

OPER A QUEEN?



SHARE THE BOX WITH A BUDDY!

Nothing says "*I want you*" like *parterre box*, the queer opera zine. Give him a gift subscription for only \$15, or \$35 for 3. Send check or money order (payable to James Jorden) and the name and address of your best buddy to:

www.parterre.com

www.parterre.com

parterre box

the queer opera zine



#27: Debris

When your tongue gets a hard-on

in the middle of the bacchanale from *Samson et Dalila*, you know it isn't from watching Marilyn Horne or some other maxi-mezzo shake her groove thing in a thong bikini. No, of course not. You waited through that boring evening of opera just to see those hunky guys pirouetting and leaping to the driving castanet rhythms, flashing their boxes, pecs and booties. That's the glory of opera ballet.

Yeah, I know opera ballet gets a bad rap, but, let's face it, that Romanian import the Met hired for fifty bucks to sing Venus in *Tannhauser* is lying under a rock for the first twenty minutes of the opera for a damn good reason. Just because her name is Venus does not necessarily mean she's going to look like Madonna, and you can't always count on those layers of chiffon to conceal her cottage cheese thighs and bay-window midriff. So much better to focus on those cute guys in the Grecian tunics doing lascivious Kama Sutra things. Those quads! Those glutes! Those calves! And Jimmy's towel is soaked with sweat well before we reach the climax of the Penisberg ballet!

Those savvy composers who ruled the Paris Opera in the 19th century knew very well that middle-aged bourgeois breeders didn't go there for the music: they wanted to ogle female flesh in a venue where there was no chance of a police raid. Now that opera is (rightfully) run by queers, it's time to return opera ballet to the fags. To begin with, the Triumphal scene of *Aida* is due for a naked overhaul. Don't you ever fantasize about using some loinclothed buttocks as an oxygen mask? The Dance of the Hours in *La Gioconda* really is not there just so idiots from Great Neck can hum "Hello Muddah, Hello Faddah" as a gesture of their cultural sophistication. And the Met needs to restore the Walpurgisnacht to the last act of their ghastly *Faust*. Fifteen minutes of nymphs and satyrs sucking and fucking would clear the air before all that shrieking in the final scene—accompanied, these days, by the sound of subscription renewals being torn to shreds. Let's face it, the audience is so bored with the current level of casting in these big operas that they long for a glimpse of anything with a bulge. (Jerry Hadley in his Guess? jeans doesn't count, obviously!)

In fact, how about interpolating ballets into all the operas in the repertoire? Even if the composer neglected to write any dance music, a talented arranger could surely come up with a Verdian pastiche of "Turn the Beat Around" or a Bizet-flavored rewrite of "It's Raining Men" for the occasion. And I'm not talking about post-modern pep squad stuff like that "choreography" in the Met's *Lucia* a few seasons back. (Man, that production really needed a show doctor—like, say, Kervorkian!) There is one faint glimmer of hope for the future of opera ballet at the Met. The guy who runs the place picks all his wives and mistresses from the corps. So long as the Big Bad Wolf continues his reign, the ballet will have a place at the Met.

The Ballet Bandit

As La Cieca predicted last year in these pages, management won't have **Matthew Epstein** to kick around any more. The legendary artists' manager is taking over as Artistic Director of the Chicago Lyric Opera, where he has served as artistic consultant for several years. The bigger news, though, is that he is going to divest himself of his much-coveted stable of CAMI artists -- ranging from Golden Age megastars **Horne** and **Ramey** to barihunks nouveaux **Gilfrey** and **Skjovhus** -- in order to avoid the appearance of conflict of interest. (Well, wouldn't you be daunted by the prospect of contract negotiations with Epstein on both sides of the table?) Time will tell if the Hogtown gig will turn out more positively than his abortive incumbency at the Welsh National Opera.

