

parterre box

(the queer opera zine)

proudly presents its 24th **bulging** issue:

Soviero in Cyberspace

Faye vs. Dixie

Holland: Tunnel Vision

Enzo Bordello at the Met

Du, dein Mutter ist Feig!

THE KATHY LEE SYNDROME

Half-naked musclemen!

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remembering when opera was
queer and dangerous and
exciting and making it
that way again!

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24: Soviero in Cyberspace!

parterre box continues its conquest of new worlds with the debut of *The Unofficial Diana Soviero Homepage*, designed by the ever-lustrous **Enzo Bordello** and dedicated to the last of the red hot verismo sopranos. The site, which includes a bio, a schedule of upcoming engagements, tributes from colleagues and critics, sound clips and some lovely photos, can be found at

<http://www.anaserve.com/~parterre/sovero.htm>

The Soviero page is the first in a series of **Diva Pages** sponsored by **parterre box**, the queer opera zine. So, what are you waiting for? Drop us an email (jjjorden@ix.netcom.com) so we can get started on a Diva Page for **your** favorite goddess!

La Cieca is proud to welcome to the pages of **parterre box** those celebrated separated-at-birth identical twins **Ortrud Maxwell** and **Krunoslav Bruna-Rasa**, who make their debuts in this issue. Which is the evil twin, you ask? I'll leave that decision to you after you have enjoyed their thought-provoking and rib-tickling penses on such vital topics as the wretched quality of modern operatic criticism, **Faye Dunaway's** performance as **Maria Callas**, and, well, I'll let you see for yourself. Glad to welcome you ladies aboard.

And a hearty how-de-do as well to **Princess Ebola**, who has written us an account of a famous diva's master classes. No, not **that** one, but it sounds delightful anyway, even **without** the mention of uncircumcised Greek dick.

La Cieca practically set up housekeeping at the Met last week thanks to the biblically generous Mr. Bordello, who treated La Cieca to four consecutive nights at Sybil's Barn. We'll begin the tale of that fateful week with a little tag-team critique of *Un ballo in maschera*, a performance that came as a bit of a surprise. But Enzo tells it better than I do...

Enzo: My dears, call it the luck of the naive, but I walked up to the box office today at 4 p.m. and asked rather sheepishly if there were any seats left in standing room for the sold-out Pav event. The box office worker replied: "No can do. Nothing in standing room." As I began to walk dejectedly away from the window, he offered: "But I do have two front row, center seats in Grand Tier." Unbelievable! Anyway, **the Pav** was mostly a shadow of his former self. He can still make some beautiful sounds and the phrasing was heavenly in the death scene. But rhythmically he was all over the place and he seemed to be both unsure of himself and disconnected from the proceedings. The audience was not encouraging, either, offering half-hearted applause throughout the evening; not exactly hostile, just indifferent.

Cieca: For the record, the Pav ***did*** leave the stage during the duet with Amelia, but he did take the (very fine) high C with La Voigt. I kept thinking he was saving himself up for the last-act aria, but "Ma se forza" sounded tired and strained. He was really limping by then and sang most of the aria leaning on the desk, so he must have been in pain.

Enzo: BIG SURPRISE of the evening was **Deborah Voigt** as Amelia. Folks, this wasn't artistic growth, this was somersaulting! In addition to a world-class voice, Voigt showed that she can act and phrase with feeling. The "Morro" was full of Italianate sobs and expressive touches. Newly svelte, Voigt looks radiant, moves with confidence and clearly relishes the challenges Verdi poses (unlike Sharon Sweet). BIG success with audience.

questo e quello

Cieca: Dite bene, dite bene! The biggest ovation was for Voigt, with Pons a close second. Deb is about 30 lbs. lighter than last season, and I was amazed at her committed Italianate plastique -- very much **école de Zinka**, and I mean that as a ***good*** thing. The middle of the voice retains its warmth and purity, but the top is if anything more dramatic and more exciting. Thrilling sustained high B and C. The shocker is her gutsy use of chest voice, especially in the cadenzas to the arias. Her acting choices in the Choosing of Lots scene were always derived from the music, suggesting a history of domestic violence in the Anckarstroem household.

Enzo: **Juan Pons** delivered yet another one of his honest, sincere, deeply felt, well-sung portrayals. Barbara Dever sounds like a dramatic soprano with a manufactured chest voice, but she sings with temperament and spirit. Say what you will about **Roberta Peters** and/or **Judith Blegen** but they knew how to perform Oscar with charm. **Young Ok Shin** comes off like **Sumi Jo's** untalented little sister. She should be taken out and shot, so annoying and badly sung is her Oscar.

Cieca: Shoot the whole family, and let God choose the soubrettes.

Enzo: Truth to tell, she was not helped by **Piero Faggioni's** unmusical, obvious staging and monochromatic settings.

Cieca: This guy gives the word "**Faggioni**" a bad name. The nadir of the many low points of this staging was the finale to Act 2, when **Amelia**, who has just been forced by her husband to be an accessory in the assassination of her lover, has her house invaded by mimes. Is this the worst night of her life, or what?

Enzo: **James Levine** conducts well enough, but he does punch up those climaxes (is it just me, or is he sounding more and more like a late **Karajan** recording?)

Cieca: Can't he create a forte that doesn't sound like the end of life as we know it? The orchestra was pouring out decibels sufficient unto *Frau ohne Schatten*. The only singer who did not suffer for this blitzkrieg was **Mr. Pavarotti**, who (shall we say) had some help from the man in the booth. (Don't start in on me! There were times the Pav's voice was originating from a point 20 feet over his head, and his first cavatina was accompanied by an eerie high-pitched electronic buzz).

La Cieca did not have the best of times at the Met's new *Wozzeck*, but the old girl is honest enough to admit that she herself was at least partially to blame: you see, La Cieca neglected to powder her nose before the intermissionless presentation of Berg's masterpiece, and just as the chandeliers rose to the ceiling she felt the inevitable call of nature. Let me just say that all that chitchat about pissing against walls did exactly nothing to ease La Cieca's distress. So by the end of the evening she was in a, well, a pissy mood.

But even a freshly-emptied bladder could not have reconciled La Cieca to the performance of **Maria Ewing**. To her already notorious rapsheet of crimes against opera (hoarse, pitchless screaming; sullen attitude masquerading as stage presence; slovenly musicianship apparently just for the hell of it; and, of course, a solid decade of bad hair days) Ms. Ewing has added perhaps the most dastardly vice of all: utter cowardice. Following her fiasco performance as Marie, she took her "solo" bow in tandem with the charming young actor who played the Child, in an obvious and cynical (and ultimately fruitless) attempt to stave off a volley of richly-deserved boos. When an audience is willing to jeer a four-year-old child in order to express their disgust with a singer's performance, you know even Ewing has scraped a new low. **SHE CAN'T SING ANY MORE**. No, I mean, ***AT ALL***. The low notes are pitchless growls, the top rasping yelps, the middle mostly just labored breathing. Oh, but she's a singing actress, you say. Oh, but she's neither, I say. She didn't even suggest the character of Marie. Hey, folks, the Bible-reading Scene

went for nothing! She just stood there, or sat there, and gave 4000 people that peeved attitude thing which is the only affect she seems able to convey. Hey, people who spend \$145 a seat want just a little more than sullen, thank you.

Remember all those decades ago when the vocal music in *Wozzeck* was considered terribly difficult, in fact impossible to sing accurately? Well, **Mme. Ewing** tonight returned us to that golden age. **Grace Moore** could have sung the part more accurately. At times it was difficult to tell whether Ewing was attempting to sing the right pitch and just missing, or attempting to sing the wrong pitch and missing. The only thing she never did was to sing the right pitches.

At least Ewing's utter inadequacy did have the effect of throwing into sharper relief the really excellent *Wozzeck* of **Falk Struckmann**. His vocal approach sounded like the purest bel canto next to his leading lady's one-woman cat duet, and his committed and energetic acting made us almost believe there was a relationship between *Wozzeck* and his mistress. (Only almost. Miss Ewing's elaborate apathy nipped that possibility in the bud.) This was a carefully-drawn and beautifully-sustained descent into madness, never cheapened by sensationalistic overstatement.

The other gentlemen in the cast, though perhaps not on the exalted level as **Mr. Struckmann**, pleased in their various ways. **Graham Clark's** Captain proved that a committed and vivid characterization can be achieved without the sacrifice of musical accuracy; **Michael Devlin** etched an eerie Doctor with his diminished vocal means. **Mark Baker** came close to making the impossible role of the Drum Major work, more through robust vocalism than dramatic believability.

