrilling baritone, Quilico was easily taken for granted. But I remember many an evening when he was the class of the cast. There as an *Ernani* From Hell "starring" Renato Francesconi and Claudine Carlson. Quilico came out in the third act and tore the place up with his invocation before the tomb of Charlemagne. You were so starved for some real vocalism that Laid back Louis was received with grateful relief. He similarly rescued a *Pagliacci* production from the efforts of Nancy Shade and Harry Theyard.

Although Quilico sang Verdi most frequently with the company, I remember him more vividly as the besotted Herode in Massenet's *Herodiade*. He sang the famous "Vision fugitive" with tangible rapture. I remember how he rolled about with orgasmic delight as the sultry saxophone introduced the aria. For once, I didn't see a tubby man feigning ecstasy, but a convincing depiction of unbridled lust. This *Herodiade* was a well-received sternstunde for this easily forgotten fixture of the New Orleans Opera.

Katia Ricciarelli, the great lirico-spinto hope of her generation, debuted with the New Orleans Opera during the 1974-75 season as Mimi (her signature role). At this stage of her career, Ricciarelli was presenting herself for the first time to opera audiences throughout the world in a variety of roles, ranging from the *Trovatore* Leonora to Micaela. In those

years, she could be somewhat gauche as an actress and her singing lacked the refinement she would attain only a few seasons later. There was a persistent beat in her voice that detracted from the golden sound. Nevertheless, Mimi was a perfect role for her and her characterization was most appealing. She played Mimi as a naive and eager *jolie fille*, not the doomed tragedy queen. She possessed an unaffected charm and naturalness that endeared her to the audience. The luminous glow of her timbre seemed to cast a soft radiance over the hall.

Ricciarelli was clearly a singer with promise and she satisfied all expectations a few seasons later at the Met with memorable portrayals of Desdemona and Luisa Miller. Who could forget the *Otello* broadcast with Vickers when Ricciarelli floated the high A at the end of the Ave Maria for what seemed like an eternity? You could almost see James Levine grinning. Ricciarelli's prime was all too brief but the promise of those early years was considerable.

Diana Soviero-Regular readers of *parterre box* know that I am a fanatical devotee of Diana Soviero. Hard as I try to be objective about her in my role as critic, I cannot speak ill of her. Her artistry stills every criticism. Each new performance leaves me even more delirious in my adoration. I have traveled to the far corners of the planet to hear her. I have seen her perform under the best and worst of circumstances. I have heard her sing with severe bronchitis, fighting back tears of disappointment and frustration over her inability to give more. I have seen her excite standing ovations among even the most jaded opera audiences. Diana is magic and I seek out that magic as often as my finances will allow.

I first encountered the Soviero magic in my capacity as stage manager for her 1984 New Orleans Opera debut in *La Traviata*. I was somewhat familiar with her work through several radio and television appearances with the New York City Opera. By the time of these *Traviata* performances, Soviero had just ended a ten year apprenticeship with City Opera and was embarking on a long-delayed international career in hopes of reaching the Met within a few seasons. Diana's husband Bernard Uzan was the stage director and flew into town several days prior to her arrival to make sure all was in readiness for the rehearsal period. He spoke passionately of Diana's abilities, describing her numerous triumphs in opera houses everywhere. At the time, I thought his comments a touching and gallant case of biased perception. I soon revised my opinion.

Diana tore into the first sitzprobe like a woman possessed. I knew she had sung Violetta dozens of times but she drank in every criticism, every suggestion, every detail offered to her by the maestro. She sang out full voice, without marking. She was in character at all times. A small but very shapely woman, Soviero radiated confidence but was never intimidating or arrogant. She was chic, stylish and very Italianate (to paraphrase La Bumbry, her arms were flailin' all about the place). Her spoken Italian was beautiful but her English still carried delightful traces of her New Jersey origins. As rehearsals proceeded, I knew I had never seen an artist work

as truthfully as Diana. Clichéd though it may sound, she was the first to arrive, the last to leave. All of this diligence served to highlight two qualities she possessed that I consider to be the sine qua non of a great artist.

