

parterre box

(the QUEER opera zine)
proudly presents is 26th
BULGING issue:

Bobby Bob's big mouth!

Wig angst in Tokyo!

Dawn Carlos!

The Roman Summer of L'Opera Francais!

Debbie Voigt feels the earth move!

Behrens' meltdown!

Richard Breath wants to know!

Opera is not porn...

Ronata goes on singing...

Little Stevie screams!

OUR LIVES ARE BETTER THAN YOUR LIVES

And reviews from New York, Tokyo,
Sarasota and San Francisco

parterre box

the queer opera zine



#26: Scandale!

Dawn Carlos

[The tombs of the Escorial; semi-darkness. **MONKS** in stern black habits are seen in the extreme background. **ELISABETH DE VALOIS**, lightly veiled, advances slowly to the footlights.]

ELISABETH DE VALOIS: Um, Maestro, could you wait a minute? Hi, folks. We really appreciate it that you're still out there! My babysitter gets overtime tonight too! She's a lovely Nicaraguan woman with one arm that my sister-in-law met at her church's Sanctuary Supper.

Now, "sanctuary" is an important concept in tonight's opera because poor Elisabeth really feels victimized by her spouse and she comes to the tombs not only to see off Carlos but for some quiet time to think about the directions her life is taking. Sometimes after choir rehearsals in high school, when the other kids went down to the malt shop, I used to stop by the pet cemetery where our dog Button was laid to rest and lie under a big elm tree and think about whatever came in to my head. Button was a great dog and feeling near him really helped to give me perspective on everything.

Of course Charles the Fifth wasn't a dog and Elisabeth never met him, but I think in this scene-- kinda gloomy scenery, isn't it, guys?-- she is looking for the same clarity and focus I used to get under the elm. I really admire Elisabeth because she works hard on her relationship issues in a society which didn't afford her much personal space for growth. I was saying to my server at Sarabeth's the other day--

[Enter **LA PRINCESSE EBOLI** (Grace Bumbry), wielding the crossbow from the Prison Scene.]

EBOLI: Bitch, shut the fuck up and sing your number already!

ELISABETH: Maybe in the convent you'll learn better ways of channeling conflict in stress situations. But, gee, I'm sorry if I stepped on anyone's toes.

[**EBOLI** leaves in a huff.]

ELISABETH (to the conductor): I guess I'm ready now. Can you ask everyone in the pit to take a deep breath and visualize Spain? Great.... (singing) "Toi, qui sus le neant..."

— *Krunoslav Bruna Rasa*

Looks like dynamic **Deborah Voigt** is not **exactly** type-casting for the role of the clairvoyant Cassandre: the soprano had no inkling that her performance in the Lisbon production of *Les Troyens* would be interrupted by a bomb scare! Says the diva:

The second performance I'm about two seconds from making my entrance and the curtain goes down! I look at the monitor and Maestro has laid down his baton. Next thing I know the chorus is running off the stage saying "Bomb! Bomb!". "BOMB ???", say I. A stage manager ran up and said "Miss Voigt, we have received a bomb threat and must clear the building". No arguments from me. They threw a coat over my shoulders and out into the streets of Lisbon we fled. (Cast went out the stage door, public out the front of the house.) Now this is a strange picture... the entire cast of *Troyens* in costume all standing huddled on a street corner. The locals are laughing about this, say it's happened three times in the last year and a half. I am, of course, thinking Oklahoma City and not seeing the humor of the moment. Well, after half an hour it IS becoming rather hysterical until I realize there is no damn bomb and after hanging around in the cold night air for an hour and a half I'm still going to have to sing the performance. Sure enough, that's what happened. The police cleared the building and after we got the public back in and filled with champagne to calm them (and where was MY champagne to calm ME?) we finally began, at 10:30pm. A long night. When I write the book this chapter will be called "Lisbomb" -- and not because of my performance, darling!

La Deb further reports she is already stocking up on industrial-strength hairspray in preparation for that big-hair opera par excellence, Strauss's *Aegyptische Helena*, on the bill for London and New York in January. A Salzburg Festival *Fidelio* is also in the works.

questo e quello

Se non e vero e ben trovato: you know La Cieca's favorite stories are all Wig Stories--and this (whether it's all true or not) ranks with the greatest Wig Stories of all time. At the touring Met's dress rehearsal of *Carmen* in Nagoya, **Angela Gheorghiu** put her foot down and announced she was NOT going to wear that uuugly strawberry-blond **natte tombante** designed by **La Zeffirelli**. (After all, is **Waltraud Meier** still wearing that

hideous black **perruque**? I don't think so!) Little did Angie know that the Zef himse'f was in town, and all primed to exercise his contractural right to **pull the production** if a single detail --even a wig -- were altered. So **Uncle Joe** bit the bullet and announced: "Miss Gheorghiu, that wig is going on stage tonight -- with you or without you."

Well, the wig, as worn by **Ainhwa Arteta**, had a lovely night, thank you, and the divette and her hubby can tell you all about it: after all, they were **in the theater** to watch the performance she cancelled-and were gracious enough to **autograph the fans' programs** as proof! At the second performance, cooler heads (i.e., the corporate sponsors who ponied up the yen for this shindig) prevailed: after all, they asked, did Mr. Volpe really believe the audience paid a \$600 top to hear **Sergei Leiferkuss** and **Luis Lima**? So, yes, La Gheorgiou sang that night, wearing her own hair and a very superior smirk.

But, next day, Uncle Joe called the Singing Breeders on the tatami. We hear that the scene went something like this: **Bobby Bob** took the offensive: "Well, Mr. Volpe, if you think we are so disrespectful, perhaps we do not belong in your theater. Perhaps, indeed, you should return our contract for **Romeo et Juliette**!" And the Sly Fox reached in his jacket pocket, pulled out the contract, and handed it to the dumbstruck tenorino, saying simply, "Suit yourself..." You can read more about the Met's misadventures in Japan in **Akira**'s review elsewhere in this issue.

Alagna's latest in a series of disastrous career moves comes in the wake of an interview in the April 7, 1997 London **Daily Telegraph**, in which the "fourth tenor" indulged in what appeared to be homophobic hate speech. The interview, written by **Susannah Herbert**, states:

In a vox pop - screened as part of a Channel 4 documentary in January - sceptical listeners shook their heads over his missing high notes. "He's noivus" and "like a frog" were among the kinder phrases used. Two months after trying and failing - to have the documentary pulled, Alagna's fury is still strong enough to send waves across the surface of his soup and silence the restaurant. "It's not reality, what they showed on television. Those women who said I was not good. They were prostitutes. From the street.

Hah! And that man who said I didn't hit the top C. I know he is a homosexual. It's outrageous, outrageous!" Alagna's Sicilian blood, and his early years spent singing in Parisian bars, lend his colourfully vulgar outburst ("Putains!") a force which freezes the smile on his wife's lips.

parterre box is seeking an apology or at least an explanation from Mr. Alagna; so far, a publicist for Angel Records has denied knowledge of the tenor's statement, and Alagna's manager has promised a statement but claims he is unable to contact the singer. La Cieca knows, however, that until Alagna takes back his fag-bashing rant, she will neither buy his recordings nor patronize his performances.

And meanwhile, La Cieca would just like to note that Mr. Alagna's choice of words is strikingly Freudian. After all, there's only one way you can **know** a man is a homosexual.

Akira further reports: "At **Ozawa Seiji**'s **Zauberflote** in Tokyo a few weeks ago, I heard he would conduct **Pelleas et Melisande** next year with a luxe cast including **Dwayne Croft**, **Jose Van Dam**. ...and **Teresa Stratas**! I can't fathom the idea of Stratas singing Melisande at this stage of her long career. She is of course notorious for her cancellations, but it seems that the Japanese yen is so attractive to such habitual cancelers as **Carlos Kleiber** and **Julia Varady**, who, to the best of my knowledge, have never cancelled in Japan, so Stratas may actually come here to sing the role! Frankly, I'd rather see a younger singer, say **Dawn Upshaw** or **Alison Hagley**, in this part...."