The smaller roles were also in most capable hands: **Donald Kaasch** offered a sweet and sympathetic Andres, and **Anthony Laciura** overcame producer-inspired convulsions to chill us with his few lines as the Fool. A special word of praise to **James Courtney's** richly-detailed Apprentice, and I really must say **Jonathan Press** (Marie's Child) was quite simply perfect: had Ms. Ewing allowed this young thespian his own call, I know the audience response would have been clamorous. The singer who should have been doing Marie was instead cast as Margret: **Wendy White** just set the place on fire every time she sauntered onto the stage. I especially liked the offhand way she manhandled a drunk off a table during her "Swabia" ditty.

I still don't care for **Mark Lamos's** direction: to my mind he strives too much after "effects" (especially some admittedly striking stage pictures) at the expense of character and thematic truth. He was at his best in a convincingly unnerving First Inn Scene, but what were all those men doing sleeping on the floor in the Bunkroom Scene? (Those shapely supers in their skivvies

Join A Club Ju

looked like they had just wandered in from *Death in Venice*.)

But I'll cut Mr. Lamos a bit of slack: in a move typical of the current Met attitude toward "novelty" repertoire, the Met granted him a production budget rumored to be in four figures. Three big walls, a couple of sticks of furniture, and a whole lot of white light might make an effective *Wozzeck* in a college workshop production, but the vast spaces of the Met cry out for a less meager approach.

La Cieca thinks the spare staging was intended to shift our focus from the stage to the pit, for James Levine led the Met's orchestra in a performance that merited our undivided attention. I cannot imagine this score played more accurately or more soulfully. One might even feel a little guilty at the sheer hedonistic beauty of Levine's reading, as if we were gourmandising on *Wozzeck's* anguish. Levine brought the celebrated final interlude to a literally overwhelming climax: I saw people around me fall back in their seats gasping.

So, Met management, here's your mission: clean up the occasional silliness in the staging, find out if young Mr. Press has a baby brother, and tie a can to Ms. Ewing's tired old tail (you might try asking, say, **Miss Malfitano** nicely if she'd consent to a *Gastspiel*) and make this worthwhile revival a mainstay of the Met's repertoire.

And in between? In a word, here come the divas. La Cieca had not seen the Met's **Jean-Pierre Ponnelle** *Figaro* since Cherubino still made his first entrance in the purple disco wig, and you know how long that's been. This production featured a *Figaro* who could sing OK but just stood there (**Michèle Pertusi**) and a *Conte* who looked dashing but whose voice was in shreds (**Jeffrey Black**, loudly booed by those surrounding us in Family Circle), but **Kiri te Kanawa** rose above these and other petty annoyances to do her Goddess thing once again. Dame Kiri was self-assured, vocally plush, breathtakingly beautiful (as always!) and, unexpectedly, quite rollickingly funny in the last act slapstick. **Susan Graham** revealed a major talent as Cherubino, an important addition to the current embarrassment of mezzo riches the Met enjoys. I liked particularly the plaintive note she struck in the faster part of "Non so piu," suggesting a boy half in awe and half in terror of his raging hormones. For **Heidi Grant Murphy** I have more mixed feelings: surely there is more voice inside her than the very pretty chirping that is currently finding its way out. And would someone please demonstrate chest resonance to Ms. Murphy? La Cieca was amused to note that all M. Ponnelle's stage action has found its way downstage into the audience's sightlines - sometimes

singers are smarter than even the most "brilliant" superdirectors!

La Soviero's final *Nedda* of the season and, maybe, her swan song at the Met, found the soprano in demented form: voice, acting, commitment—it all was on. Now La Cieca feels like an utter ninny for suggesting in print that Ms. Soviero's *Ballatella* were past. (See the opening night *Cav/Pag* review below and have yourself a big steamy laugh at Cieca's expense!) Ms. Soviero had the advantage of having the ultra-scrummy **Mark Oswald** to nuzzle as *Silvio* (for once, the baritone was stiff the right way) in the uncut version of the duet (with two statements of the "Non mi tentar" section). For once, the long version did not drag: Ms. Soviero found regret in the first statement, anger in the second. **Juan Pons** treated us to his only *Pag* of the season in between two *Ballos*, and what a singing actor he has become! He is the first *Tonio I* I have heard in years to sing the *Prologo* with such even scale and firm legato, building to a thrilling climax on the high G (not prematurely on the A-flat as many less imaginative artists do). A real night to remember, one even the incessant chatter of the unpleasant couple seated behind us (who responded to a quiet "Shhh!" with a hissed "Fuck you, asshole!") could not spoil.

Though not quite so mythic in its impact, the curtain-raising *Cav* was quite a show on its own terms: the unjustly neglected **Ghena Dimitrova** poured out molten tone, lacking only the extreme top notes. That much was to be expected; but her stylish (if old-fashioned) acting proved surprisingly moving: here was a *Santuzza* numb with grief, rousing herself only long enough to deliver a massive Easter curse.

Another surprise: **Dixie Carter** finally reconciled me (somewhat) to *Master Class*. The actress's innate intelligence, chic, and sense of humor refine the coarseness of **Terrence McNally's** script, suggesting the real artist hiding behind the tacky Gorgon mask. I think what I liked best was the way Carter threw away the insults without emphasis, as if *Callas* were merely babbling to cover her nervousness. (**Zoe Caldwell**, by contrast, aimed and landed the bitchy bits for maximum destructiveness, as if she were playing *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf* in the Superdome.) So what if Carter's accent is less than accurate, suggesting more *Marlene* than *Maria*; this lady breathes class whether she's enacting *Sonnambula* or merely adjusting her scarf. And, speaking of which, La Carter looks like a billion lire in that black Chanel pantsuit. Miss Dunaway had better watch her back!

My friends, La Cieca before you today to address a growing problem in our wild and wacky world of opera: a problem I shall call "The Kathy Lee Syndrome." Now,

understand that La Cieca is not referring to the deplorable practice of underpaying a children's chorus; neither is she addressing the growing crisis of humorless and talentless barracuda divas. No, what she is talking about is the habit of undercutting a perfectly respectable performance by setting up a standard of comparison that no one can match. And you know there's a story here. Several years ago, **Kathy Lee Gifford** was co-hostess of the Miss America pageant (an error of judgment the committee soon corrected) and it was her task to present the "talent" portion of the competition. Ms. Gifford introduced a young lady whose intention it was to perform the song "Papa, Can You Hear Me?" from the film "Yentl". Ms. Gifford's scripted comments included a brief precis of the theme of this film; then, it appeared, the contestant was not quite in place, and the hostess was asked to "stretch" the introduction. The obviously panicky television personality blurted out, "Uh, and so **Miss Nebraska** will be singing in just a minute, but for my money, nobody can do that song like the great **Miss Barbra Streisand**. Let's hear it for Barbra, ladies and gentlemen!" Well, then the unfortunate contestant came out and performed to an audience who had just been forcibly reminded of the great Streisand: is it any wonder that Miss Nebraska's rendition sounded amateurish and shallow?

This kind of unfair (if, I hope, inadvertent) comparison occurs with alarming frequency on broadcast opera performances: remember a few years ago when the New York City Opera telecast "La traviata" and the intermission features included videotape of **Beverly Sills** and **Renata Scotto** in the role of Violetta? The unfortunate soprano whose night that *should* have been came off like a bland also-ran.

And Kathy Lee-ism runs rampant on Met broadcasts: recently the intermission feature's tape of **Joan Sutherland** at her dazzling peak threw a shadow over **Ruth Ann Swenson**'s not unpleasant performance of Elvira in *I puritani*; a blood-and-thunder archival "Suoni la tromba" (I did not catch the names of the singers, but they were Titans) left Messrs. Hampson and Miles sounding like a couple of accountants harmonizing in the shower after a game of racquetball. I try to listen with an open mind and unjudged ears (no, really I do) but I wish the programmers of these broadcasts would give us (and the performers) a break.

Not much magic at the Met's first Cav/Pag of the season, but several solid performances, including two promising debuts. **Dolora Zajick** was singing Santuzza (role debut) and she is likely to develop into a great interpreter of this role. I found the first half of her performance (up to the beginning of the duet with Turridu) pretty tentative, as if she were feeling her way into the part. "Voi lo sapete o Mamma" was vocally rock-firm, with

really corrosive chest tone, but more correct than passionate. Zajick needs some help with her acting performance. She is still a little uneasy physically onstage, I guess because of her size. Or maybe she's self-conscious about being so butch. (I wish I could walk like that!) And it's not really an Italian voice, lacking that which that coach of coaches **Everett Zimmerlein** describes as "the round part behind the point" in voices like Tebaldi and Corelli. Fabulous chest on "ME L'HAN RA-pi-ta!" and "Sono SCOMUNICAAA-TAAAA". Beat me, beat me dear Masetto but La Zajick is no more a mezzo than I am. She's a dramatic soprano who has darkened the middle voice. The passaggio is on E-F-sharp; she negotiates it like a pro but those high G's really want to turn.