Frankly, La Cieca wonders if is not time for Epstein to find new worlds to conquer. Despite his celebrated knack for "positioning" artists through meticulous choice of repertoire and venue (as demonstrated by his brilliant success selling **Catherine Malfitano** as today's ideal "singing actress"), Epstein seems to have dropped the ball for client **Renee Fleming**. A three-year experiment with "jugendlich" repertoire (Arabella, the Marschallin, Desdemona, Amelia in *Simon Boccanegra*, Eva, Rusalka) left the soprano making unhappy noises about the difficulty of "singing in middle voice all night against a loud orchestration". Epstein's belated (if wise) decision to move her away from heavy rep has broken the hearts of Fleming Flappers, who were just salivating over rumored appearances by their goddess in everything from *Ernani* to *Elektra*.

And now no one knows just exactly what Fleming is: French lyric? Mozartean? Bel canto diva? Recitalist? Modern music lady? With so many one-off events (and so many cancellations!) littering her schedule, it's hard to make out a clear pattern. Anyway, let us hope that whoever is now taking the reins of Ms. Fleming's unruly career will advise her that saying "no" in the first place is an infinitely better career move than saying "yes", then

questo e quello

changing your mind.

La Cieca was just wondering if we really are being fair when we pass judgement on singers' careers, praising them for their solid technique (which wins them "vocal longevity") or damning them for singing out of their fach (leading to "premature burnout")

Could it not be that some voices by their very natures fade early, whereas others are sturdier? Think, for example, of the way some people retain a youthful physical appearance and vigor into their sixties, whereas others are worn out at 40. There must be some (unalterable) genetic component that is a factor in the life-span of a voice. Certainly such singers as **Richard Tucker** or **Leonie Rysanek** performed a wide repertoire and, God knows, never spared themselves onstage -- but their careers lasted until the ages of 62 (cut sort by a heart attack) and 70 respectively.

Besides genetics, technique, fach and general health, there is also the matter of making an informed artistic choice to sing in a manner that can lead to vocal damage and thus shorten the career. But a "short" career may very well be a glorious one, as in the case of **Callas**, **Scotto**, or **Sills**, who made up in intensity whatever their careers may have lacked in longevity.

And so I think we are misguided to debate the various "causes" for the length (or brevity) of a given singer's career. The reasons are complex, based on the interaction of many different factors, including some (such as events in the personal life of the singer) that we can never know.

These thoughts were among those staggering through the wide open spaces of La Cieca's lovely noggin while she watched **Werner Schroeter's** film *Love's Debris* (reviewed elsewhere in this issue by *The Ultimate Arbiter*). Cieca really had thought the Eurotrash movement was over, but this film suggests there is life in the turtleneck-ponytail-and-shades crowd yet. I suppose the director was trying for a loose, unstructured feel in this film; that certainly is what he achieved. Whatever this film lacks in structure it more than makes up for in homoerotic content. **Sergey Larin** quotes Catullus to a dewy Euroboytoy while the two exchange languid glances. Later, as **Marta Moedl** sings Greta off in the distance, the two men play a tense game of hide-and-seek in a Victorian bedroom. Later the tenor sings "Amor ti vieta" (quite stylishly) to his long-lashed friend as a naked youth rides horseback in the

background. (Earlier, the same unclothed fellow rolled around in a giant hoop, perhaps thinking he was playing Cora in *Footsteps on the Ceiling*. All he was missing was the rompers. But anyway.) The **Ciesinski** sisters find Sapphic subtext in various soprano-mezzo duets (including what must be the lousiest rendition ever of "Ah! rimembranza" -- with Katherine in white tie and tails!) and do a little same-sex necking while Mr. Larin sings *Fidelio*.

Laurence Dale and the director commiserate about AIDS and then have what appears to be a lovers' spat. In his defense, I should point out that Mr. Dale has plenty to be angry about-- Schroeter's cut of the film includes three consecutive takes of the tenor cracking the high B in his "Werther" aria. **Gail Gilmore** shows up with an "insignificant other" in tow: we never are vouchsafed a clue whether the silent middle-aged lady with her is a girlfriend, abn agent, a personal assistant, or just somebody Gilmore met on the plane.