Jane Eaglen made her debut with the NY Philharmonic May 22 singing what surely must be the briefest solo program in history: her entire contribution was "Mild und leise" from **Tristan und Isolde**. This is La Cieca's first experience hearing Ms. Eaglen live, and, frankly, she can't see what the fuss is all about. I found Ms. Eaglen's voice medium-sized and limited in tone color. Her vocal production sounded curiously "tight" and forced, with the ends of phrases bitten off. She began the piece **not** in a true supported piano, but in a fake-sounding breathy

sotto voce. While she did offer fuller singing a few phrases later, I never did hear any real "opening-out" as the voice climbed; the climactic G# on "WELT Athems" came and went with no sense of occasion. (The soprano was indisposed for the following performance and was replaced by **Margaret Jane Wray**.)

On the positive side, La Cieca was pleased by Ms. Eaglen's long-breathed and imaginative phrasing, especially of the quieter passages at the beginning of the aria. The notoriously difficult final phrase ("hoechste Lust") was taken, properly, without a break.

Now, La Cieca does not enjoy playing couture cop, but she really must say that Ms. Eaglen presented on this occasion an almost comically unglamorous stage figure. Poorly coiffed and made-up, the soprano wore a garment best described as a "shmatte" of indeterminate grey-blue, with bugle beading that cruelly emphasized her full and very low-slung bust. To be brutally frank, this woman is in desperate need of gay friends.

Was this just an isolated night of mediocre voice and fashion victimhood? Or have other listeners found this obviously serious artist as unimpressive on other occasions?

Producer/Designer/Filmmaker/Wig Policeman Franco Zeffirelli did a few lunches in Lalaville recently, pitching his new knockabout comedy farce flick set in the wild and wacky world of Grand Opera. The high-concept premise involves two lookalike sisters, Classy Opera Diva **Aprile Millo** and Sassy Cabaret Chantoozy **Bette Midler**. One night at *Aida*, you see, Aprile succumbs to a nasty case of *abassimento di voce*, leaving brave Bette to strap on the platform wedgies and go barging down the Nile her divine self! Cute, huh? (Though La Cieca must admit the whole setup sounds awfully like that stalled **Dom Deluise/Luciano Pavarotti** project!)

So **Gotterdammerung** at the Met (5/10) starts with the all-too-familiar lights-up in front of the curtain. From elsewhere in Family Circle one hears: "Oh, no! We've got **Penny Daner**!" "You mean Penny Dreadful!" But the little Brit fag on stage has an announcement to make. (Joe must be hoarse

from all those similar speeches he's had to make over the past few weeks.) The Brit's mike doesn't work, so he shouts "**Miss Behrens** bla bla bla...still not fully recovered, bla bla bla...and she asks your indulgence." To which someone in the audience responds, loudly, "**All the time!**" Laughter, gasps, applause, groans and boos.

The Norns are OK, especially #2 (**Michelle DeYoung**). Then Brunnhilde and Siegfried (**Jerusalem**) enter and she opens her mouth, and out comes....gargling. She's doing that in-and-out-of-chest yodel thing she's been manufacturing for years. In fact, she sounds rather better than she did in **Walkure** a month ago. But in her concentration on making the voice work (and it does, mostly, albeit only one note at a time -- and it's not as if she has any vocal means left over to sing **expressively**) she has completely abandoned any connection with her body. She just **stands there** or occasionally makes a meaningless leading-lady sweeping cross. The one thing that always made Behrens special, the physical intensity of her acting, is gone, gone, gone. She looks about as committed as **Martina Arroyo** at her most passive.

Jerusalem sounds okayish if really dry, but at least he's spiritually **here** and thinking. He still moves well, probably the most graceful big-role tenor around today with the possible exception of a Mr. **Domingo**. Behrens' high C is a yell but at least she has the sense to get off it quickly.

The brass are tired and playing not quite up to pitch; otherwise the orchestra sounds A+. Many listeners have commented on **Levine's** quicker tempi this time around, and I will admit that some pages do go faster. What La Cieca is still missing is a sense of rhythmic excitement, of forward movement. Even the **fast** passages sound static, like a buffalo with a broken leg flailing around but getting nowhere. And then there are sections that are taken far too slowly, so slowly in fact that the singers have to breathe about every other note (more on that in a moment).

Alan Held and **Marie Plette** are quality Gibichungs: in fact, La Cieca thinks they could be promoted to Wotan and Sieglinde and do an honorable job. Held looks hungry for direction: he does the blocking with a kind of fierce intensity that suggests he

is looking for motivation, but, of course, that has never been what this Ring is "about." Ms. Plette really is a charmer; she occasionally startles me by actually singing legato, a style otherwise unknown in this performance (except for the first act of *Walkure*.) **Eric Halvarson** is a disappointment: big voice, but pushed beyond its limits and frequently sharp.

Now, another complaint about the production: while Siegfried and the various Gibichs are wandering around aimlessly, one constant holds true: their faces are **always** in shadow. The terrazzo of the Gibichung's patio is illuminated as if by the noonday sun, but **WE CAN'T SEE THE SINGERS' FACES!** This perversity is apparently an idiosyncrasy of **Gil Wechler's**. We suffer another of his mannerisms in the following (Valkyrie rock) scene: that gray, flat overcast look that obscures all detail, including (especially) the singers' faces. **Hanna Schwarz** could have been wearing Groucho glasses for all La Cieca knows. La Schwarz was in more pleasant form tonight than she was for Fricka; her "swimming underwater" gestures didn't bother me so much, though I must say her acting is 100% phony, lacking either versimilitude or style. She coped with Waltraute's Narrative well enough until the long, sustained passage beginning with "Des Stammes Scheite.." which Levine took at an absurdly slow tempo that no human being could sustain. I swear he must have beaten it in 8. Well, Ms. Schwarz huffed and puffed and did what she could, but she ran out of breath, and the climactic high note sounded like hell.

And then, during Waltraute's yelling match with Brunnhilde, it struck La Cieca that the performance was **dead**, as devoid of momentum as the orchestra's playing the performers sleepwalking, the whole experience without a single not a spark of dramatic fire, like a "marking" rehearsal with desperately tired artists giving the absolute minimum. Another thing: all night long, Behrens' voice kept getting noticeably larger and smaller in general volume, and then, just before Siegfried/Gunther's entrance came the giveaway: when the fans came on for the stage smoke, the roar was deafening, drowning out her voice. But when Mme. Behrens moved a couple of feet upstage, the roar suddenly dropped in volume while the smoke continued to pour out unabated. Again, a strong clue that the Met indeed uses amplification for "most-favored" artists.

By this time La Cieca had made up her tiny mind **not** to stay for the remaining two acts. So I left during the (sparse) applause after Act 1 -- a nice hand for Schwarz, very few cheers, and, yes, a few **boos** aimed at La Behrens.

Well she deserved it. The word around the house from smug Behrens queens was that the diva was by no means ill a couple of nights before when she cancelled **Siegfried**: she was only "resting." Now, Behrens agreed to perform **Siegfried** as well as the other operas of the **Ring**; tickets were sold (at inflated prices) on the strength of her name; she was awarded the glossiest performances including the broadcasts; she was granted the privilege of claiming "indisposition" on the frequent occasions she was afraid to face the public with the tattered remains of her voice. And now she seems to have claimed the right to cancel whatever performances she pleases in order to conserve her "precious" resources. Singing a cycle of the **Ring** is a grueling experience not to be undertaken lightly: if Behrens wasn't up to the task, she should have ceded her role to **Janis Martin** or **Gabriele Schnaut** or even **Jane Eaglen**, whom La Cieca caught a glimpse of entering her loge at this performance. (Oddly, up close Eaglen looks, well, large, to be sure, but nothing like the side-of-a-house I saw singing the Liebestod a few weeks later.)

Now, if Behrens had **anything** to offer, La Cieca could perhaps condone the pampering she demands and receives from the Met. But everything that ever made her special as an artist is gone, sacrificed to the single goal of squeezing out (some of) the notes. All she is now is famous, and if I want to see someone famous, I'll go to a **Madonna** concert-- where I'll also hear better-quality singing. La Cieca is **so** tired of hearing excuses for Behrens' irresponsible and selfish behavior! She's washed up, trading on our sympathy without regard to the very rare and expensive performances she wrecks along the way.