The Zaj really mopped up the stage with the mediocre **Fabio Armiliato** (Turridu) and sub-mediocre **Bruno Pola** (Alfio), then uncorked a dazzling and lengthy high C at the final curtain. Despite Mr. Armiliato's shameful milking of his bow (the audience was not that enthusiastic about his violently north-of-the-pitch belting), Ms. Zajick enjoyed an ovation.

Bowing at the Met was South African tenor **Johan Botha**, a **Richard Margison** lookalike who is the proud owner of a large healthy dramatic tenor. The voice is IMO really *too* freely produced for a role like Canio, which calls for a more emotional (not to say Italianate) sound. He is a sort of male **Jane Eaglen**, coolish "British" sound with an even scale and an easy top (too easy! I want to hear **Richard Tucker** spitting blood!) I think he will move over into German rep soon and maybe Otello. Not much of an actor, and he's as big as Pavarotti.

Paolo Gavanelli's voice is curiously old-fashioned with a tight fast vibrato. I enjoyed his unusually angry reading of the Prologo, capped with an easy (if overly prolonged) high A-flat.

La Soviero does not look a day over 30. Vocally she takes a while to warm up (like midway thru the scene with Tonio). Really warm and sweet quality to the scene with Silvio. Her best singing of the night - really warm and sweet-- was in the duet with **Anthony Michaels-Moore** (Silvio) whose lyric baritone will be an asset to this theater. He is what you would get in the old days doing Schaunard or the Mandarin or Masetto, or more recently as Marcello or Belcore. But I can't imagine him singing Scarpia in a real opera house.

Anyway, in the love duet Soviero keeps singing "I have to go! Leave me!" but with blatant "Come get me" body language. Lovely comedy in Act 2. "No per la madre" is a real outburst, like she just can't take it any more. No false heroics or hysteria, just saying to Canio "piss or

* Speaking of chest, did you catch **Wendy White** (Lola) in that tight peasant blouse. She looked like she was shoplifting a mortadella.

get off the pot." She knocked down a couple of choristers and ran out of the light trying to escape him. My own personal opinion is that she (like Scotto) is at her best singing a line, not the declamatory stuff. Gioconda I don't see how she can finesse. She really is more Suzel. But even when she is in less than her best voice, Ms. Soviero's verismo style and heart-felt acting are incomparable-- no one in the world today understand so well what makes this kind of opera go.

I am sure there are easily millions out there who understand verismo better than **Simone Young**. Her conducting was simultaneously pedantic and timid, as if she were afraid of the orchestra. As La Cieca's ex-boyfriend says about Ms. Young, "If she were a man, everyone would say she conducts like a girl!" Though, frankly, I don't think she's entirely to blame for the tired and scrappy sounds emanating from the pit. The first-chair trumpet sounded like he'd just been fired from a mariachi. Ms. Young's curtain call was greeted by some of the loudest booing I've ever heard at the Met; it's a safe bet she will not be invited back.

It may well be time to retire these celebrated Zeffirelli productions: everything happens by sheer rote, while the chorus stands in a semi-circle singing into the pit.

La Cieca thinks she may apply to the *New York Times* for a position as a sports reporter. Well, no, La Cieca doesn't know beans about sports, but knowledge of the subject matter seems not be a prerequisite these days at the Newspaper of Record. Witness the ongoing employment there as opera critic of **Bernard Holland**, a gentleman who knows little about opera, less about operatic style, and nothing at all about voices. And lately he seems to be having trouble stringing a meaningful sentence together. Recently Mr. Holland "reviewed" this Met's Cav/Pag, which is to say he yammered for half the column about the background of the opera in a dumbed-down style that would do no credit to a freshman music-appreciation student:

"Cavalleria Rusticana" hits like a cyclone. Mascagni's lyrical inspiration never weakens. There are no dead spots, no lulls. "Cav" is one of the few operas that can be criticized as too short. "It never keeps us waiting," the conductor Thomas Beecham once said. "It gets on with it."

Now, even if we overlook the fact that dear **Sir Thomas** happened to be referring to *La boheme* with that remark, this vague and clumsy scribble can hardly be mistaken for even the outtakes from such real critics as **Andrew Porter** or **Peter G. Davis**.

And what's worse, it's not as if Mr. Holland has 30 or 40 column inches to fill with this drivel: he leaves himself only a sentence or so to rate each singer's performance. A star mezzo's first attempt at a role central

to her fach is summed up thusly: "As Santuzza, Dolora Zajick was loud and oddly impersonal."

Plus, Holland is often just plain wrong: he refers to Fabio Armiliato's "irrepressible flatness" in the Serenade, when in fact the tenor was singing consistently sharp. But the biggest howler of the day is Holland's unreserved praise of the conducting of Simone Young: he gushes over her "lovely legato blendings" and how "the prominence of winds and brass over strings seemed a conscious and happy emulation of the Italian village band." Look, La Cieca was **there**, wincing at the hash Ms. Young made of this score, and it seemed obvious to La Cieca (and to the many in the audience who greeted the conductor's curtain call with a deafening round of boos) that Ms. Young shows no aptitude whatever for this repertoire. In fact, La Cieca is of the opinion that such vigorous booing in **itself** is news, and should have rated at least a mention in a competent review.

New York, with its rich and varied musical life, deserves a better first-string critic than the lobeless Mr. Holland. How long will take until the *Times* gets a clue?

La Cieca missed a week of temping last month and found herself with a lot of time on her hands. Instead of improving herself intellectually (as if that were possible!), the old gal mooched around the internet, where she learned, among other things, lyrics you can sing to the opening melody of *Le Sacre de Printemps*:

I'm not an English Horn.
I'm only a bassoon.
This part's too high for me.
I'm not an English horn.

She also got involved in a debate on the merits of Puccini's *Turandot*. Besides defending the music and drama of this opera, La Cieca went on to say

[*Turandot*] can be a striking spectacle of exotic and colorful costumes, crowd movement, and dance. And there's a half-naked muscleman in the first act, a production detail that I think enhances any opera with the possible exception of "Dialogues of the Carmelites".

To which some wiseass replied:

Gee, sounds like Menotti and his inevitable children or Zeffirelli with his inevitable animals...but seriously, let's rise to the occasion: name an appropriate use of a half-naked muscleman to enhance any of the following operas (preferably in the first act):

Le nozze di Figaro
 Così fan tutte
 Fidelio
 La Cenerentola
 Lucia di Lammermoor
 Simon Boccanegra
 Tristan und Isolde
 La Gioconda
 The bartered bride
 The Queen of Spades
 La bohème [and keep the weather in mind!]
 Adriana Lecouvreur
 Werther
 Pelleas et Melisande
 L'enfant et les sortilèges
 The mother of us all
 The turn of the screw

Well, La Cieca never said the beefcake guy had to be appropriate, just that it would be fun. I mean, how appropriate are all those silly ballets in French grand opera? But never let it be said La Cieca shrinks from a challenge.

A well-built Figaro might well be stripped to the waist to do the heavy and sweaty work of furnishing his room. Said sweatiness would add an earthy touch to all the Figaro-Susanna sexual tension. And imagine Marcellina's leer when she glimpses Figaro's shiny pecs!

While Dorabella and Fiordiligi are lamenting their sad, lonely separation from their lovers, a humpy barechested gardener wanders by, catching Dorabella's eye for a moment until she is silently admonished with a glance from Fiordiligi. (Actually, I used this idea in a production years ago!)

With that brutal heat in Seville, shirtless prisoners in *Fidelio* are reasonable enough.

Perhaps in a Peter Sellars production of *La Cenerentola*, Clorinda and Tisbe could have Chippendale calendars on the walls of their room? Or Ramiro could have the invitations to the ball delivered by a strip-o-gram?

Some of the Lammermoor lads could do the kilt-without-a-shirt look as in *Brigadoon*.

Sweaty Genoese sailors in *Simon Boccanegra*. Yummy!

And what about some raunchy, half-naked sailors to taunt Brangaene?

In *Gioconda* anything goes. Shirtless acrobats at the festa.

More acrobats show up in *Bartered Bride*.