At the heart of the film are interviews and performance segments with the three elderly divas **Moedl**, **Anita Cerquetti** and **Rita Gorr**. Cerquetti gets the lion's share of attention, which includes letting the director dress her up in '50s drag and miming her recording of "Casta diva". She is indeed a great lady, and, befitting her goddess status, remains elusive on most subjects, including the reasons for her very early retirement.

Moedl is as forthright as Cerquetti is oracular. We see the German diva in a most intelligent and moving performance of the Old Countess, and she is engagingly down-to-earth in interview as well. These "old-diva" bits are well worth sitting through the other sillinesses of the film. (More about this film, as judged by *The Ultimate Arbiter*, elsewhere in the zine.)

A new acquaintance of La Cieca's tells this story:

I was in town to hear *Parsifal* at the Met a couple years ago. I was really tired & overwhelmed when it was over, but friends insisted going out for a drink after. We ended up at "Rounds", the notorious hustler bar on 3rd Avenue.

So I look around and I see, sitting alone in the corner of this dive -- The Great Man Himself, who after 6 hours of Kunst is apparently looking to round off his evening with a little play-for-pay. Feeling naughty, I call over the hottest,

most expensive-looking boy in the in the place, slip him 50 bucks and say, "Just five minutes of your time. I want to play a joke on someone. Just go over to that man in the corner and get up close & personal with him. Really come on to him. You see him, the guy in the corner?"

And the hustler says, "Oh, you mean *Jimmy*?"

La Cieca has never tried writing an opera (her masterpiece is her day-to-day life), but she is firmly of the opinion that a librettist/composer of an opera sets himself an impossible task when he makes his leading character so utterly passive (both verbally and musically) as **Hans Pfitzner** does his *Palestrina*. After all, the "agon" in "protagonist" means "struggle" or "contest": drama without dramatic action is an oxymoron. Honestly, all these fin-de-siecle ruminations on the pleasures of renunciation must have rung truer back then than they do now. The idea of personal loss leaving an artist permanently blocked has since become such a cliché that we cannot take it seriously. As a friend who walked out after the first act of this Lincoln Center Festival production commented, "Tell him to take a Prozac and get back to work!"

Palestrina shows us for three hours the conniving of the corrupt and/or dimwitted leaders of the Roman Church; and then makes the emotional payoff a house call by the Pope. Hey, who elected this guy in the first place: those same jerks who were so mean to poor **Thomas Allen** in the second act. (Though by far the sleaziest of the lot is the **Kim Begley** character: you can tell he's evil because he eats grapes.)

How to describe the music? Well, suppose you make a highlights disc of the best music from any one the lesser Strauss operas. *Palestrina* sounds like all the stuff you would leave out.

My favorite thing about this production (other than the stellar and well-cast supporting players) was the detailed but self-effacing production by **Nikolaus Lehnhoff**. Work this finely-crafted deserves a "Meistersinger" to be seen in.

Sergei Leiferkus has still not convinced me he is a baritone, or, for that matter, a singer, but he did look scrummily daddyesque with his shaved head and leather double. Alas, the butch effect was a bit diluted by his steam-furnace lisp.

inade by

the music
by Tuzar

Our publisher **James** did his Andrea Chenier routine on an internet discussion board recently, defending this zine (in its online incarnation) against charges of obscenity. The ensuing discussion on the difference between "sexually explicit" and "pornographic" art has got La Cieca thinking about the importance of intention in other questions of art. Specifically, she thinks think intention is what separates High Camp from Low Camp. The practitioner of High Camp **knows** what s/he is doing is tacky, but does it anyway, ironically. Low Camp knows has neither irony nor a clue.

What brought this to mind is the CD currently playing over and over on infinite-loop repeat: **Regina Resnik** singing "Not since Nineveh" from a London studio recording of *Kismet*. This numbo has a higher cheese content than Velveeta, but that doesn't faze La Resnik: she gives it her considerable all.