La Cieca's bosom buddy Eugenie swore she had **never** seen so many Germans in one opera house, not even in Germany. On this **Zweite Krautnacht**, all seemed quite taken with the Met's brand of **Wagner ohne Gedanken**.

La Cieca

Tokyo – an operatic center?

One well might not think that. In fact, the very first **true** opera house in Japan will open on October 10. However, we do have quite a few opera performances and vocal recitals here. The Met is just finishing up its umpteenth Japanese tour. They are doing *Cav/Pag*, *Carmen*, *Tosca*, and *Così*, as well as concert performances of Verdi's Requiem and Berlioz's *La Damnation de Faust*. I attended *Tosca* on June 1 at NHK Hall. Pavarotti was Pavarotti: he looked lazy, and hardly acted, but he still has that gorgeous voice, even if it diminished a little. Guleghina sang *Tosca* a month ago in Tokyo, with Vincenzo La Scola and Renato Bruson, and she sounded a lot more fiery than she did with the Met. James Morris must have sung too much Wagner. He can't sing legato at all, so important in Italian opera. His Scarpia was just coarse. Ugh!

Most people bought tickets for the Met's *Così fan tutte* to see Cecilia Bartoli sing Despina. I am not a big fan of hers, but I have never seen her live in an opera, so I paid \$300 for a ticket in the balcony. (Many people paid \$600 to sit closer.) I heard that Bartoli hadn't shown up for the dress rehearsal of *Così*, so I was worried that she would cancel. When I arrived at Tokyo Bunka Kaikan on June 3, posted in the lobby was a photocopy of Bartoli's hand-written letter to Sarah Billingham, together with a Japanese translation. In the letter (whose childish scrawl was the subject of much unfavorable comment from the audience), she claimed that her specialist doctor ordered her a week-long complete rest due to a "neck problem." Ms. Bartoli also canceled her previous Japanese tour (allegedly because she was afraid of being killed in an earthquake!), so she is gaining notoriety as a frivolous prima donna here.

Australian soprano Clare Gormley filled in and sang a perky Despina. In the end, I and many members of the audience were quite pleased with the substitution. The other soloists were identical to the telecast in December. Vanessa sounded tired and wobbly in Act 1, but she got considerably better in Act 2. Mentzer was doing her slapstick routine, and the men looked and sounded just like the telecast..

Ozawa Seiji has been conducting one opera per year for the past nine years in Tokyo under the sponsorship of the French cognac company Hennessy. Last year, he did *Madama Butterfly* (Leech, Gorchakova, Terfel), which I thought was rather boring, thanks mostly to Gorchakova's blowzy Cio-Cio-San. Ozawa has chosen *Die Zauberflöte* this year. I attended one of the performances on May 23, at Tokyo Bunka Kaikan, in Ueno, Tokyo. I indulged in a few glasses of the free cognac Hennessy provided before the performance and during the intermission, so I will say in advance that my

judgement may have been a little clouded. (BTW, they served V.S.O.P. With the kind of money we had to pay for tickets, I demand that they use at least X.O. next year!)

Zauberflöte kept me awake most of the time (being a Japanese, I was naturally exhausted from overwork). Sumi Jo was frankly miscast as the Queen of the Night. I had seen her sing the same role in L.A., and I wasn't impressed. Firstly, she has such a tiny voice that Kathleen Battle sounds Dimitrova in comparison. On May 23, she had no fire, no power, or no menace: a real queen of the Munchkins! Furthermore, her top notes were taking on very unpleasant edges, too. She barely touched the F in alt in "O zittre nicht." Although she was able to hit all the notes in "Der Hoelle Rache," her E's and F's were sour, in spite of the fact that she seems to be often thought of by some as too sweet-toned for the Queen.

Sarastro is my least favorite operatic character of all, what with his holier-than-thou sermons and seemingly-democratic-but-practically-tyrannical power. So, no matter who may sing Sarastro, I guess I will always get bored (unless Edita Gruberova decides to sing it). Paul Plishka is WAY passé. Vocally speaking, his Sarastro was nothing to write home about, with the lowest notes virtually gone. So, he was more like a besotted uncle figure (à la Giorgio in *I puritani*) than the obnoxious sexist/right-wing religious wacko that I usually see him as. Plishka made one rather big mistake, beginning to sing several bars too early, at one point.

Now what's the big deal about Mark Oswald? Sure, he looks young, and has boy-next-door good looks, which he made the best of by acting very cute--too cute, in fact--as Papageno. But his singing struck me as so ordinary. Could somebody enlighten me? And who is this mediocre soprano named Belinda Thayer Oswald, who sang Papagena? Is she part of the Oswald package?

Frank Lopardo, with a crew-cut, sounded more butch as Tamino than when I had seen him as Tonio in *La Fille du Regiment* at the Met a few years ago. But his basic timbre is still too clouded (nasal?) for my taste. He looked like a believable Prince, though. (But why on earth did the Queen of the Night ask Tamino to save Pamina for her? He cries "Zu Hilfe! Zu Hilfe!" and FAINTS while running away from a snake, and it was the three ladies who killed the snake! If I were the Queen, I would most definitely not rely on such a puss. Send those three butch ladies to the rescue instead.!

All the Barbara Bonney fans I know are straight boys with whom I wish to maintain a cordial (if nonsexual) relationship, so I was worried about what to say if she sounded awful. Fortunately, she sounded and looked lovely as Pamina throughout.

I guess a lot of people are familiar with David Hockney's sets, as they are the same as those seen at the Met. I found them pretty, but not really fabulous

the way his L.A. *FROSCH* and the Chicago/SF *Turandot* are. The production by David Kneuss, who directed a wonderful production of *Les Mamelles de Tiresias* at last year's Saito Kinen Festival at Matsumoto, should also be familiar to many listeners, from the Met *Zauberfloete*. Suffice it to say that I have seen enough vanilla productions of this Singspiel that I now crave kinkier ones, like, a dominatrix drag queen in leather fighting over a jail-bait blond West Hollywood type with a leader of the Log Cabin Club, or something....

Ozawa's conducting was on the brisk side, and New Japan Philharmonic Orchestra played competently, but I am not yet convinced that Ozawa is a good opera conductor....

Tokyo is frequented by veteran divas and divos. Such esteemed singers as Bergonzi, de los Angeles, Haeffliger, Gedda, Prey, Ameling, and Kraus have sung here quite recently. Renata Scotto gave a recital at a nice hall in a women's college in Tokyo on May 28. The "more-than-a-diva" is called by the affectionate nickname Jagaimo-San (Ms. Potato-head) in Japan, because her face bears a striking resemblance to an Irish potato, especially in photos taken in her pre-glamour days, when she was singing *leggero* roles like Amina and Lucia.

Scotto appeared on the stage wearing a chic almost-black-dark-blue dress with a slit that occasionally exposed her legs. From my seat on the third row, dead center, I felt as if I could almost reach her. She started her recital with "Arianna a Naxos," a fairly long cantata by Haydn made up of two recitatives and arias. Although I have never considered her instrument to be really beautiful, she sang this piece in a very dramatic way that kept me from dozing off. Her middle still sounds quite good, and as long as she is not singing above the staff, she is still the great little Renata.

The tessitura for the Rossini's "Regata Veneziana" songs, which she sang next, are not so high, and lies in the area where Scotto must feel comfortable. She sang them in so endearingly cute (if not downright coquettish) a manner I knew that I was going to enjoy this recital. Scotto was certainly much more charming in this repertoire than a certain young Italian mezzo known for her facial gymnastics.