Act 1 of *Queen of Spades* is a mite nippy in Act 1 for acrobats, I admit... But couldn't a particularly kinky Old Countess employ a buff

masseur to knead her during the Gretzy aria and then carry her frail old bones to bed? (Rysanek would do it in a minute!)

If it's so warm in Act 4 *Bohème*, why can't a well-build Schaunard take off his shirt? (actually this happens in the Ponnelle production)

There's a ballet in Act 3 of *Adriana Lecouvreur*, always a good excuse for a little male flesh, and of course Act 1 takes place backstage in the dressing rooms of a theater. Period dance-belts?

Werther. Well, I wouldn't go to this opera even if it *did* feature naked musclemen, so the point is moot. Onward.

What about a beefy Golaud in bed recovering from his wound, Melisande giving him a guilt-ridden sponge bath?

L'enfant et les sortilèges should be performed on a double bill with *Daphis et Chloe*.

A Sandoz-the-Strongman character would not be out of place in the all-American fantasy *The Mother of Us All*.

And why shouldn't Peter Quint appear nude in little Miles' dreams? (This one was a real softball question, wasn't it?)

So, did you see Ruth Ann Swenson on Rosie O'Donnell's show? Wouldn't you just have known that they went to high school together? And how annoying was it that Rosie let Ruth Ann sing her little aria and then sat her down on the couch and launched into a rant about how neither of them ever got a cast in any of the high school shows? And how much more annoying was it that Ruth Ann didn't get to say two words the whole time? Well, don't take it too personally, Ruthie. Maybe you haven't noticed, but this is how the kinder-gentler Rosie treats all her guests. Even Madonna has trouble getting a word in edgewise around Rosie's "You're gonna LOVE me" act.

I have to say I liked Rosie better when she was still doing the foul-mouthed bulldyke persona: at least that seemed sincere. Oh, well, another object lesson that on TV the only successful queer is an asexual queer.

La Cieca's homegirl Ellen Degeneres, though, is getting some good goofy innuendo going on her show, and playing the media like a soprano saxophone to boot. Wouldn't you love to see an episode where Ellen got mistaken for Anne-Sofie von Otter?

La Cieca was home busily typing her reactions to the Met's *I puritani* by 10:45 opening night, and you know

what that means. Believe me, she wasn't the only one walking out.

The problem with *Puritani* is that it's just so simple: there's practically no plot, no action at all, and even the music is straightforward: the most limpid melodies, the most basic harmonies, the most unobtrusive orchestration. Nothing is allowed to distract from expressively beautiful singing. And that's where you run into trouble. This show needs singers with the loveliest timbre and the most perfectly refined technique in order to make Bellini's tunes sound important.

And, since the performers mostly just stand there, a dash of star quality is important to hold the audience's interest. Well, unless something incredibly dazzling suddenly happened in the last act, tonight none of these qualities was in evidence. Maybe Ruth Ann Swenson (Elvira) was feeling the aftereffects of her ankle injury, or maybe she was just having an off night. Since last Saturday, I have wondered how you can injure your ankle doing Elvira; now I know: Ms. Swenson's acting performance was all darting and lunging, with fast, jerky gestures that made her look like Shirley Temple (the blond ringlets didn't help).

What an odd combination that physical frenzy made with Ms. Swenson's vocal languor. Besides a world-class trill (as good as any I've ever heard, on stage or on disc) and some ravishing middle-voice singing, she didn't seem to have much to offer in this role: bel canto needs more than droopy portamenti and smudgy coloratura. Ms. Swenson's attempts at finessing the high pianissimi bored me after the 15th or 16th time: it all began to sound alike-- except for a couple of passages in "Vieni al tempio" that simply got away from her. The top notes were clean but not particularly energetic; the big set pieces never caught fire-- when the audience's attention wanders during "Son vergin vezzosa", something's way wrong.

I do not think the flaccidly unrhythmic and therefore unexciting quality in Ms. Swenson's fast singing is so much a problem of chosen tempo (though these are on the slowish side), it is her marginally late attack on the first note of many phrases and her tendency to slow down slightly during each phrase. These microscopic drags on the forward impulse of the music were best illustrated in "Son vergin vezzosa": the purpose of the piece (besides to display every weapon of the well-trained vocalist's arsenal of "brilliant" singing: rapid chromatic scales, turns, trills, staccatto arpeggios and

And, you know, La Cieca would have been home even earlier, but she stopped in for a moment at Tower Records, and would you believe that in the opera room they were playing Mr. Hampson's *Leading Man* CD? La Cieca covered her ears and bugged her eyes and screamed just like dear Joan Crawford in *Sudden Fear*!

octave leaps [omitted by Ms. Swenson]) is surely to excite the audience with crisply rhythmical singing. An example of an effect based primarily on rhythm occurs only a few measures into "Son vergin vezzosa", with a five-note ascending scale followed by a leap to an off-beat high B, first heard on the words "giglio d'April". Ms. Swenson took an instant too long to prepare the high B, and thus attacked it just a fraction of a beat too late, dampening the exhilarating effect.

About a page later, following a trill and chromatic cadence (with a slight ritard) on the words "tue rose", the piece returns to the Polonaise tempo on the words "Son bian-ca", emphasising the return with a crisp gruppetto on the downbeat syllable "bian". Ms. Swenson did not go immediately back into tempo and smoothed out the rhythm of the sixteenth-note figure: the net effect was a momentary loss of energy and excitement in the piece, and, cumulatively (for these are only two among many examples of slightly slack rhythm throughout her performance), a loss of impact in the entire opera.

Ms. Swenson also showed a less-than-exemplary command of another requisite of the bel canto vocal style, a seamless, well-supported legato. The long lines of "Qui la voce sua soave" did not float out as single sentences, but as a series of discrete (if sometimes ravishing) little gurgles and whispers and sighs overlaid upon the tone in what I assume is an attempt to color what is essentially a monochromatic (pale pink) voice. The combination of this fragmentation of the vocal line with the slack rhythm I mentioned earlier meant that the many slow sustained melodies in this role lacked much sense of forward motion or flow.

At this performance Ms. Swenson sang the traditional higher vocal line in the "Vieni al tempio" ensemble, only to squeal and finally crack on the crest of the phrase. Her decision to sing this passage as written in later performances (including the broadcast) therefore seems based more on vocal limitations than artistic choice.

Much-hyped Stuart Neill (Arturo) seems to be a one-trick pony: his high C-sharp is indeed impressively pingy, but the whole rest of the voice is either uneven or uninteresting. His middle voice is choppy, though he does some nice diminuendos just above the passaggio. Mr. Neill is, frankly, an unattractive stage figure, not only stout but ungraceful as well. The voice of Alistair Miles (Giorgio), while hardly glamorous, is at least technically secure, which puts him in a class above Thomas Hampson. The noted "word freak" tired before the end of his first aria, and then never sang in tune again the rest of the night, often sounding like Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau at his most determined and least engaging. Hampson's attempts to enlarge and darken his tone invariably resulted in a flapping vibrato and sustained notes that tended to go sharp as he shoved on them. I honestly cannot hear the elegant phrasing or any of the other qualities which other listeners claim make up

for these shortcomings. He could not excite the audience with the presumably sure-fire "Suoni la tromba", lacking even a solid high F.

Furthermore, Hampson's stage demeanor was a medley of self-enamored poses that looked carefully practiced at great length before a pier glass—

Ah! I see beauty that is smiling back at me!
Ah! I see beauty that is smiling back at me!
Tommy Hampson! Is it you? Is it true?
Tommy, Tommy, Tommy tell me quickly...

[orchestra modulates to...]

See that baritone in the mirror there
Who can that attractive man be?
Such a pretty voice! such attractive hair!
Such a ringing G!

[modulates to...]

Dis-moi que suis beau
Et que je serais beau!
Eternellement! Eternellement!

[another modulation...]

I'm a word freak, a word freak,
I'm word freaky!

And Mr. H might think about 86ing the John Travolta blow-dry next time he plays a 17th century Puritan.

I have to take my hat off to Eduardo Muller, who held things together in the pit and in fact produced some lovely, well balanced sounds while following his singers' (especially Ms. Swenson's) sometimes idiosyncratic ideas of rubato. And, for my money, the best performer of the night was Charles Anthony (Bruno), who showed a real understanding of Bellini style in his brief opening recitative.