First, she was blessed with an innate musicality that is instinctive, not applied. She not only hit the notes, she commanded them. She phrased with rubato, made sensitive use of dynamics and understood how *accento* can be just as exciting, if not more so, than mere decibels.

Second, she was a born actress. She knew that all great acting comes from really listening and reacting to one's colleagues. She was alert and aware of her surroundings at all times. Most importantly, she played something other than the given about her character and her situation.

How often I had seen "Sempre libera" played by unimaginative Violettas who laughed maniacally as they twirled around the stage, lapping up Sprite out of a plastic champagne glass. The febrile giddiness of the music is already there in the music—it doesn't need to be underlined with silly business. The *intent* of the cabaletta is to communicate Violetta's despairing retreat into hedonism as a response to her awareness of impending death. But how many Violettas have the intelligence or the inspiration to play such subtext? Diana did. I will never forget how she pulled flowers from a large vase, shredding their petals as Alfredo's voice penetrated her defenses, finally burying her sobbing face in the destroyed remains of the flowers, a perfect visual metaphor for this young life ravaged by illness and self-destructive behavior. As a stage manager, I was usually much too absorbed in the task of calling cues to pay much notice to what the artists were doing on stage. But every night when I signaled the curtain after "Sempre libera," there were tears pouring silently down my face.

Diana would return in future seasons to deliver a definitive Cio-Cio-San and heartbreaking Mimi. Illness robbed us of further planned appearances as Massenet's Manon and Desdemona, but I treasure what did come to fruition. I remember the last night of the *Traviata* run, sitting with Diana on Violetta's deathbed, waiting for the Act Three prelude to begin. We talked about many things. She was off to Vienna the next day for performances of Liu at the Staatsoper. She regretted her lonely, hotel-confined existence but had committed her life to being an opera singer. Her idol was Renata Tebaldi but she also had been influenced as a girl by her father's Muzio recordings. We both revered Renata Scotto and expressed outrage at her hideous treatment by the New York press and public. I told her that Scotto was my diva of the moment but maybe one day Diana would hold sway over my adoring heart. She laughed and we shook hands on it. Well, I'm happy to say that, while Soviero has not displaced dear Renata, she is the diva of the moment in my singular affections.

I still can't believe I actually heard **Richard Tucker** perform but I'm glad to say it's true. I saw the great tenor in one of his rare appearances as Eleazar in *La Juive* during the 1973-74 season. I was eleven at the time, only two years before Tucker's untimely death. The role had great

personal meaning for Tucker and the Met lent him some of the costuming worn by Caruso in his final Met performance as Eleazar.

Tucker gave an overwhelming performance, demonstrating conclusively that an unimaginative singer can be transformed into a titan when the music or drama speaks to his soul. Tucker understood the suffocating atmosphere of the closet and his portrayal of the outwardly compliant Jew practicing his forbidden religion behind closed doors touched me in ways I did not yet understand.

The lightning-quick way Tucker alternated his duplicitous dealings with the oppressive Christians with tender concern for his adopted daughter was the instinctive work of someone who has known persecution. The inner torment of this complex spirit poured forth like lava in the well-known "Rachel, quand du Seigneur." The audience rewarded the verity of Tucker's performance with an ovation. Don't ever let anyone tell you Tucker wasn't an artist. Any singer who exposes his vulnerability so bravely, so movingly is worthy of every accolade.