After a 15-minute intermission, Scotto came back to the stage wearing a more conventional (?) light-blue dress. She sang four songs "Vaga luna," "Malinconia, Ninfa Gentile," "Dolente Immagine Di Figlia Mia," "Per Pieta, Bell'idol Mio" and an aria "Depo l'oscuro numbo" from *Adelson e Salvini*, all by Bellini. I had heard Scotto sing them in her highly enjoyable 1995 Tokyo recital, so they must be something she thinks she can sing very well now. However, unlike Rossini's songs, Bellini's made Scotto expose some rather unpleasant highish notes sung forte, which made me cringe several

times. The aria also sounded a little uncomfortable when she had to sing high in piano. (In fact, I have heard only Scotto and Rosina Wolf sing "Depc l'oscuro numbo," and, with all due respect to the latter diva's undoubtedly multitudinous admirers in New York, I prefer Scotto -- although my favorite rendition of Bellini's "Oh! quante volte," which is almost identical to "Depc l'oscuro numbo," is by Edita Gruberova.)

The same thing (about some unpleasant high forte notes) can be said of Scotto's set of Wolf-Ferrari songs although the overall impression of her rendition was moving, owing to her dramatic sense.

I had seen *Le Villi* only once, on TV, about 10 or so years ago, so I hardly knew "Se come voi piccina," which she sang well, but I kept wondering why she didn't choose a more familiar Puccini aria that is within her current vocal means. Her "Sole e amore" was quite delightful. She ended her official program with "Ebben? Ne andro lontana" from *La Wally*, receiving big applause, and also several bouquets from her adoring fans, all of whom, by the way, were female. Where were all the Scotto queens??

She sang four encores, the first being Massenet's "Ouvre tes yeux bleus". She then sang Carmen's Seguidilla beguilingly, and I thought that her "Quando m'en vo" was fabulous, including the final high B. The last of the encores was "Over the Rainbow." Being a "friend of Dorothy," I shouldn't be too critical of anyone attempting "Over the Rainbow." My lover, who lives in L.A., conjectured that Scotto "probably didn't sound any worse than Judy Garland when *she* last sang it". I guess he's right.

— Nakamura Akira



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Italian Zinging Lesson #3

Welcome once again to Tipsyco's Italian Zinging Lesson, which is broadcast this week from London's Alberlich Hall. Tonight's sponsors are Polygraph Records ("Truth in black marketing"), Fafner & Fassolt, Giant Burghers ("Builders to the stars"), and the Contessa Brava Bra ("When your cup runneth over"). As I'm sure our listeners know, la Contessa has a pushed up chest. And here she comes now. *[warm applause]*

Buona sera a tutti! I'm inna hurry tonight, so you ztudy these, and I'll getta znack and be right back! [She dashes to her backstage znicker trove while her dwarf Pakistani pianist, Mr. Buttah Phinghers, warms up the crowd a with a little Italian stride and vamp, "Stride la vampa".]

Exercise 1. *Bizzarrie biforcute*

ENGLISH	ITALIAN
big name	il big
transom	il vasistas
toilette bowl	il water
tuxedo	lo smoking
jogging	il footing
nightclub	il night
tailcoat	il frac
panties	lo slip
slip	la sottoveste
vest	il gilet
Gillette blade	una lama della Gillette
Tibetan lama	un lama del Tibet
Alabama, a llama	Alabama, un lama
Move Forward (on bus):	E' vietato sostare sulla piattaforma posteriore quando e' possibile spostarsi in avanti

Now, for your solfeggio, I know somma you are having trouble moving your vowels on those hard accacciaturas! So I wanna you shoulda buy my friend Cristina Deutekom's autobiography, *From Gutter to Gala*. Please reada Chapter 1, "How to make a guttural trill" anda Chapter 2, "How to make a guttural stop".

The Contessa flies back to her beloved adopted hamlet, New York City, and hungrily enters the nearest eatery. After a main course of knife-defying meatloaf interred under death-defying mushrooms, the waitress returns and asks "Did you want some dessert?" "I still do!" replies our perplexed

heroine. The loop-thrown waitress recites the desserts in an Albran-Berger sprechstimme: "We got radio-opaque rice pudding, high-bouncing Indian-rubber Jello cubes, cellophane-topped apple pie, and yesterday's chef's today's special, "tiramisu". "Che cos'e? Something giapponese?" When the dessert arrives, the still-hungry Contessa looks askance at the skimpy portion and asks "Didda something fall offa the plate on you way over?"

* * *

Meanwhile, Gofreddo, has picked up la Contessa's brooch-computer. While trying to call up an Italian soccer video game, he inadvertently combines the Contessa's file of regulations for the next Italian Maria Callas Competition (she's on that jury, which surprises no one) with Mr. Buttah Phingher's file of regulations for the next Pakistani Figure-Skating Championships (he's on THAT jury, which surprises everyone). The following day the *same* mail-merged melange is sent out to skaters and singers alike:

The Maria Callas International Marriage of Figaro-Skating Competition

Competetors must execute four of the following:

Beethoven/Catalani: Double Axelaida followed by a Wally solo

Berlioz: Cleopatra's Death Drop

Puccini: Half Moon and Butterfly's Duet; Pinkerton's Yankee Polka

Schubert: Gretchen at the Cartwheel; Lachen und Weinen und Overhead Liften

Tippet: The Ice Break Dance

Borodin: In the Quick-Steppes of Central Asia

Traditional: When Irish Eyes are Spiraling

"Competetors are reminded that the judges are looking for smooth, effortless execution on the cutting edge of bravura; however, acrobatics and pyrotechnics will be frowned upon. We expect accurate leaps, clean turns, graceful arm and hand positions, good balance with the musical accompaniment, and proper deportment in public."

* * *

La Contessa Macedonia di Frutta will be returning to the recording studio soon. As her fans know, she has an elusive contract with Polygraph, who wants to promote her crisscross talents and bra. Scheduled releases are:

1. An album of religious country banjo and ukulele music "Plucky to Be Alive" featuring la Contessa's hit singles "I am the Lord's In-strum-ent"

and "Stop frettin' your guts to hell and start pickin' your way to heaven".

2. Granados' song sci-fi song cycle built for two, "Darth and the Maiden"
3. Wagnerian sailor songs including the naughtygal ditty, "Watch it, Arnold Steuermann! Keep those hands on deck!".

In addition, Alfredo Kraus-vanDal sings

The Forlorn Fishmonger (*Mal-aria di pun-izione*)

On Yom Kipper with Senta, a sole clammy thing;
I show off my mussels (I'm no shrimp) and her ring.
Her scalloped dress plummets as I roe Blu Laguna,
I unsnapper and grouper, sing a coral out of tuna.

My sea-hoarse voice flounders, her wavy lox touch,
"You're small fry", carps Senta, "so I'm going Dutch."
"Holy mackerel! He smelt bad! My Cod!" Mary's urchin',
"Sail escargot you cheap skate and net plastic sturgeon!"

Dutch's gar was a stingray with turbot, but drab;
"Looks squally", said Senta, "I'm calling a crab".
He was krilled on the turn-pike (as snailor, no bargain);
He's decked out in sharkskin (crew's whalin' a psalmon).

Sveltina Voltapagina is a prisoner in Room 1413 of the KGB Entertainment's 4000-room Psychoramada East. She is tied to the bed with borsh't belts, corn belts and sun belts. She cannot call for help, because a judge's gag order is pasted on her lips (among the staff and KGB in the Psychoramada East such sick American jokes are the latest rage). Out of no-fidelity JBL (Just Blay Loud) speakers blares an accordion-trio arrangement of "Lady of Spain" sung in Russian by Spittalova Novowelski. This is a tape loop and, unbeknownst to Amnesty International, has been playing night and day. Sveltina had not slept in two weeks: whenever she stops her toe castanets, the music gets louder.

Sveltina had been arrested at the Mussorgsky, Moscow's Art Cinema. Just before the feature they projected a newly discovered newsreel of Franco Corelli on a 1953 tour of the Soviet Union. Naked to the waist, he was changing for a performance. At the first flex of Corelli's calaf muscle, Sveltina, normally the demure damsel, lost control, stood up and began stripping off her clothes, screaming "Vai Franco! ... Togli tutto! ... Vai cosi'!" creating a scandal. Pravda ran the story as:

Exhibition at the Pictures!