The mise-en-scene looks like an ancient photo from *The Victor Book of the Opera* come to, well, not to life, exactly, because living things move every now and then. Obviously this *Puritani* was thrown on the stage with as little rehearsal as possible; thus, the chorus are standing immobile so they can concentrate on the music they have just barely learned. You might call it a "traditional" production; the tradition in force dates back to the mid-1970's, about the time the Met's Music Director began hogging the rehearsal time for his pet projects. Since that time, bel canto opera has been shamefully neglected at this theater, perhaps because singers are the stars, not that little man waving the stick and making soulful faces for the PBS cameras. It's a tradition that would, I think, be "more honored in the breach than in the observance", but I wouldn't hold my breath.

About Mr. Hampson I care little, but I do hope Ms. Swenson will take stock and repair some of the cracks in her technique and her approach to the music, for she is

a charming and talented artist. I would hate to see her end up like June Anderson.

Speaking of Dainty June, take a look at what La Cieca found on the "June Anderson Fanpage!"

JUNE ANDERSON'S REPERTOIRE

BELLINI: *Beatrice di Tenda* (Beatrice); *Norma* (Norma); *Il Pirata* (Imogene); *I Puritani* (Elvira); *La Sonnambula* (Amina)

CHARPENTIER: *Louise* (Louise)

CILEA: *Adriana Lecouvreur* (Adriana)

DONIZETTI: *Anna Bolena* (Anna); *La Fille du régiment* (Marie); *Lucia di Lammermoor* (Lucia); *Maria Stuarda* (Maria)

GOUNOD: *Faust* (Marguerite); *Roméo et Juliette* (Juliette)

HÄNDEL: *Alcina* (Alcina); *Giulio Cesare* (Cleopatra); *Semele* (Semele)

LEONCAVALLO: *I Pagliacci* (Nedda)

MASSENET: *Manon* (Manon)

MOZART: *Don Giovanni* (Elvira)

OFFENBACH: *Les Contes d'Hoffmann*: (Olympia, Antonia, Giulietta)

PUCCINI: *La Bohème* (Mimi); *Madama Butterfly* (Cio-Cio-San); *La Rondine* (Magda); *Tosca* (Tosca)

ROSSINI: *Armida* (Armida); *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* (Rosina); *Guillaume Tell* (Mathilde); *Otello* (Desdemona); *Semiramide* (Semiramide)

TCHAIKOVSKI: *Eugene Onegin* (Tatiana); *Iolanta* (Iolanta); *Mazeppa* (Maria)

J. STRAUSS: *Die Fledermaus* (Rosalinde); *Der Zigeunerbaron* (Saffi)

R. STRAUSS: *Arabella* (Arabella); *Capriccio* (Madeleine); *Salome* (Salome)

THOMAS: *Hamlet* (Ophélie)

VERDI: *La Battaglia di Legnano* (Lida); *Il Corsaro* (Gulnara); *Erani* (Elvira); *Falstaff* (Alice); *Giovanna d'Arco* (Giovanna); *I Lombardi* (Giselda); *Luisa Miller* (Luisa); *Otello* (Desdemona); *Simon Boccanegra* (Amelia); *La Traviata* (Violetta); *Il Trovatore* (Leonora)

We here at *parterre box* congratulate Ms. Anderson on her rich imagination and uproarious sense of humor.

Boys and girls, Once upon a time there was a naughty little pig, and this naughty little pig's name was Lieutenant B.F. Piggerton. One lovely day in February, Lieutenant Piggerton decided to check out the big shiny new *Opera News Online*.

Well, to start with, Lt. Piggerton was a little peeved that some of the coolest promised features, such as the schedule of upcoming operatic events and the archive of

Opera News articles were still not up and running. True, he could browse the current issue of the magazine online, but since he was required to subscribe to the print version in order to obtain a password to enter the site, he had already seen all the pretty pictures and read all the fascinating features and chuckled at all the funny reviews.

But the site had some yummy, delicious-looking discussion boards, and Lieutenant Piggerton jumped up and down with glee. He posted a few posting on such topics as "Can **June Anderson** Really Sing Norma?" and "Nobody Can Sing Any More, So What's the Use?" and "What's the Deal with this Alagna Guy, Anyway, Is He Some Kind of Nut?" and other subjects near and dear to his piggy little heart.

And then this naughty piggy decided to do something silly. To a posting on the subject "Ruth Ann Swenson" which asked:

I think Ruth Ann Swenson is a wonderful singer. Does anyone have any idea how far she may go?

The silly little piggy replied:

Well, this guy I knew in college claimed he got to second base with Ruth Ann, but I think he was just trying to impress his frat brothers.

Oh me oh my, boys and girls, would you fucking believe that Lt. Piggerton's naughty posting stayed on the board less than 12 hours before it was deleted by operanews.com's big bad guardian of public decency? And Lieutenant Piggerton cried, "Ah, non reggo al tuo squallor! Ah, son pork! Ah, son pork!" all the way home.

The moral of this piggy story is: have fun at Opera News Online, boys and girls, but keep it **squeaky** clean. On the other hand, if you're feeling down and dirty, La Cieca wants to hear it. Write to her at

www.parterre.com

or

n

La Cieca

www.anaserve.com/~parterre

Holland: Tunnel Vision!

Recently I had the chance to reacquaint myself with the critical writings (collected in several volumes including MUSIC IN THE NATION) of B.H. Haggin, who was active from the 20's through the 70's and who published mainly in "The Nation". I would recommend Haggin to anyone seriously interested in opera or music criticism. He had a *moral* sense of the critic's responsibility not only to promote the good but to decry the bad, not least where it concerned the writings of other critics and the machinations of publicity. In this he consciously followed in the tradition of Berlioz and Shaw.

Haggin has his hobbyhorses and quirks (Toscanini can do almost no wrong; he has no appreciation for Berg or Bartok; it is saddening to read that in the 60's "his eye has trouble" with Price and Bumbry in "white" roles) but by and large his taste is exceptionally good and his reasons for his judgments bear reading today. Operatically, his tastes run to Steber, Bjoerling, Thorborg and Valletti and against Galli-Curci and del Monaco. He writes discerningly about the different aspects of and stages in careers of singers we sometimes now tend to see in generalized terms as having been "great": the overworking and resultant precipitous vocal decline of Flagstad (whose 1935 instrument and overall artistry he admired greatly); the ways in which Lehmann's personality and "feeling," so transformative as Elsa or Elisabeth, could overwhelm her lieder performances— he notes that as the voice got older she initially got *more* disciplined as a recitalist, when not yielding to the overstatement and "cute" fussiness he identifies as having predisposed her public to transfer their loyalties to Schwarzkopf in the 50's; the hamminess of Tibbett's Iago; the contrast between the vocal and musical excellence of Tourel and the hopelessness of her acting as Carmen, etc.

It is refreshing to read someone who is willing to be cruelly honest rather than "encouraging" about the City Opera's Ford Foundation-funded projects of worthiness; who is willing to take on the Germanic systematizing that overwhelmingly dominated American music criticism and instruction for much of this century; who takes the time to demonstrate, for those prejudiced against his music from the start, the excellence of Berlioz (I recommend his piece on ROMEO ET JULIETTE, but particularly that on NUITS D'ETE); who is lacerating on the evasions and pretensions of artists' publicity as it relates (or fails to relate) to their performances (his diatribes on Horowitz and Landowska and Barenboim I recommend highly, while wishing he were around today to take on the pretensions of the likes of Thomas Hampson or Dr. Leon Botstein) and, most especially, one who repeatedly over the course of decades exposed the pitifully low standards of music criticism of New York's supposed "Newspaper of Record", THE NEW YORK TIMES.

This last is something we see demonstrated nearly daily today, except when Anthony Tommassini is writing. Haggin's citing and denunciation of the scandalous inadequacies of taste and knowledge (coupled with pompousness and arrogance) of Olin Downes, Howard Taubman, Harold Schonberg and Donal Henahan, for several of whom Pulitzer Prizes were "arranged" in the familiar TIMES manner, give pause when one realizes that it is *their* judgments (and usually only theirs) whom TIMES writers cite in treating any historical matter. The editorial ignorance and feeling that "our critics are the best because they are the TIMES critics" cited by Haggin in the Rosenthal era certainly seems to remain in force. What else would explain the entrusting of the job of chief critic to a man who recently opined, on the basis of Deborah Voigt's *Amelia* and three or four other individual performances, that "the worldwide vocal drought seems to be over". Would Bernard Holland care to name even one front-line cast for *TOSCA*, *TROVATORE* or *LA FORZA DEL DESTINO*, let alone casts enough for all the major houses, let alone a *decent* cast for *TANNHAUSER*?