La Resnik diva shares a distinction with **Mae West**: they are two of the few FEMALE drag queens. The vocal line lies precisely on the diva's formidable register break, so she has to flip in and out of chest constantly while wrapping her tongue around material like:

Where oh where
Can you compare
High life
To the life
You'll find here?
Not since Nineveh
Not since Tyre
Not since Babylon
Turned to mire
For a sin of a kind
We never mind here!

Fabulous!

Where the hell did summer go? La Cieca really had planned to get a tan to rival that of "Malibu" Debbie Voigt, but instead retained her fabled fishbelly pallor. Oh, well, there's plenty to look forward to once The New York Season starts:

At the Met, La Voigt's golden voice and newly-svelte

ineerade by

maestro always kept the music right on the beat, with a strong but controlled sense of forward momentum. The difference between this show and, say, the Met's soggy *Puritani* earlier this year is startling: I think the Rossini is actually longer by the clock, but this evening flew by, whereas the Bellini just sat there in a lump.

Cieca was also intrigued by Crutchfield's editorial decisions. He interpolated a duet from *Bianca e Falliero* (arranged for Elena and Malcolm) into Act One and recomposed a recitative or two. I think that in this concert setting he might have cut a more deeply: the performance was something over three hours long, with only a single short intermission. (The baritone's spurious aria was an obvious candidate for pruning.) My only other quibble (and minor it is, too) is that some of the "a due" cadenzas were needlessly fussy and complex, not showing off the singers voices to any particular advantage. Given that the maestro was on excellent and self-effacing behavior through the rest of the evening, even such momentary showing-off does seem a pity.

The biggest delight of the evening was the spectacular **Vivica Genaux** as Malcolm; the thunderous ovation following "Mura felici" surely must be a "star-is-born" moment. (Were the maestro 100% dedicated to authenticity, he would have encouraged her to take a "bis" of the cabaletta.) This is singing that is not only brilliant and exciting, but musically expressive as well: the mezzo caught (perhaps more precisely than did Rossini) the character of the headstrong youth. Ours is an era rich (perhaps glutted) in fast-moving low voices, La Genaux's instrument is something special: wine-rich below the staff, fleet in midrange, and thrillingly pingy all the way up to high B. In short, this artist has all she needs to be a very big star indeed.

Ms. Genaux's success threw a bit of shade over the evening's official prima donna, **Marguerite Krull**, who certainly delivered the goods as well. This "mezzo-soprano" (surely that is not right-- she is obviously a soprano!) boasts agility and musicianship in every way equal to Ms. Genaux's ("Tanti affetti" sparkled); lacking was only a little fire necessary to bring the character to life. The concert setting could be blamed for this slight "sameness" in her performance -- the sight of the pre-Raphaelite Ms. Krull slowly drifting across a lake in a small bark (per the stage directions) might effectively have added the requisite glamour to her portrayal.

Then there were the tenors. It is perhaps unnecessary

will be the U.S. pren

silhouette will make something very special of *Ariadne auf Naxos* and -- especially-- *Lohengrin*. The Wagner will as well afford us the opportunity (at long last!) to hear The Other Deborah (**Polaski**), not to mention tenor discovery **Johan Botha**'s first local Swan Knight. A luxe cast (and then some) promise to light up *The Rake's Progress* (**Jerry Hadley**, **Dawn Upshaw**, **Sam Ramey**, and sumptuous substitute **Denyce Graves** behind the beard). La Graves later shares Dalila with debutante **Olga Borodina**, yet more proof that this is truly The Golden Age of the Mezzo-soprano. La Cieca will be there for Diva Excitement when **Eva Marton** returns to the Met as *Turandot* and **Kiri te Kanawa** says farewell in *Capriccio*, and Enzo Bordello has already announced he's swooping in the last week of the season for Catherine Malfitano's *Emilia Marty*!