This week's Italian Zinging Lesson comes to you live from the Glorious Metropolitan Opera House at Lincoln Center. Our sponsors this week are RATS, Russian Amplification for Theaters Service, "We mike everything that moves" and the La Donna e' Mobile Escort Service. Speaking of the glorious Metropolitan, listeners will of course know that certain adjectives become permanently linked to specific opera houses: the legendary La Scala, the revolutionary Sydney, the secondary NYCO, the lapidary Parma, and the dromedary Cairo.

La Contessa Macedonia di Frutta has just returned from a recital-tour of the American West. An elaborate western cookout was organized in her honor. How vividly she remembers the unkempt, corpulent cook in the chuckwagon who ladled out food to the guests in line. When it was her turn, la Contessa requested the menu. The cook rolled his eyes and answered gruffly, "Same old grub: boiled cactus, then fried prairie dog with grits or rattlers with beans, and for dessert I got crepes maison au chocolat et au Grand Marnier."

Here at the Metropolitan renovation continues. Gone are the old but elegant brass seatback plaques:

Chewing gum may be TEMPORARILY parked under the seat during performances. The MET is not responsible for gum left more than 7 (seven) days after a performance.

This has made room for the exciting new STV (seatback title viewers). In addition to the libretto of the opera translated into your choice of six languages, STV electronic wizardry features:

- Flouncy, the green LED Hum-Along Bouncing Butterfly.
- The Time Remaining until the next intermission.
- Coming Attractions for upcoming MET performances.
- A Shuffle Button to vary the order of the arias in tonight's performance.
- Instant replays of off-pitch high notes.
- Two-minutes before the final curtain, the screen flashes: "DON'T EVEN THINK OF CLAPPING HERE".

La Contessa has just returned from Pesaro where she judged the annual Miss Rossini Competition. Points were scored for (1) the greater the number of notes sung in the allotted time; (2) the greater the resemblance to Rossini without actually copying; (3) the fewer breaths taken; and (4) the greater the resemblance of vocal mannerisms to Maria Callas. All proceeds from this event went to the Azucena Child Care Center, whose motto is "The welfare of our children is our burning, all-consuming desire"

Recounted by HRH the Princess Ebola

little Stevie's rant

I have subscribed since the first season the Met offered the Premiere Series, gladly paying premium prices in exchange for the the honor of attending on the opening night of each new production of the season, a total of four or five performances. I was able to get great seats in a Dress Circle Box, thereby living out my *Dangerous Liaisons* fantasies, and since most people who get subscription seats this good have contributed to the great machine, I made myself afford it. Fair enough.

Beginning last year, the Met saw fit to split this package into two series, including several revivals on the reasoning that these were "gala evenings". These events included *Forza* with Pavarotti, *Walkure* with Domingo and Voigt, and the dream team in *Faust*, as well as all the seasons' new productions. This brought the number of operas up to six, substantially increasing the price. Now, I would probably have attended *Faust* anyway, but *Forza* was a leftover from last season, and I attended *Walkure* (with the same principals) that season too. This pissed me off. When I called the subscription department to complain, I was treated to an incomprehensible lecture from a Guild volunteer (a contemporary of Mrs. Belmont, apparently) who told me that I should feel privileged to hear such great voices, and that this was the new Golden Age. I grumbled, but I paid up.

So NOW I get my renewal for 97-98, and I can't believe the schlock they're trying to shove down our throats! *Turandot* and *L'Elisir* with Pavarotti I can almost justify, but *Boris* fucking *Gednor*? How old is that production? So it's Borodina's debut or something...Who cares? And then *Don Carlo* with fucking Crider and Lima and, oh God yes, Hampson!

So now, I am asked to buy 9 operas, more than twice the amount originally offered when my subscription began, but there are only five new ones, spread across THREE series. If I want *Samson et Dalila* and *Capriccio*, I must swallow that wretched *Don C*. If I want to see Voigt and Heppner in *Lohengrin*, I must sit through *Boris* and *Turandot*.

So what can we expect in 1998-99? *Lakme* with Young Ok Shin? *Fille du Regiment* with Paul Groves? *Turandot* with Margaret Jane Wray?

This series was originally created to attract new subscribers, and to offer excellent seats for opening nights. To double the amount of operas offered, and mix in shoddy revivals just to expand the series seems to me not only unfair but reprehensible. The Met's attitude seems to be one of "So what? If he doesn't subscribe, someone else will." I am, after all, paying a higher price for the "privilege" of attending the prima of each new production, and that should count for something. The continued elitism of the Met can only serve to alienate future subscribers, not to mention offending those of us who would appreciate choices that reflect the fact that our subscriptions matter.

LITTLE STEVIE

The other night, Peter Hunter and Richard Breath ventured into enemy territory—a cocktail party at the sprawling townhouse of Edmund and Bailey, San Antonio's most pretentious opera queens. Fifteen of Central Texas's most avid opera buffs were in attendance. Between sips of domestic champagne, they argued opera trivia. Ground rules established (Callas = Good; Scotto = Bad), the chatter turned to who had just jetted where to experience the best or worst performance ever given in the history of the world. In other words, the theme of the party was

Our Lives are Better
...than Your Lives!

Edmund and Bailey have no taste. Tons of money, but no taste. They also have no original opinions. They only parrot what John Ardoin thinks, so until one of his puffpiece pontifications appears in print, Edmund and Bailey are bereft of conversation.

You see, opera queens in Texas split into two camps: the Ardoin Acolytes and everyone else. Each of these major divisions includes factions who loathe Terrence McNally and those who have somehow learned to tolerate him. Complicated, perhaps, but after the fifth or sixth drink, who cares? I actually heard a grown man query, "Has Leona Mitchell entered the Federal Witness Protection program?"

Since one of the subjects broached early in the the evening was Freni's Met broadcast *Fedora*, Peter and Richard wasted no time in reminding the room that they own the only copy in North America of the *Fedora* from La Scala starring Callas and Corelli. A deathbed vow exacted by the previous owner means that the boys must never let Ardoin or McNally hear a note of it. Edmund and Bailey tried to gloss over their uncontrollable envy by commenting on the \$5000 worth of CDs they recently purchased. Peter took this opportunity to remind the room that he hasn't a spare moment to buy CDs, thanks to all the free ones his has won, what with his FIVE questions being asked on the Texaco Opera Quiz and all...

Standing there at the table laden with giant strawberries and chocolate fondue, Peter suddenly got to thinking about all the "drivia" (trivial drivel) one experiences during a typical opera queen cocktail party. Upon returning home, he wasted no time getting his thoughts down on paper:

The worst breed of operagoer is the shushbird. These people are not there to enjoy the music; they are there to monitor the behavior of others. They shush people who applaud when the curtain goes up. They shush when someone dares to applaud before the final chord of the opera

OPERA IS NOT CHURCH

completely dies out. They insist on complete reverence before, during and after a performance. Peter remembers a *Lohengrin* in San Francisco with Lorengar and Rysanek. With the audience already primed for hysteria, Rysanek delivered the Curse (with talons clawing the air), and fell to her knees. The Rysanek Queens went absolutely berserk, stopping the show. For whatever reason, the conductor continued the music. Lorengar's cue came and went, but you couldn't hear her – mostly because of the shushing biddies who were making every bit as much noise as the screaming fans. On this night, nobody won.

Have you ever been to a *Fidelio* when you thought you were awaiting your turn in a confessional booth? So tasteful, so solemn. You've seen the audience whipped into a frenzy by the interpolated overture, eager to cheer if only for the sake of catharsis, but the shushbirds will hear of no such thing. They insist on test room silence, even if it means proctoring the performance themselves. These morons will even shush the applause after the Mad Scene in *Lucia*—because that 30 seconds of comprimario recitative is "so important to the plot, you know!"

Every performance, they think, should be *Parsifal*. Don't any under circumstances applaud after Act One. Do not cream your pants when Kundry starts shrieking those high Bs, even though you've waited three and a half hours for it to happen. And never suggest to these moralists that this opera is about the destructive effects of sex: that Amfortas's wound may have something to do with venereal disease or that Klingsor is a viciously horny drag queen. And by all means meditate on the Christian symbolism of *Billy Budd*, but never cheer for Billy's tight 13-button pants!