Paul Griffiths, who seems to know absolutely nothing about voices (how else to account for his characterization of the Met's recent *PURITANI* foursome as "astounding," meant in a *positive* sense?) had a typical piece February 17th on a Netherlands Opera *PARSIFAL*: a paragraph on the event as such ("The production has been sold to a consortium of other European theatres, in Brussels, Florence, and Paris..."), two vague and generalizing paragraphs, as bad as anything Olin Downes ever wrote, on the production ("The production is neither abased nor frightened by its responsibilities. It has no empty pride and no false shame. This, it says, is the best we can do."), three vague but fawning (British = Good, for Mr. Griffiths) paragraphs on the conducting of Simon Rattle ("Mr. Rattle and his orchestra convey an impression of geological weight. One layer will often be moving forward and upward while another is disintegrating, so that one seems to be hearing two tempos simultaneously.") and, finally, one short paragraph about the leading singers in which their performance are characterized almost exclusively in nebulous, non-musical terms. Robert Lloyd is "strong, gentle, humane" as Gurnemanz. "Violeta Urmana gives a warm, feeling performance as Kundry, and Wolfgang Schoene towers in distress." Yes, and how did they sing the music? Only about Poul Elming does Griffiths venture that his Parsifal "has a thrilling ring". Alas, while Mr. Griffiths presents an extreme case of this kind of dumbed-down, everything-but-the-singing opera reviewing (how for example could someone reviewing the Met debut of a somewhat ballyhooed tenor in *PURITANI* fail to mention how the singer dealt with the high Ds and (written) high F that make this part so famously hard to cast?), he is not alone either at the TIMES or in operatic reviewing in general to cleave alarmingly to this tendency. For word on singing per se, one turns to Peter G. Davis in *NEW YORK* and (increasingly) to the operanet.

From Haggin's account of Harold Schonberg's infamous "Hey, Ossip!" review of Glenn Gould's traversal of the Brahms First with Bernstein and the Philharmonic (written in the style of a Yiddish vaudevillian a la Gertrude Berg) one gets a sense why Holland feels licensed to write (also in February 17th's TIMES) the following:

[H]ere was Jean-Yves Thibaudet on Thursday, rushing in with "Rach Pag" to save the day. Whiz, Wham, Bam, went the famous runs and octaves. Ooh, Ah, went the famous sighs and moans. If you lost interest in the music, there were Mr. Thibaudet's red socks and gold buttons to admire. I almost expected the Rockettes at the end.

Now, the "Rhapsody on a Theme of Paganini" is not my idea of good music either, but one doubts anyone but an openly gay musician like Thibaudet would have been subjected to this abuse, on a level of taste nearly as poor as Holland's sneering performance on the subject of Schubert's homosexuality, a lapse for which he later had the temerity to cite Virgil Thomson's willingness to criticize Dorothy Maynor even though she was a racial icon as proof that he (Holland) should not be considered homophobic because he 1) doesn't want to discuss a composer's personal life if it happens not to have been heterosexual, and 2) doesn't feel that homosexuals or (most) other minorities are worthy subjects for art. Bernard Holland is not a homophobe because he didn't like HARVEY MILK. Surely most people, gay and straight, did not like HARVEY MILK. But the Bernard Holland who wrote that Schubert piece is a homophobe.

The claims, advanced often by Edward Rothstein and others in the TIMES neo-conservative wing, that art has no relation to the political and social forces that shape either the time of its creation or the time of our experience of it, are belied by the hundreds of stories the TIMES arts pages have run over the last decades relating to Judaism, anti-Semitism, Israel and the Holocaust, all in relation to art. Many of these stories have been interesting in and of themselves and indeed quite illuminating as to the "pure art objects" to which they have related ethnic, political, personal and social factors. But why the double standard where other minorities are concerned? Why, to draw on a recent example, is the reception and promotion of Bruckner's music in Nazi Germany relevant to our understanding of the works of a man who died in 1896 *IF* one accepts the "art exists in its own apolitical vacuum" dictum? Rothstein, the TIMES' chief theorist of neo-con aesthetics in recent years, himself contradicted his own theories when he proved unable to listen to and write about Strauss' *CAPRICCIO* without considering the horrors taking place offstage in 1942 while Strauss was writing an allegory about opera set in the French *ancien regime*. Clearly, both art and its reception are categories clearly interrelated to all manner of "extrinsic" factors (including, in the case of the composer of "Ganymed", sexual orientation) and to claim that some are irrelevant while lavishing attention on others is to advance a clear and often embarrassing political agenda behind a claim of aestheticism.

The screed style of Haggin can prove infectious! I highly urge those interested in the history of (and in the hope of a better future for) music criticism to search libraries for Haggin's sometimes infuriating but greatly informative and inspiring books.

Krunoslav Bruna-Rasa

gimmick.

CHERYL (ruefully):

You can pull all the notes out
Till you make the queens shout,
Spurn Verdi turns 'til you're banned,
But you've gotta get your Fach straight
If you wanna get a hand!
You can sacrifice your high tones
Crooning for the headphones,
Think SALOME's not to dread,
But you've gotta get your Fach straight
If you wanna get ahead!
You can coo, you can coo, you can coo, coo, coo --
Forget your breath support!
Me, I cooed, yes, I cooed, yes, I cooed, cooed, cooed,
From the Met nun ich muss fort --
NAUGHTY MARIETTA?
Be glad to get Musetta!
It's a stretch to hit a high B!
You gotta get your Fach straight;
Else you'll just end up like me!

ALESSANDRA (confidently):

She can coo, she can coo, she can coo, coo, coo --
They'll never take the bitch!
Me, I moo and I moo and I moo, moo, moo,
All those consonants I ditch!
I'm ELEKTRA-fyin',
And I ain't even tryin' --
Don't even have to move to get paid!
'Cause once you've got your Fach straight,
Kathy B. can be your maid!

CAROL (defiantly):

All your moo, and your moo, and your moo, moo, moo
Ain't gonna spell success!
Me, I (rasp) and I (rasp) and I (rasp rasp rasp):
Try to do it like Vaness!
Fiendish tessitura
Beats girls who are demurer
And never "blow air through" their high Cs.
'Cause if you've got your Fach straight,
Who cares which dumb fags you please?

ALL THREE:

Do nothing special,
Nothing individual,
Style distinctions be damned!
They'll say you're just a mimic,
Call your technique a gimmick --
We'll just stay indifferent to all!

ALESSANDRA:

If you want to fake it,
Scoop or blast -- don't break it!

CAROL:

If you can't refine it,
Might as well unwind it!

CHERYL:

If the critics trumpet,
Tell 'em, "Like or lump it!"

ALL:

But baby, get your Fach straight
And you too
Can be a star!

Ortrud.

The story of *Il Trovatore* (as told by an opera queen)

So there's this Count who is stalking a beautiful princess or something named Leonora. Meanwhile, the Count's sidekick kills time telling the story of what happened to the Count's kid brother: he was cursed by this old gypsy Hag, see, who later got burnt at the stake in order to teach her a lesson. Then somebody (at this point we don't know who) kidnapped the accursed kid brother. And then the unrecognizably crispy remains of a baby were found among a pile of burnt-out faggots! Well, meanwhile (on a lighter note) the beautiful Leonora is telling her sidekick another story, about this Troubador she's crazy for. So the Count comes stalking in and who does he hear serenading Leonora? Yes, of course, the Troubador. So the Count and the Troubador (who, by the way, is strawberry-blond, but that's not important right now) — anyway, they fight this duel while the beautiful Leonora says, "Stop, you fools!" and sings a high D-flat until she passes out.

Later, the Troubador's mom, a middle-aged gypsy Hag, tells yet another story, a really depressing one about her mom, who was an old gypsy Hag who was burnt at the stake and how she (the Hag, not the Hag's mom), back in the good old days when she was just a young gypsy Hag, kidnapped this kid but got crazy for a minute and burnt her own kid instead, leaving behind unrecognizably crispy remains among, yes, a pile of burnt-out faggots! (Do you see where this is going?) "Uh, Mom," says the Troubador, "then who the hell am I?" "My kid," replies the Hag, "I was just making all that stuff up." So anyway, the Troubador's sidekick announces that the beautiful Leonora, who has nothing better to do since the Troubador is dead (nobody tells her anything!) is going to join this convent. Meanwhile, at the convent, the Count attempts to kidnap the beautiful Leonora, but the Troubador arrives in the nick of time and he kidnaps her instead. The nuns are speechless.