You wouldn't know it to listen to those guys over there at Sybil's Barn, but opera flourishes lots of places besides the Met. City Opera's ambitious productions of *Macbeth* and *Iphigenie en Tauride* sound most promising, and L'Opera Francais de New York will, I trust, work their familiar magic on rare concerts of *La Jolie Fille de Perth* and *Barbe-Bleu*.

In between, La Cieca will pass the time listening to some recent and not-so recent history courtesy of Lyric Distribution. Their new releases include *Moise* (Ramey, **Gasdia**, **Verrett**), *La Juive* (**Carreras**, **Tokady**, **Siepi**, **Merritt**, **Gazarian**), *Otello* (**Vinay**, **Stella**, **Taddei**, **Beecham**) and *Turandot* (**Nilsson**, **L. Price**, **Di Stefano**).

The inauguration of the "Bel Canto at Caramoor" project, a concert performance of Rossini's *La donna del lago*, was as successful an operatic presentation as La Cieca has seen this season. This is the kind of performance that can make you believe in Rossini as a first-rate composer of serious opera.

Now, La Cieca know this is going to sound grudging, based on her low opinion of **Will Crutchfield**'s ragged Handel performances at Mannes and her often-stated distaste for his boy-genius public persona (that part still stands), but that man can conduct some Rossini. Startlingly shorn of his "Brahmsian locks" (did I hear someone shout, "Philistins! A moi! A moi!"), the maestro led the Orchestra of St. Luke's superbly, drawing forth sounds that were crisp and yet rich, especially in the brass. More importantly, the

for me to note at this late date that the "Rossini tenor" is hardly one of La Cieca's favorite voice types; nevertheless, she supposes we're stuck with them if we want to do operas like *La donna del lago*. At least last night there were only two of them, and neither was in any way painful to listen to. **Bruce Fowler's** accuracy and musicianship in the role of Giacomo were altogether admirable, and the color of the middle voice was quite haunting. But he just seemed to lack the oomph for the de rigueur high C's and D's. More vital-sounding (and a truly Walter Scottian scene-chewer of an actor as well) was **Matthew Chellis** in the villain role of Roderigo. His voice is certainly light for the dramatic phrases of the Act One finale (this is a baritenor role if ever there was one), but he compensated with pingy declamation of the text. For my money, he was the winner in the Act 2 "Battle of the High C's" trio.

Preceding the show was a arch and semi-informative talk on Walter Scott and associated trivia written and performed by a little man who called himself **Barrymore Laurence Scherer**. Mr. Scherer, whose persona suggests **Clifton Webb** as reimagined by **Gilbert and Sullivan**, is a critic for the Wall Street Journal: his popinjay manner is a perfect precis of corporate America's impression of the artist as a whimsical frill on society.

The Caramoor estate offers plenty of opportunities for strolling and picnicking a la Glyndebourne; though La Cieca does not know if at Glyndebourne one sees so many people in Bermuda shorts noshing on Safeway pasta salad and Entenmann's coffee cake. La Cieca just wants to observe that for an opera performance out in the woods this was not at all a cruisy experience. Let me take that back. I did see an attractive dark young man, quite alone at the edge of the garden, reading. One wondered, of course. A quick glance over the young man's shoulder confirmed our suspicions (hopes?): the book was *Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*. Otherwise, all the fags were up on stage, or else (in the traditional manner of upstate NY fairies) deja schockered by the time they arrived.

Now that the summer is lurching to a halt, dear Dr. **Repertoire** is busy (as I am sure you all are) getting ready his questions for the Texaco Opera Quiz. He has come up with 10 questions he really would like to hear some answers to, but, my dears, La Cieca can tell you right now they have no chance of making it onto the

air. What do you think of these . . .