OPERA IS NOT CIRCUS

On the other hand, and despite all claims to the contrary, we really are not supposed to whoop aour way through the performance. I mean, just because Nicola Martinucci misplaces the hammer in Act One *Turandot* and kicks the gong instead, does the entire balcony have to start yelling "Didja see what he DID?" And who can forget the *Tosca* in San Francisco and the brouhaha following Magda Olivero's high C on the word "lama" in the last act. She sat on that note way too long (just to prove she could still do it) and almost before she was finished, an epicene voice shrieked "Brava!" on almost as high a pitch. Cheers, laughter, and disruptive groans continued through most of the rest of the opera. An interpolated high note is not really the same thing as a triple backflip. We should try to behave at

OPERA IS NOT KITCHEN SINK

the opera and not get our cotton candy in someone else's hair.

Do we really want to see *Don Giovanni* set in a crack house?

Fedora or Francesca or Madame Sans-Gene sweeps onto the stage. What is that odor that fills the auditorium? It's the stench of decay blended with mothballs and your great-grandmother's lavender sachet. Some queens will jet halfway around the globe for the latest mummy-unwrapping, reveling in *Esclarmonde* or *Thais*. The music is like pig-piss (only not so tasty). The cheap canvas drops flap in the breeze. The plot creaks to its unlikely conclusion. The tenor and the baritone are forgotten, but the diva receives an ovation longer than her performance because, after all, she is a direct descendant of the Last of the Last. In the old days, bouquets would fall at her platform-shod feet like dead doves, close enough to the hem of her robe for her to totter forth and grasp them. These days you don't see so many flowers. Those discretionary dollars go for protease cocktails.

OPERA IS NOT MUSEUM

When Peter saw the Zeffirelli *Traviata* at the Met, he was appalled at all the scene changes from ballroom to bedroom. Were Verdi and his librettists just wasting their time keeping the action in one room? A caressing inflection of the word "amore" is in many cases more effective

OPERA IS NOT CINEMA

than a quick cut to the bedroom so we can see Violetta and Alfredo pawing each other. And how about that recent *Salome* in Houston, when the Dance of the Seven Veils accompanied a music video detailing the gang-rape of Salome as a child by the palace guards, thus explaining why she turned out so unpleasant. The stage directions say, "she dances", so, why can't she just dance? Maybe next year, we'll see film of Manon and des Grieux arriving in muddy New Orleans and fleeing westward into the Texas desert.

Peter once saw a Manon Lescaut in Washington during which Harry Theyard peeled down to his skivvies. The matinee ladies hissed like cats. More recently a production of *Seraglio* in San

Francisco, Belmonte (Kurt Streit) came out during the overture to entertain us with a jaunty striptease down to his white briefs. And we all sit anxiously during *Die Frau ohne Schatten* for the Appartition of the Young Man, eager to see if his performance will be uncut. Or what about that Maria Ewing Salome when she took it all off and then straddled the prompter's box-- this guy will take that vision with him to his grave! Remember when the day after the opera we used to talk about the singing or the size of the diva's hair? Nowadays, we argue about whether the demons in *Mefistofele* were really nude or wearing bodystocking with sew-on oversized genitalia. Opera is about singing, not dicks.

Peter was seated in front row orchestra for Scotto's *Gioconda* in San Francisco (next to Lotte Lenya, by the way, who hummed along with all the

famous tunes.) In Act Two, Pavarotti started choking during the opening bars of "Cielo e mar"; the panic on his face was horrible to see. The sharks in the audience leaned forward

buzzing, their teeth glittering at the scent of blood. Somehow he finished, but the sharks were still hungry. In the middle of "Suicidio!" Scotto let out a sour high note, and someone in the tenth row loudly booed. She glared at the offender and delivered the most menacing phrases of the aria directly to him. No longer was this scene about the struggle between *Gioconda* and Barnaba: it was about the rivalry between Scotto and Callas. As the audience grew more partisan, Scotto crossed downstage and spat her lines directly into the public's teeth. By the final curtain, the War Memorial Opera House sounded like feeding time in the hyena cage. As always Scotto reserved the greatest

artistry of her acting for the curtain calls, assuming her mantle of magnificent faux-humility. By that time the violinists in the pit were climbing on their chairs to see what the riot was all about. Peter thinks opera is exciting enough without the taste of blood.

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Peter was appalled to read what Georg Solti said to Debbie Voigt ("Why are you so fat?") in the *parterre box* interview. As a man who has perhaps lingered a little too long at the more amply-supplied buffet tables of *lige*, Peter thinks Debbie should have whirled on that gnarled little maestro (Cobra and Mongoose time!) and shrieked, "And why are you so bald? Have you tried sucking dick? Face it, Georg, how many bald gay porno stars have you seen?"

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Earlier this year, Peter and Richard had the option of returning to the hideous City Center auditorium for *Salome* or *Aida* or trying something new. The upshot was, Richard swore he would never set foot again in that wretched airplane hangar on the Bay. The boys therefore opted to spend their 15th anniversary in Sarasota, which turned out be a fabulous operagoing experience.

Peter and Richard were delighted to learn that they were the youngest people in town. Everyone else was over 70, tanned, wearing white shorts, and chatting merrily on their cellphones as they sped through red lights in their convertibles. And the sun, the beaches, the pretty houses! It's like San Diego with prune juice. Beside the hotel swimming pool, the ancient men in baggy swimming trunks cast lustful looks at Richard and Peter, who looked like gogo gods in comparison.

Small lobbies and narrow staircases do not detract from this former movie theater's great acoustics. The first opera we heard was Humperdinck's *Königskinder*. The closest either of the boys had ever come to hearing this music was the time years ago Peter almost checked the recording out of the public library. The program notes screamed "Wagnerian", but the piece really sounds like R. Strauss by way of Korngold. The score deserves attention. The only miscalculation is the ending, which goes on for 15 minutes too long. Everyone assumed the show was over when the prince and the Goose Girl died to perfumey Straussian ephemera, but then the Fiddler and the villagers clumped in to sing a long and anticlimactic finale.

The role of the Goose Girl should appeal to all those budding Elsas and Sentas out there; Lisa Wilson was captivating, and apparently ready for Ariadne and Chrysothemis as well. Similarly, the amazing baritone Brian Davis (the Fiddler) should be doing Wolfram and Barak in major houses.

The big question with this show is of course, what about the geese? In a masterstroke of genius, the solution to this problem was to use arm puppets worked by ballet dancers. They were integrated into the rest of the action

OPERA IS NOT BULLFIGHT

OPERA IS NOT PORN

delightfully. Another dancer portrayed the Spirit of the Linden Tree who appears prominently in the first and third acts. Peter found her performance a bit wooden, though she fully deserved her solo bough.

Next night was *Manon*, heavily cut, thank God. The soprano, Cherie Caluda was just not up to it: this role is neither short nor light. The tenor, Barton Green, garnered huzzahs for his lovely soft singing. The chorus was tiny; the sets were OK. Everything did click in the Hotel Transylvanie scene: the set looked like a million bucks, and the women all looked suitably chic in lavish sepia-toned gowns. More importantly, the ensemble work in this scene was superb.

The final night was *Ernani*. The cast offered interesting ornamentation during the repeats, with loads of interpolated high notes adding fuel to the fire. Tenor Philip Webb was like a pint-size Pavarotti, and soprano Tamara Wright Acosta now and then reminded one of Caballe. The tiny baritone Igor Emilianov made gorgeous velvety bel canto sounds. Basso Ding Gao had obviously done some close study of Sam Ramey (gestures, facial expressions, projection), producing a result attractive enough that one regretted the omission of his cabaletta. But the most exciting part of this performance was that the singers actually showed enthusiasm for what they were doing. Their excitement leapt across the footlights, and one could finally understand why this opera (and all opera, for that matter) was so popular in Italy 150 years ago. The night whizzed by, a great finale for a wonderful trip that included the Ringling Art Museum, the Ringling Mansion, a gorgeous garden tour, a boat cruise, and plenty of delicious seafood. And someone offered Peter \$140 to go to his hotel room!