So then the Hag, lacking a sidekick, sets out herself to look for the Troubador but finds the Count instead, and the Count's sidekick recognizes her as the ex-young gypsy Hag who barbecued the kid brother. The Count's sidekick decides to execute the hag and orders the soldiers to round up some fresh faggots. But the Troubador's sidekick hears about all this and breaks the news to the Troubador in the middle of his wedding to the beautiful Leonora. They decide to postpone, and the Troubador rushes off to storm the castle, pausing only long enough to sing a thrilling high C. He fails (storming the castle, I mean) and gets thrown in jail.

So the beautiful Leonora comes up with this plan that I suppose sounded pretty good at the time: she will have sex with the Count in exchange for letting the Troubador go, but what she doesn't mention is that she's going to swallow poison before they can do anything more than just sing a cabaletta together. Actually it all goes pretty much according to plan except the Count begins to get suspicious when Leonora dies. Meanwhile, the Hag has a nightmare about flaming faggots and the Troubador sings a song about mountains. The Count sends the Troubador off to be executed, and, just as a change of pace, beheaded instead of burnt. So the Hag turns to the Count and says, "That was no Troubador, that was your brother!" Then she sings a high B-flat and laughs hysterically. And so do the faggots. The ones in the audience, I mean.

Why can't you give me the respect I'm entitled to?

Queens everywhere will recognize this demand, voiced so memorably by Faye Dunaway whilst impersonating Joan Crawford in *Mommie Dearest*. But it's a complaint one could easily imagine Maria Callas lodging with playwright Terrence McNally, whose *Master Class* is appearing the world over (France, Argentina, presumably the West End) and demeaning La Divina's memory everywhere it goes.

Let me cut to the chase immediately and say that, here in Seattle in early January, Miss Dunaway proved that if this play has any value at all, it's as a star vehicle. Mr. McNally wrote it for Zoe Caldwell, who I can well believe was marvelous in it. Since then, Patti LuPone has had her admirers in it, and now Dixie Carter has taken over in New York. (Who's next? Lainie Kazan?) Faye Dunaway has taken the role to Boston, Seattle and Chicago already, and I must say she really makes it her own.

Complaints first. I'd never deny that McNally has a talent for clever theatrical turns. He's famous for his one-liners (Callas to an audience member: "You there — you don't have a look. Get one."), but he also has generated scenes which catch theatrical fire even if one quibbles with the content. In *Master Class*, one of the most famous such depicts Callas showing her first student ("Sophie de Palma") how to inflect the recitative before "Ah, non credea mirarti" by having the pianist play while she (Callas) recites the Italian without actually singing pitches. Miss Caldwell was, I expect, magnificent here, but La Dunaway, despite her extended affair with the late Marcello Mastroianni (who called her the great love of his life), doesn't really command the Italian. Most of it is pronounced decently, but key syllables are frequently not stressed correctly, and in general her Italian, here and in the assorted phrases and expressions which turn up elsewhere in the script, doesn't sound real, felt or the least bit authoritative.

I should also note that, in Seattle, anyway, Miss Dunaway was surrounded by histrionic dreck, people who would have been laughed out of my high school's auditions. The ones who really have to sing (the Lady Macbeth pretender, plus a big strapping tenor) had voices, but their acting was nothing short of ludicrous. And the Sophie de Palma had the additional weakness of being a big girl with a surname to match ("Klump"); I almost shrieked aloud with laughter when Callas stared her down icily and yelled, "Have you ever known what it is to STARVE?" It's hard to get a piece going when you're the only thing doing.

But Faye Dunaway was, and she did. People tend to write her off as the overwrought star of camp classics like *Eyes Of Laura Mars* and *Puzzle Of A Downfall Child*, but they forget she started her career on the stage (Hogan's Goat off-Broadway) and has occasionally returned to that venue (including a big anniversary revival of *Streetcar* under Tennessee Williams' supervision, opposite Jon Voight). In some ways you miss the way the camera so favors that

(still-) glorious face of hers. She's got everything else, though -- star presence, glamor (did I say she looks *fabulous*?), panache, even the willingness to get down and dirty in the big interior monologues. If anyone could pull off the horrific Aristotle Onassis nonsense about the "big uncircumcised Greek dick," Miss Dunaway could. In the event, she came damn close. But McNally keeps controverting her at every turn, having already set his Callas up as a big joke.

What's the deal with McNally's take on Callas, anyway? We know he admires her greatly, since he talks about her all the time and has hymned her in an earlier play (*The Lisbon Traviata*) and, among other places, in his preface to John Ardoin's *The Callas Legacy*. But the Maria he sends before the public night after night in *Master Class* is a ludicrous caricature of the self-aggrandizing diva; indeed, she seems more a loony queen got up as Callas than anything even vaguely resembling the goddess herself.

It's not the obvious musical inaccuracies which bother me -- though I am surprised that McNally has his Maria talk of interpolating high Fs in *Norma*'s Act One finale (where they would be harmonically out of place -- and of course Callas' entire recorded legacy encompasses, to my knowledge, precisely one F, touched in scalework in "D'amore al dolce impero") and fulminate that "Everyone knows Eboli's aria is 'O don fatale'" when in fact, as the diva well knew, that role contains not one aria but two. (Indeed, here lies another irony: the Eboli solo Callas coached in the actual Juilliard classes was not "O don fatal" but the Veil Song, with student Sheila Nadler.) After all, we know Callas herself made bloopers like insisting that Cavaradossi was tortured by Scarpia in the first act of *Tosca*. And I'd never suggest that what we owe Callas is retouched portraiture which ignores her many flaws and cruder idiosyncracies.

But to what end, this ridiculous figure who spends so much time berating students (especially the most talented one, who "dares" to sing Lady Macbeth's entrance solo before the century's greatest exponent of the part) and trying to make herself look significant that her talk of art (and of service to it) near the end of the play, closely echoing Callas' actual parting words to the Juilliard students, rings terribly hollow? Why sully her with embarrassing (if theatrically imaginative) sequences in which she assumes the voices of Aristotle Onassis and Battista Meneghini, whose repulsive tones and sentiments lead her through a ritual of pointless self-degradation before our very eyes? Is this all we can imagine Maria Callas thinking while brilliant music so closely associated with her (the *Macbeth* scena and the *Sonnambula* rondo-finale) is being played?

When he learned that Faye Dunaway had been signed for the *Master Class* tour and (maybe) the film, a friend observed, "Funny: I thought that after Mommie Dearest, Miss Dunaway had given up playing drag queens." He had a point. McNally hasn't created a larger-than-life goddess or a touchingly vulnerable humanization of a famous diva. He's put his own perverse fantasies about her and himself-as-her on the stage -- who needs it? I almost went back, just to watch Miss Dunaway do her thing one more time, but I just couldn't face this routine again. But you probably won't want to miss her, back onstage where she belongs, and I couldn't blame you for that.

Ortrud Maxwell

Italian Zinging Lessons

* * * Italian Zinging Lesson #1 * * *

Now entering the hall is the legendary soprano, la Contessa Macedonia di Frutta, who will conduct today's Italian Zinging Lesson. Our teacher appears a bit thicker around the waist (she's completely re-tired, you know). Some of our radio listeners will be interested to know that La Contessa is wearing a flattering ivory-colored chiffon-and-crepe A-frame muumuu. Just a moment! *Che meraviglia!* Our teacher has generously consented to begin our master class with an aria! [applause and glee]

[Accompanied by the well-known Russian pianist, Sveltina Voltapagina, La Contessa sings a schmaltzless *Pasta Diva*, taking all Da Capers. There is a tumultuous ovation, which eventually dies down.]

* * *

Grazie e buon giorno. Excuse please my English. I am, what is your word, a little rusted, yes? [she chuckles, muumuu quivers, audience plotzes]. Better we begin now lesson -- you have train, I have train. [more chuckling]

NEVER analyze Italian language! Just keep on zinging!

Exercise 1. Vocabulary

I slept badly last night; I hope to sleep better tonight.
Ho dormito male stanotte; spero di dormire meglio stanotte.

Exercise 2. Vocabulary

The host gives a party and invites a guest.
L'ospite dà una festa e invita un ospite.

All is clear? Bene! Let's zing on:

Exercise 3. Solfeggio

Today's solfeggio is from my friend Joan's Jumbo Lyric Fake Book *Evviva le vocali* available in Italia from G. Ricotta & Filetti. You have in your country English edition, *Moved your Vowels Today?* published by Sharper & Howe. For solfeggio we use Italian word *cuoiaio*, which means "a dealer in leather goods". Now, this is rare triple diphthong (very good for practicing Rossini), so make sure vowels are round -- and plects, plects, performance practice for Sutherlandia dialect requires we do not make

first "c" too strong – we don't want to cover those pretty vowels, do we? Only Italian language has such nice clusters with six vowels. I make no exceptions no students no substitutions, yes?