Questions You'll Never Hear on the Opera Quiz:

1. The panelists have heard the first act of today's opera. Now we are going to ask them their frank opinion of today's performers, and whom they would have cast in these parts instead.
2. In a related question, what is your opinion of the sound quality of Metropolitan Opera broadcasts? Mr. Ardoin, I believe your hand was up first...
3. Following are statements by Will Crutchfield. The panelists are asked to identify which person or institution Mr. Crutchfield is patronizing in each statement.
4. Tell us, Mr. Innaurato, what the hell kind of drugs were you on when you wrote that piece about Mirella Freni?
5. Mr. Hampson, would you describe for us in detail your interpretation of "Winterreise"?
6. The following recording consists of five sopranos singing the "Lied des Lulu" from Berg's opera. The panelists are asked to identify...
7. This question is for Mr. Alagna. Is true that Ms. Gheorghiu can suck the chrome off a fender? (Oops, all the hands are up, including some in the audience...)
8. Maestro Weitach, who is seated at the Yamaha, will now play the main theme from Corigliano's *Ghosts at Versailles* and the theme from TV's *Dynasty*; the panelists will be asked to guess which is which.
9. The questioner is a veteran operagoer who frequently enjoyed anonymous sex in standing room at the Old Met. He would like to know where the panelists go for a quickie at Lincoln Center, and what the action is like there.

and, finally...

10. So, Mr. Jorden, exactly what is a 'queer opera zine'?

Performing Wagner in concert with the New York Philharmonic, Deborah Voigt looked wonderfully

feminine in black beaded silk with a deep V neckline, full sleeves, and a flowing "Watteau" back. She wore her golden-blond hair in a casual bubblecut that sets off perfectly her huge and brilliant blue eyes. As **Louella Parsons** might have said, "Debbie has never been lovelier."

Now, the singing. Given that the Wesendonk songs and the Liebestod lie a bit low to show off the brilliant top notes that are the glory of Ms. Voigt's voice, the soprano did herself proud, singing with a rich legato and crystal-clear German diction. Her approach to these songs is simple and dignified, but eloquent: she treats them as Lieder, not mini-operas. She was at her best in the troubled "Im Triebhaus" and in a "Traume" rich in repose. I cannot say **Maestro Masur** was of any particular help in creating a mood for this cycle: his direction sounded rushed and perfunctory. I would love to hear Ms. Voigt do these songs in recital with piano, perhaps in a smaller venue, where the lush color of her middle voice could shine through more clearly.

La Voigt has announced that she will not sing Isolde in the theater for at least a few more years; her performance of the Liebestod tonight is a glimpse of a real treasure in store. I was particularly impressed with the way the soprano "terraced" the phases, adding more voice bit by bit until her secure opening piano surged above the staff in a mighty fountain of sound. This is a most impressive work-in-progress; as La Voigt continues to perform this music, she will add even more subtleties of phrasing and color to what is already a warm and powerful reading. For the record, she took the final "hoechste Lust" in a single breath, with plenty of air to spare to spin out the final high F#.

The program opened with **Hans Werner Henze's** 1972 "Tristan", an example of what might be called "maximalism". The huge orchestra included a lot of percussion doodads I had never seen before: at times it looked unclear what the players were about to perform -- music or a hysterectomy. La Cieca wasn't bothered by the bombast or the length (well, it was a *bit* long) and actually I found the exotic colors and sound combinations fascinating. This would probably be a great piece to listen to on acid.

La Voigt was bubbly and charming in the greenroom afterward, introducing her dressmaker to the assembled fans, and even putting in a nice word or two about some queer opera zine or other.

LA CIECA

OUT WEST

My lover Doug and I arrived in Santa Fe on Sunday, August 3. No opera on Sunday, but because a friend of a friend of Doug's was playing the role of Dorine in Moliere's *Tartuffe*, we decided to go. It was set in a modern Paris, with the Eiffel Tower and all.

The first of the five operas that we saw at Santa Fe this year was Verdi's *La Traviata*. As Doug and I were approaching the Santa Fe Opera Theater, we were anxious to see whether our favorite cheerleading parking attendant would be there this year. We were so disappointed to find a garden-variety non-cheerleading attendant instead.