Richard Breath Wants to Know:

Did everyone hear June Anderson's Norma as broadcast from the Chicago Lyric? My dogs still haven't come out from behind the hot water heater. And those embellishments on the second verse of "Mira o Norma" stretta! My God, even Richard Bonyngé at his ditsiest never created such inappropriate ornaments!

What is it with that Liz Torres DiscoverCard commercial? One of the things she likes is "Cecilia Bartoli in something by Puccini". Tell us, Liz, is two minutes of madrigal in the second act of *Manon Lescaut* really worth whipping out the credit card?

In the latest "Opera Fanatic" catalog, Callas cheerleader John Ardoin lashes out at the Three Tenors, writing, "In 1972, there was only one tenor -- Franco Corelli." Really, Ardy? I'm sure this is news to Jon Vickers, Alfredo Kraus, Carlo Bergonzi, Richard Tucker, James McCracken and Nicolai Gedda!

— *Peter Hunter (with Richard Breath)*

Thank you, Mayor Giuliani, for appearing on our program this afternoon

GIULIANI: Thank you for inviting me here.

ANNOUNCER: I'm sure our Texaco Metropolitan Opera broadcast listeners are eagerly awaiting the opinions of New York's first fan of opera, so let's get right to it. Is there any opera which has particular meaning to you as mayor of this city?

GIULIANI: Oh, definitely. *Tosca*, for one. I mean, it's got one of your all-time great tragic heroes.

ANNOUNCER.: Ah yes, you refer of course to the courageous painter-patriot, Mario Cavaradossi.

GIULIANI: No, I mean Baron Scarpia.

ANNOUNCER.: Uh... excuse me?

GIULIANI: Scarpia! Scarpia! Don't tell me you never heard of the guy.

ANNOUNCER.: Actually, I am quite familiar with the character -- and like most people, I would be loath to refer to him as the "tragic hero" of the opera.

GIULIANI: Oh, you would, would you? Listen, Scarpia is one hell of a city administrator, busting his hump trying to make Rome work, and he's stopped at every turn by Cavaradossi and this *Tosca* broad, a couple of artsy-fartsy dilettante upper-West Side Ruth Messinger types. And what does Scarpia get for his trouble? A knife through the heart!

ANNOUNCER: But Scarpia was evil and ruthless and --

GIULIANI: Hey, they say the same thing about me, and a lot worse besides. But let me ask you something, buddy -- did *Tosca* or Cavaradossi ever run a major city? Did they even try? Well, let them give it a shot sometime, before they go around ranking on a stand-up guy like Scarpia!

ANNOUNCER: But really, Mr. Mayor -- In Act II, Scarpia tortures Cavaradossi, without mercy.

GIULIANI: Yeah, everybody makes a big fuss about that.

But nobody points out that during the whole opera, you don't see a single squeegee man! Coincidence? I don't think so.

ANNOUNCER: Well, that is certainly a very... original approach to the work.

GIULIANI: Thanks... of course, what with Scarpia getting the heave-ho, *Tosca* is kind of a downer.

ANNOUNCER.: Ah -- so you prefer opera buffa?

GIULIANI: Opera in the buff? That's disgusting.

ANNOUNCER: Comic opera.

GIULIANI: Oh. That's different. Yeah, call me a sentimental slob, but I'm a sucker for a happy ending.

ANNOUNCER: As in *Don Pasquale*? *Marriage of Figaro*?

GIULIANI: No, no! I'm talking about *Trovator*'.

ANNOUNCER.: I'm sorry, but I think most people would consider *Il Trovatore* a tragedy.

GIULIANI: What tragedy? Manrico, some kinda so-called troubadour, is going around playing music without a cabaret license -- your basic quality-of-life crime. Count Di Luna sees a problem -- and he deals with it.

ANNOUNCER.: He has Manrico put to death!

GIULIANI: Okay, not the way I would have handled it -- not with a first time offender. But hey, Manrico made his choice, he has to live with it. So to speak.

ANNOUNCER: But really, Mr. Mayor, *Il Trovatore* is one of the most grim operas in the repertoire -- babies being tossed into the flames --

GIULIANI: (*an audible shrug*) A typical day at Child Welfare.

ANNOUNCER: I must admit, when you said you liked operas with happy endings, I assumed you meant something more in the vein of *Hansel And Gretel*.

GIULIANI: (*incredulous*) Happy? You call that happy?

ANNOUNCER: What do you call it?

GIULIANI: Don't get me started. A couple of unaccompanied youths, vandalizing the forest with their damn bread crumbs and who knows what. They come upon a small business woman, trying to run a gingerbread factory -- not an easy thing to do with all those child labor laws out there. And what do these two delinquents do to the woman? They toss her into an oven. Now what kind of example is that opera

setting for the youth of this great city? Lemme tell you, if Hansel and Gretel tried to pull that kind of nonsense here in New York, they'd be tried as adults! A night or two at Riker's, and they'd think *Fidelio* is an opera buffa!

ANNOUNCER: Ummm... well, surely you have no objection to today's opera, *Così Fan Tutte*. A light-hearted comedy of romance and --

GIULIANI: Four hours of unprotected sex. I got a good mind to call the health department and shut the whole thing down. And just this morning, somebody tells me what "Così Fan Tutte" means -- "They All Do It" Now, if I've heard that excuse once, I've heard it a thousand times. People got to start taking responsibility for their actions, I say. I mean, look at this Bartoli broad canceling at the last minute today!

ANNOUNCER: I take it you disapprove.

GIULIANI: You take that right, pal. I'd like to sit her right down and say, "Look here, Bart. You're acting like an arrogant, insensitive egomaniac-- and there's only room in this town for one person like that."

ANNOUNCER: I understand you're on somewhat better terms with other luminaries of the lyric theater.

GIULIANI: Huh?

ANNOUNCER: You know some singers.

GIULIANI: Oh yeah. In fact, we just had a fund raiser for my re-election campaign with a whole bunch of singers. The theme of the evening was "Beverly Shills." Her friends call her "Burbles," did you know that? Yeah, and we had that tenor, you know, the one who isn't Pavarotti. He sang a couple of tunes, and in exchange, I promised to keep the health department out of his restaurant.

ANNOUNCER: Well... that certainly explains what I found in my paella.

GIULIANI: Your what?

ANNOUNCER: A Spanish dish. I take it you don't speak any foreign languages. You must certainly appreciate those new "Met titles."

GIULIANI: I think they stink. The operas should be sung in English. You know, these foreigners come over here, they ought to learn our language. Especially in the work place.

ANNOUNCER: Some opera aficionados suggest that there are not as many world class singers today as there were a

generation or so ago. Do you agree?

GIULIANI: I do, and I blame that on my predecessor, David Dinkins.

ANNOUNCER: I see by the clock we're running short on time. Why don't we end with some quick reactions to famous operas? For example, *Faust*.

GIULIANI: The art of the deal.

ANNOUNCER: *Otello*.

GIULIANI: Can't we all just get along?

ANNOUNCER: *L'Elisir D'Amore*.

GIULIANI: This is your brain on drugs.

ANNOUNCER: *Don Giovanni*.

GIULIANI: The hardest working man in show business.

ANNOUNCER: You admire Don Giovanni?

GIULIANI: Well, I'm not saying I approve of what he did. But like they say in the Catalog Aria, he did it to everybody, regardless of race, color, religion, creed, or national origin. That's certainly what we strive for in my administration.

ANNOUNCER: One last question, Mr. Mayor. What would you say to those who suggest that appearances of this sort are merely an election year stunt -- and that you are in fact not a real opera lover at all.

GIULIANI: Hey, a lot of people didn't take Caruso seriously either -- and he went on to become the greatest baritone that ever lived.

-- Michael Quinn

PARTERRE BOX is about remembering when opera was **QUEER** and **DANGEROUS** and **EXCITING** and making it that way **again**.