Bene! You keep zinging – I get now something to eat.

As she leaves, la Contessa waves arrivederci with her trademark, the (slightly yellowed) lace *fazzoletto* she used in the historic 1962 Kathmandu *Otello* arranged for the Tibetan Tambourines led by Thomas Sherpas. The original WYAK broadcast is now available on the Llama Llabel remastered with Spitting-Image, Bite-Stream Technology (much superior to the smelly old LLPs). The woolwinds play their hairy part brilliantly.

* * * Italian Zinging Lesson #2 * * *

La Contessa Macedonia di Frutta has returned to honor us with another Italian Zinging Lesson, which is being simulcast in 104 countries (105 with the simulcaste in India). Tonight's Opera-list Italian Zinging Lesson is brought to you by Tipsyco Brewers, the makers of Alberich Lite – "The Bier that Made Sigfried's Funeral Famous" – and by PyreXXXX flamproof condoms (as featured at Wotan Family Clanning Centers)

* * *

La Contessa is underemployed and has clearly overnoshed, but she's still an all-round beauty. This evening she's been groomed, tuned and spooned into a coffee-brown dirndl skirt topped with a frothy cinnamon-and-cream crepe de Chine blouse and a scrumptious cerise-and-teal gold-laced bodice from Armani's *Grande Armadio* Collection. Listers will remember this ensemble from the cover of her crossover album *La Contessa Yodels Begin the Ravine*. Unfortunately, that photo does not do her justice: right before the photographer's flash she lapsed into her native Italian and mouthed *formaggio*. We have just been informed that Sveltina Voltapagina, la Contessa's loyal Russian pianist will not appear tonight because of a lengthy commitment to KGB Entertainment's Psychoramada East (formerly Ivan's Bar & Grill Room).

La Contessa is making her way to the piano, where the dwarf Pakistani pianist, Mr. Buttah Phinghers, will (shortly) accompany her in the Jewish Princess' "Doorbell Song" from Lenny Delibes' *Latke*. With her pancake makeup, teased hair and schlock jewelry, la Contessa is a gorgeous ersatz princess that would make any queen mother kvell. I see that Mr. Phinghers is still adjusting the piano bench, so I'll give you some of the fascinating background to tonight's piece. The "Doorbell Song" is a challenging *aria di agilità* for soprano. It was also used to test the hearing of the allied troops in WWII, who were later entertained by Judy Holliday and Bing Crosby's "Hollywood Bellringers" skit. English coal miners use recordings of this aria as a "canary scarer" to administer a humane coup de grace to asphyxiating songbirds (strict British law requires that this can be done only "when the wobble distinctly predominates the warble in a mining venue"; the corresponding American statute reads "when the shafted critters are half-gassed"). But returning to the

aria, here is the start of this patter-batter-splatter number, which the Princess dishes out in the palace kitchen:

*Ding dong ding dong...ding dong ding dong.
Someone get the doorbell, I am not able.
Ding dong ding dong...ding dong ding dong.
I'm making breakfast, someone set the table.
Ding dong ding dong...ding dong ding dong.
You better get it, I've got to much to hold.
Ding dong ding dong...ding dong ding dong.
Someone get the doorbell or the latkes will get cold.*

[Mr. Phinghers stacks the last phone book in place and is graciously boosted up by la Contessa, who then snuggles her once-elegant curves into the still-elegant curve of the piano – a perfect fit. The houselights dim and all eyes brighten in expectation. In impassioned defiance of her years, la Contessa fires off radiant yet ethereal notes of crystal that burst into shimmering silver-pearl droplets against a plush piano accompaniment of dark crushed velvet. By the aria's end la Contessa has made a deep, indelible impression on both the public and the piano. After long, deafening applause la Contessa approaches the microphone.]

Grazie, mille grazie, e buona sera! Tonight we talk about sex. In italiano we gotta boy words and girl words. But italiano, she not alika German, which has boy word, girl words and those strange Krossdresserworten – but we donna talk about them now because maybe you gotta the children staying up to hear me sing tonight! Was good joke, yes? Donna worry if these exercises they are confusing – we zing now, ztudy later.

Exercise 1. Gender in Italian. Text from the libretto to *The Queen of Spays* ossia *Il vero genere del genere*

La regina, che non mente mai, preferisce il tè alla menta.
[The queen, who never lies, prefers mint tea.]

La regina ha una mente straordinaria, ma, sfortunatamente, ha anche uno sdoppiamento della personalità.
[The queen has an extraordinary mind, but, unfortunately, a split personality as well.]

Dopo l'approvazione della regina, le vendite del dentifricio mentadent sono aumentate
[Since the queen's endorsement, sales of Mentadent toothpaste have picked up.]

Veramente la regina ha ordinato questo julep con doppia menta.
[Actually, the queen ordered this julep with extra mint.]

La regina, esasperata dall'emental domestico, dà all'ancella un pugno sul mento.
[The queen, fed up with domestic Swiss cheese, bops her handmaid on the chin.]

La regina porta il doppiamento perennemente.
[The queen takes Joan Sutherland wherever she goes.]

Exercise 2. Preparatory Review for the Italian Zinger's License

La regina, mentalmente disturbata, dimentica la foglia di menta sul mento e mente al reggimento veementemente.

The queen, off her rocker, forgets the mint leaf on her chin and lies to her regiment vehemently.

Bene! Keepa zinging while I getta znack. You gotta maybe Znickers bars abackstage? They even more deliziosi if you keppa them in the ice-a-box! And donna forget your solfeggio! You gotta keepa moving those vowels! Arrivederci!

[La Contessa throws kisses, catches roses, fields questions, runs afoul of her critics, bats 1000 with fans, walks home, and pops out to buy a can of Alberich Lite – she's all American now! Poor Mr. Phinghers never gets to first base with la Contessa; apparently he is all (Tom) thumbs.]

As the houselights come back up, let me remind la Contessa's many admirers that she will be recording ALL the voices in the "Coro a bocca chiusa" from *Madama Butterfly* on her next album, *Humdinger!*

La Contessa Macedonia di Frutta leaves tomorrow on her All-Indian Tour with Maestro Zubin Metha. Concerts are scheduled for Poughkeepsie, Lake Hopatcong, Wannamassa and Manahawkin, where there will also be a New Deli autograph signing. The program features traditional Buddhist chants with authentic aerophone instruments and is entitled *Ghandi with the Wind*.

Tipsyco, Alberich Lite and PyreXXXXX would like to wish all our music-inebriated listener una buona notte.

*** End of Italian Zinging Lesson #2 ***

P.S. A combination postcard/do nyet disturb sign has just arrived from the Psychoramada East. The words:

Having Exceptionately Lively Party!

are scrawled in borscht over the signature of Sveltina Voltapagina. La Contessa delves into a pass through her alpine cleavage and unpins her Aida Decrypter Scarab. As she begins to decode the message, a worried expression sets in.

Recounted by Her Royal Heinie The Princess Ebola

Richard Breath wants to know:

When will we see the premiere of Carlisle Floyd's opera *Steel Magnolias*, set to star Nova Thomas, Susan Dunn, Marilyn Mims, Mignon Dunn, Ruth Welting, and Ealynn Voss?

Will New York opera-goers emulate their idol Luciano Pavarotti (who didn't feel like learning *La forza del destino* and demanded to substitute *Ballo*), telling the Met, "We don't want to see *Faust*; do *Frau ohne Schatten* instead"?

Why does Riccardo Muti always look like he just caught a whiff of Thomas Hampson's underwear?

Will World Wrestling Federation fan Jane Eaglen bodyslam Angela Gheorghiu during next year's Met *Turandot*?

Is there anything queerer than a Francesca Zambello production of a Benjamin Britten opera with an all-male cast headed by Swedish sperm machine Bo Skovhus? Unless maybe it's Daugherty and Koestenbaum's *Jackie O*?

Is it possible to masturbate (successfully) while listening to a Huguette Tourangeau CD?

How vast a collection of compromising photos, videos and sworn affidavits is Waltraud Meier using to blackmail James Levine into offering her such plum roles as Carmen and Dalila?

Is it true that the Met will pay you a hundred dollars for each misspelled word you find in the Met Titles?

Can you think of a more appropriate operatic anagram than "Roberto Alagna = Tool Grab Arena"?

Is it a law or something that American sopranos who make the big time suddenly have to start acting and dressing like trailer park trash with money?