Patricia Racette, whom I had seen as Emmeline last year, was a bit iffy Violetta at first. Her coloratura in "Sempre libera" was laborious. Hearing her struggle with it, I was certain that she would end the cabaletta come scritto, so I was quite surprised that she took the E flat at the end. On the other hand, she was an excellent Violetta in Acts 2 and 3, even if she hammed it up a bit. Raymond Very's Alfredo was simply poor. He has a somewhat whiny smallish character tenor voice and didn't seem to have true legato. He didn't seem able to modulate dynamics nor change tonal colors very well, either. He just sang the notes rather unimaginatively. Too bad that Neil Shicoff (who was in town to be with his girlfriend who was singing Zdenka) did not sing Alfredo instead. William Stone's Giorgio Germont was quite competent, if not strong enough for me to recall his singing a week later (namely now). The costume designs struck me as lacking in invention: despite variations in color and trim, they all somehow looked the same. Sets were traditionally pretty. Violetta was made to look old instead of sick in the final act. I didn't realize how tiny the stage itself was until I saw that the stage didn't have enough space to have two dancers (bull and bullfighter) in Act 3.

On Tuesday, August 5, we saw an English version (by Andrew Porter) of Mozart's *Così fan tutte*. I saw *Così* in Japanese almost ten years ago in Tokyo, and I remember enjoying it quite a lot, understanding almost all words. Being a non-native speaker of English, I didn't expect to understand all that much, but I managed to hear enough. (However, I

didn't get the second word in "Come scoglio." "Like WHAT!?!?" It turned out to be "Gibraltar".)

I am normally a voice-first, appearance-second opera fan, but when three of the four leading roles looked the part and sang decently enough, I found myself being less fussy and actually enjoyed it quite a bit. Fiordiligi was sung by Alwyn Mellor, who looked like a hybrid of young Edita Gruberova and slimmer Suzanne Mentzser, and Dora-bella by Mary Ann McCormick, who looked like a hybrid of Renee Fleming and Dolora Zajick, if such hybrids are at all possible. They had the same dresses and hairstyle, like Gruberova and Ziegler in the Ponnelle film, suggesting the permutability of the sisters. I had always thought of Despina as a young woman, perhaps only a few years older than Fiordiligi, so Judith Christin, who looked more like Marcellina than Despina, was a bit disorienting as the cunning maid. I really don't think much of her voice, but she is a great actor and she is undeniably musical. It seems that Santa Fe Opera suffers from the lack of good tenors this year. Robert Swenson, who sang Ferrando, has a nondescript voice. Thomas Barrett, who sang Guglielmo, was a better vocalist, but the best among the male singers was Timothy Nolen, who sang and played Don Alfonso well.

We saw *Arabella* on Wednesday, August 6. We were delighted to see our favorite cheerleading attendant w.c.s back and doing her routine as before!

Arabella and *Capriccio* are the two Strauss operas that I have most difficulties enjoying. In late 1980s, the Bavarian State Opera, under Wolfgang Sawallisch, performed *Arabella* for the first time in Japan. The title role was double-cast with Anna Tomowa-Sintow and Lucia Popp. I attended its Japanese premiere performance, with Tomowa-Sintow and Thomas Allen as Mandryka. Lucia Popp, however, got the telecast, which I also watched. Even these two fine singers didn't make me warm up to the character back then. While seeing Janice Watson sing *Arabella* ably in Santa Fe, I realized why I didn't like *Arabella*: she is such a hypocrite! Despite what Strauss and Hofmannstahl wanted to have us believe, *Arabella* strikes me as a spoiled daughter of an extremely dysfunctional family. She pretends not to notice the victimized dire plight of her sister Zdenka and plays along with her parents, donning pretty clothes and enjoying every bit as the ONLY daughter of Count and Countess Waldner. Those sweet, kind-sounding words that she occasionally tosses at Zdenka sound suspiciously superficial.

Back to the performance at Santa Fe: the sets were quite wonderful, and costumes were also great. Janice Watson, who I thought was a fantastic Daphne last summer, sang *Arabella* sympathetically, but perhaps because of my aversion to the character, she didn't sound as good this year. Dawn Kotoski, who looked like Steffi Graf, was a warm,

ardent Zdenka with beautiful soprano voice. She must make a fine Composer. (Isn't the Komponist in *Ariadne* a soprano role, although many mezzos sing it successfully?)