Lucille Udovich—Lucille who, you ask? Never heard of La Udovich, you say? A Glyndebourne Elettra? Turandot in the Corelli film? Still scratching your head? Well, you can stop—I never heard Udovich either. She came to New Orleans in 1964 to sing an *Aida* with Sandor Konya and Oralia Dominguez but I was only two years old. I mention Udovich because she represents a whole category of valuable artists who were overshadowed in their day by giants like Callas, Tebaldi and Milanov, but now, in retrospect, sound like Golden Age material. New Orleans opera welcomed a number of these underappreciated divas during its first few decades, including Stella Roman, Inge Borkh, Phyllis Curtin, Margherita Roberti, Gianna D'Angelo, Leyla Gencer, Virginia Zeani, Gabriella Tucci, Adriana Maliponte, Raina Kabaivanska and Gilda Cruz-Romo. The sad irony of being a junior opera queen in the 1960's and 1970's was that I took a lot of singers for granted who deserved more respect than they were accorded. The mere mention of some of these ladies during their respective eras would have drawn scorn or laughter or both. But in the debased age of Victoria Loukianetz and Ainhua Arteta, someone like Mary Costa is starting to look like a goddess.

Although she did not spend many years in her hometown of New Orleans, **Shirley Verrett** is the most famous native-born female singer the Crescent City ever produced. She made her 1980 debut with the local opera company under rather frenetic circumstances. Alexandrina Milcheva had canceled her appearances as Carmen at the last minute. Through some combination of managerial finesse and good timing, Arthur Cosenza persuaded Verrett to step into the lurch. Rumor had it that she had her own personal agenda: to return Carmen to her repertoire away from the international spotlight, as well as to visit relatives she had not seen since leaving New Orleans.

Verrett came, saw and conquered as Bizet's gypsy. She looked and sounded like a goddess and, given the harried rehearsal situation, was surprisingly at ease. Tickets had been sold out for days, audience excitement was high and Verrett earned a standing ovation at opera's end.

Verrett returned in 1983 as Tosca. This was the first production I had ever stage managed on my own and I was scared to death. Shirley was a dear, though. She calmly reported anything she thought was a problem and offered sage wisdom about how to get it resolved. When Verrett's rented costumes were deemed unwearable by the diva, she instructed me on how to contact the Met and have her own personal costumes shipped to New Orleans. They arrived the day of the first performance but Shirley took it all in stride. No, she had no plans to come to the theater early for fittings. "We'll, manage, darling," she said to me by phone. "I need my rest, so don't expect me before 6 p.m." This diva was unflappable.

Verrett had a rare ability to do the prima donna routine right, without all the off-putting nonsense that lesser divas felt compelled to resort to. Her hauteur was innate and organic, not the phony camouflage associated with some other divas ("I was bohn in Owgoosta, Georgia"). She had a delightful grandiosity that was endearing, not laughable. On day over lunch, she informed me with a perfectly straight face that Elisabetta was her role in *Don Carlo*, not "that lady with the eye patch!"

Alas, our Tosca was a mess. The stage director had never directed a complete opera before and it showed. There were other problems, as well. Our Cavaradossi, a cute little Italian tenor named Beniamino Prior, Prior was the gay equivalent of a skirt chaser and spent every available pausa putting the moves on supers and ballet boys. At the final dress rehearsal, I was distributing lists of the planned curtain calls to the artists' dressing rooms. Upon entering Prior's room, I heard the door close behind me— and there stood the hairy tenor, completely nude, his dick erect and ready for action. Before I knew what was happening, Prior was on top of me, thrusting his tongue in my mouth and unzipping my pants. Suddenly, Verrett pounded on the door, calling Prior's name. Oh, great, I'm thinking to myself. Shirley Verrett wants to consult with the tenor and he's about to give me a blow job—that'll help my career. Quickly zipping up my pants, I beat a hasty exit, leaving one frustrated tenor and puzzled prima donna behind.

Verrett rose above all the backstage craziness. She was grateful for my efforts on her behalf. On opening night, I found a long-stemmed rose on my desk with a sincere note of thanks from the diva. Your most welcome, Shirley. And thank you for all those fabulous Ebolis and Azucenas.