Famously dour Dr. Repertoire ("It's not that I don't like what you do, it's just that I feel you are capable of so much more!") lost his long face last month and, no, Zoloff hasn't a damn thing to do with it: thank instead a flurry of fine-to-excellent performances and recordings.

FAIR AND WARMER

Maestro Abel and his **Opera Français de New York** signalled the beginning of summertime a little early this year when they presented that warm-weather opera par excellence, Hector Berlioz' *Beatrice et Benedict*, on May 1. By a happy coincidence, the company's big-name diva, Susan Graham, was heard in *Les Nuits d'Été* earlier this season when she saved a NY Phil concert by jumping in for an ailing colleague. Maybe the memory of that happy accident helped color our perception of her performance of her ravishing second-act aria. Or maybe not-- Ms. Graham's silken mezzo sustained the long, long lines of this long, long piece with the utter repose born of flawless technique and the confidence of a real star. She dared to float out phrase after phrase in a supported real-voice mezzo-piano, a silver thread of tone that never so much as snagged.

But don't go supposing La Graham is one of those dreaded "finesse" singers! She was equally effective in the brilliant bits portraying the hyper-intelligent Beatrice's brittle sense of humor. Ms. Graham's keen sense of rhythm and forward movement in this music is all the more exhilarating these days, when tout le monde drags behind the beat even in bravura: look at poor Ruthie Swenson's dreary "Son vergin vezzosa!")

The heart of this opera is the dramatic movement from competition to mutual admiration and affection, as traversed by both Beatrice and her Benedict. Ms. Graham had a worthy foil in Gordon Gietz, whose "braggart soldier" owed less to Petruchio than it did to Elyot in *Private Lives*. The trick up wily Benedict's sleeve was Mr. Gietz's adorable tenor, sweet (if smallish), and cleverly projected. He landed every tongue-twisting word of the French libretto, and dazzled as well in the add-Shakespeare-and-stir spoken text. Mr. Gietz' finest moment was the Hate Duet early in the first act-- he and Ms. Graham stalked and challenged each other in a sexually-charged battle of wits, flashing roulades like rapiers.

As Hero, Elizabeth Futral certainly looked good enough to eat, but this soprano is by no means a dumb bunny. Whether trilling out the tricky roulades of "Je vais le voir" (waving an Italian flag like a demented one-girl pep squad) or floating the limpid top line of the Nocturne (which for my money beats "Soave sia il vento" all to hell), Ms. Futral revealed herself as one of the most attractive lyrico-leggerio sopranos in the world today.

Ms. Futral's partner in the "Nuit paisable" duet was Janis Taylor, whose velvety mezzo filled out the lower lines of the all-girl numbers with ease. Frankly, I would see the show again just to watch her trip the measures of the Siclienne, like Charlotte Greenwood as Empress Eugénie. I also took great pleasure in the old-pro routines as performed by Spiro Malas and Nicholas Kepros. No one else since Zero Mostel would have dared milk the *Epithaleme Grotesque* for so many laughs, but Mr. Malas succeeded brilliantly in this low-comic turn.

More about Yves: he is the best, no, the **only** conductor of French opera in the world today, (*And so young! So young and so fair!*) His apparently telepathic connection to his singers allows a subtlety and audacity of phrasing one hardly expects at a one-off event like this one. (The ever-modest maestro credits "geniuses" Graham and Gietz for the evening's stunning success) Yves (*the Kid -- Junior*) has his eye on such rarities as Hérold's *Zampa* and Offenbach's *Barbe-Bleu* for next season.

LOFNY's tradition of presenting the wittiest stagings in town is due in no small part to discreetly imaginative producer David Alden. This gentleman knows when he needs to give the music a nudge (the genre scenes in Act 1) and when he should retire discreetly into the background and let Berlioz' music soar (the women's trio). "Doing nothing" on stage is the hardest work of all, but the magical Mr. Alden makes it seem as easy as breathing scented summer air.

Intelligence and hard work made all the difference in The Center for Contemporary Opera's May 31 double bill, for, truth tell, the American operas they presented were not up to much musically.

Mark Bucci's *Tale for a Deaf Ear*, the curtain-raiser, was sunk by a plot that might have made a passable *Twilight Zone* episode, but is far too thin and scattered for any stage presentation, let alone an opera. A thoroughly unpleasant and whiny couple, Tracey and Laura (who obviously live in the same suburb as Sam and Dinah) sit around on a winter's afternoon knocking back scotch and snarling at each other until Tracey keels over from a heart attack. Next up we witness back-from-the-grave flashbacks from many lands -- sort of a round-the-world resurrection revue. Meanwhile, back in the fifties, Tracey recovers long enough to pick another fight ("How can you criticize my family, what with that degenerate your father!"), then buys it for keeps. A heavily-sedated Laura murmurs the immortal curtain line, "Of what celestial coincidence am I the guinea pig?", a text Evelyn Lear herself could not make work. Having painted himself into a corner dramatically, Bucci can offer nothing more than generic "American opera": a weak solution of Menotti and Barber, with pastiche providing a little variety in the vignettes.

The cast climbed their uphill climb with as much dignity as is possible; Patricia Dell and Elem Eley in particular deserve praise for their spirited performances in the impossibly overlong "modern" scenes. And, while her

Italian needs a bit of polishing, Joanna Johnston as the courtesan revealed a rich lyric soprano and real stage presence. Director Charles Maryan succeeded in introducing a bit of variety into the one-emotion arguments of the thoroughly unpleasant Gateses.

If you guessed that an operatic *Bald Soprano* would sound a lot like Poulenc, well, you were right. Composer Martin Kalmanoff efficiently adopts the French composer's technique of exploiting cheap tunes to delineate the shallowness and vapidness of the very British Smiths and Martins. The result is an attractive if overlong chamber opera, admirably sung and energetically acted by all. The rich-voiced and rubber-faced Lynn Owen (Mrs. Martin) **would** have stolen the show had not Keith Howard (Fire Chief) beaten her to it with dead-on reading of his shaggy-dog patter song. While I cannot say I bought into Mr. Maryan's dramatic concept for this piece (surely Ionesco is funnier when it is underplayed), I salute his imagination and the cast's virtuous movement.

Next season, I look forward to better-quality repertoire from this company. But I could not hope for better performers.

Two spectacular summer releases from Lyric Distribution (516-484-5100) acolytes belong in your VCR. A 1979 *Salome* offers what might seem an unlikely Princess of Judea, the Rubenesque Montserrat Caballé. But this is, in fact, one of the legendary diva's very favorite roles, and she is most convincing as the royal brat, acting with sincerity and a wicked sense of humor -- take a look at her angelic smile when she asks for the head of Jokanaan. Only Delta Burke could get so much mileage out of a pout, and (this is no secret), La Burke lacks Montsi's pipes. She **sings** the whole role, ravishingly, with plenty of voice to spare for the big climaxes at the end of the show. And, yes, (I knew you would ask this), La Caballe dances the dance herself. I know a lot of 120-pound sopranos who **dream** of moving this gracefully. Norman Bailey is in strong voice (and what appears to be Uma Thurman's *Pulp Fiction* wig) as Jochanaan, and Fritz Uhl and Josephine Veasey do heavy camping as the Herods. Julius Rudel whips the provincial orchestra into quite decent shape.

Big voices and big hair headline *Great Moments in Opera*, a compilation of spots from *The Ed Sullivan Show*. Met stalwarts like Robert Merrill, Roberta Peters, and Richard Tucker are seen in vintage form. Anna Moffo shows up looking like Elizabeth Taylor and sounding like hell; Eileen Farrell is the Bizarro Anna, singing like a goddess while dressed in a hand-me-down from Kate Smith. Some segments disappoint: an obviously uncomfortable Lily Pons is effortful in "Je suis Titania, and Maria Callas' *Tosca* scene looks like the lighting was designed by Zinka Milanov. But, on the other hand, we get to hear the teams of Corelli/Tebaldi and Sutherland/Horne at their respective peaks in glorious color and well-balanced sound. Get it!

Dr. Repertoire