Frau Kammersangerin **Claire Watson**, an American soprano who concentrated her musical activities mostly in Germany and Austria, appeared rarely in the United States. Surprisingly, she sang most of her American performances with the New Orleans Opera. She debuted with the company in 1969 as Arabella and made subsequent appearances as Ariadne (1974) and Elsa (1976). By the time I heard Watson's Ariadne

and Elsa portrayals, I was already familiar with her performances as Freia and Guttrune on the Solti *Ring* recording. She was an aristocratic figure on stage, noble of bearing yet very feminine and appealing. She was vocally somewhat past her prime but she imbued both roles with the same ethereal purity and spiritual dimension that Elisabeth Grummer, Lisa della Casa and Leonie Rysanek brought to their classic interpretations. Although her appearances with New Orleans Opera would be counted successes, they were not without their problems. Watson was confronted with some rather trying circumstances that she probably did not encounter in Munich or Vienna. At the end of the love duet, Ariadne and Bacchus rose to the heavens on a little circular elevator. The effect was magical: the lights went out on stage, the set flew into the wings, Watson and the tenor began their ascent into the firmament and an electric starburst exploded over their heads as the music reached its climax. The curtain descended . . . a long pause ensued . . . what was holding up the curtain calls? The curtain flew out again, revealing Watson and tenor Jean Cox trapped on their little elevator, now looking decidedly garish in the harsh work light turned on to assist in their rescue. A stagehand came out with a ladder and propped it up by Watson's feet. However, the diva gave him a withering look to indicate that Kammersingerins in togas do not climb down ladders with their behinds facing the public. The curtain came down yet again, the singers were duly rescued and the curtain calls proceeded without further delay. In typical New Orleans fashion, the stagehand with the ladder was given his own bow.

As Elsa, Watson was plagued by another common New Orleans menace, something known as "New Orleans Throat" (not to be confused with "Moffo Throat", although some of the causes are similar). In fact, almost every artist who came through New Orleans suffered to some degree from New Orleans Throat. The city's marshy location and tropical climate created humid conditions that were often intolerable for singers. Watson coped admirably with her bout of this condition, even when veteran mezzo Nell Rankin as Ortrud tried to take advantage of Watson's indisposition by upstaging her during their Act Two confrontation (in a screaming purple dress, no less: by this point in her career, Rankin needed cheap stunts like this to create any effect at all: her voice was no more than a husk.)

With her old world charm and elegance, Watson graced the limited Germanic operatic repertoire that I heard in my youth. She braved the inherent hazards of operatic life in our fair city and went on to deliver some splendid performances. Given her few appearances in her *suol nativo*, I count myself lucky.

Diva and Divo X—You know them: the last-minute substitute for the famous artist you bought a ticket to hear. No one has ever heard of them but the opera house management assures us in their pre-performance hype they triumphed in places like Mobile and Toledo. New Orleans Opera presented many Diva and Divo Xess in my years there. When Nicolai Gedda canceled his *Faust* performances, we got some

character named Jean Bonhomme. When Galina Vishnevskya canceled her Tosca, we heard the "renowned" Roberta Palmer.

New Orleans didn't always rebound with a loser. There's the aforementioned Verrett substitution. I also remember the little-appreciated Matteo Manuguerra filling in for Renato Bruson as Rigoletto. Manuguerra was sick as a dog himself but still impressed with a moving, intelligent portrayal. Cancellations occasionally yield unexpected but rewarding results.

Joann Yockey was the local diva done good. New Orleans has had its fair share; in addition to La Yockey, they included Linda Zogbhy, Audrey Schuh and Phyllis Treigle. These native-born sopranos usually triumphed with New Orleans Opera in roles like Micaela or Musetta, nabbed a few prestigious gigs elsewhere, then settled back into lives of domestic bliss as local society matrons. I saw all these homegrown prima donnas. While Zogbhy was clearly the most talented of the lot (she sang Mimi and Ilia for several seasons at the Met), Schuh had the longest career. She was still singing Micaela as late as 1976, some thirty years after her debut with New Orleans Opera. She was perhaps a little long in the tooth for the *jupe bleu* and the *natte tombante*, but her presence in the cast was a tribute to the enduring power of the locally produced diva. Just ask Ana Panagulias why she keeps getting gigs in San Francisco and nowhere else.

I have no hesitation in describing **Teresa Zylis-Gara** as the most ravishing-voiced soprano of my experience. Now largely forgotten by queens of the current generation, this Polish prima donna was an enchanting fixture of Met broadcast seasons throughout her sixteen year career at that house. With her satin-textured, sherry-colored sound, Zylis-Gara lent distinction to any performance she appeared in. Her most celebrated role was Donna Elvira, but I will always cherish a Tannhauser Elisabeth I heard Zylis-Gara sing in her final season at the Met (1983-84). Nobody ever sang "Dich, teure Halle" like her. NOBODY. Rysanek may have made a vacation of the high B, but Zylis-Gara flooded the senses from first note to last with a gorgeous outpouring of creamy radiance (and her high B wasn't chopped liver, either).

By the time of her 1980 debut with the New Orleans Opera as Adriana Lecouvreur, Zylis-Gara could do little wrong in my book. I went to the theater that evening prepared to encounter an adored friend, known intimately but never seen. My heart was pounding with excitement as Cilea's gossamer strings accompanied Zylis-Gara's center stage entrance. I applauded feverishly and felt no shame when the uncomprehending *beoti* in the audience shushed join me. Although she lacked the temperament of a a Scotto or Soviero, Zylis-Gara impressed with her palpable glamour and sophistication. I rushed backstage, determined at last to know what a genuine diva looked like up close. The deserted stage was lit by naked light bulbs and the dingy hallway outside the artist's dressing rooms contained none of the cheering fans I

expected to encounter there. Summoning up all my courage, I knocked on the door marked "Miss Zylis-Gara." A lilting voice responded: "Yes?" The door opened and there stood the first diva I ever saw in the flesh--so to speak. She was dressed from head to toe in leopard: leopard shoes, leopard coat, leopard turban, leopard everything. She had the most dazzling blue eyes I have ever seen. As I introduced myself, they sparkled with anticipation, illuminating her broad, attractive face. I stammered my praise for the performance, told her how I came to admire her through her many Met broadcasts and what a dream fulfilled it was to see her at last. Zylis-Gara embraced me tightly and kissed me with delight on both cheeks. "You are so kind, dear boy," she exclaimed. "I love you." Somebody wake me, I thought. As she autographed my stack of records, photos and memorabilia, we chatted about future engagements and possible new roles. I escorted her to the stage door. As she stepped into a waiting limo, I went stumbling into the night intoxicated by my brief encounter with this muse in human form.

In the fall of 1983, I was an assistant stage manager when Zylis-Gara returned for three performances of *Cio-Cio-San*. She was the kindest, least difficult soprano I ever worked with. Everyone backstage respected her, even the precocious boy playing Dolore. When Zylis-Gara attacked a high note forte and caused little George to clap his hands over his ears, the soprano immediately did a diminuendo on the same note to spare the boy further injury. A caring gesture by a classy artist.

Junior queens may be interested to know that Zinka Milanov, known to be sparing in her praise of other divas, considered Zylis-Gara the finest soprano of the 70's. Those intrigued by this remembrance are directed to her portrayal of the Composer in Ariadne auf Naxos for EMI. If the duet with Zerbietta doesn't bring a lump to your throat, you've been warped by too many evenings with Maria Ewing.

No piece about my junior queen years in New Orleans would be complete without mentioning the diva who started it all way back in 1970, glorious **Grace Bumbry**. When I was eight years old, my grandmother took me to see the Karajan *Carmen* film at the Saenger Movie Palace on Canal Street. If opera is my religion today, then that film was my first communion. La Bumbry was my first taste of the delicious, intoxicating way of life known as diva lust. I love you, Grace Bumbry. And when I die, I want someone to play your recording of "O don fatale" at the funeral of this formerly *jeune andouille*.

--- Enzo Bordello

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