Now, I don't know whether it was the director (John Cox)'s intention, or it just happened that way, but both David Pittman-Jennings's Mandryka and Gert Henning-Jensen's Matteo were so stereotypically gay that they just didn't look like they were in love with *Arabella*! The way Manryka waved his hands around, the way Matteo scampered up the stairs to *Arabella*'s room from the Cabbies' Ball, were just definitively nelly! I was left with a strong impression, that Mandryka and Matteo will one day come to terms with their sexuality and then run away together, leaving the sisters behind!

Tracy Dahl's Fiakermilli: I had seen her twice before, but I didn't realize how tiny she was! With her squeaky high voice, she was positively freakish. Come to think of it, the Fiakermilli is such a thankless role. Dahl was much better as Iris the following night.

On Thursday, August 7, we saw Handel's *Semele*. The main reason I decided to visit Santa Fe this year was to see it, as I had seen the other operas before (except, of course, the brand-new *Ashoka's Dream*). I am so happy that the performance was so good!!! Singers, the conductor, sets, costumes, directing. Even the musicians who had sounded like a Class C orchestra earlier played beautifully under John Nelson.

Elizabeth Futral's *Semele* really looked the part and sang beautifully. She started out a little cold in Act 1, but by the time she was rejoicing over her multiple orgasm in "Endless pleasure, endless love," she was quite hot. Her "O sleep, why dost thou leave me?" was heart-felt and sensuous, and her "Myself, I shall adore" was simply a knockout. For a soprano leggero, Futral has a feminine voice that is not overly bright (like, say, Tracy Dahl's) which is most appealing in such "Kathy Battle" roles as *Semele*. The only thing I was not completely enthusiastic about was that her coloratura in Act 3 "I ever am granting" sounded a bit strained. When I asked her backstage if she had any plan to sing in Japan, she told me that she was going to sing Stella opposite Renee Fleming's Blanche in the upcoming San Francisco *A Streetcar Named Desire*, which the SF Opera may take to Japan if it is a success locally. (So, you San Franciscans, do you know who will sing Stanley? Chris Merritt? Ben Heppner? Thomas Hampson? Sam Ramey? Marilyn Horne?)

Patricia Spence was a splendid Juno except in big moments like "Iris, Hence Away," maybe because the performances of Horne and Philene Wannelle were imprinted on my memory. (Doug, on the other hand, bitterly disagrees with me and says that she was a splendid Juno

throughout.) Spence was really funny. I thought that I had become such a jaded opera queen that I would never burst out laughing during a performance, but the way her Juno sarcastically mimicked Futral's coloratura during "Myself I shall adore" like a goldfish gasping for air was so hilarious I couldn't help but laugh! Spence also sang Semele's sister Ino, wearing a different wig. Here, Doug is less appreciative than I am. I thought that she was a sympathetic, feminine enough Ino.

Tracy Dahl moved really well and fast as Iris, and was cute and funny. Now, what can I say about Rockwell Blake's Jupiter? I had heard him in the theater only once, in Tokyo, where he sang 11 high C's instead of usual 9 in "Ah, mes amis," so I sort of expected him to interpolate as many high C's as possible, but I guess you can't do that in Handel. He can sing rapid passages with ease, to be sure, but his voice is so ordinary!. It was like hearing Martha Argerich playing Liszt's Mephisto Waltz No. 3 on an old inexpensive upright piano. (Doug says Blake sounds like a really good Stefan Zucker.) Other singers were all competent to good in Semele, although I didn't care too much for countertenor Lawrence Zazzo, who sang Athamas. Compared with the many really excellent countertenors of today, Zazzo was nondescript on the voice and the technique departments.

I really loved John Copley's direction. Baroque operas come alive when they are a bit overdone, with sight gags and what have you. At the beginning of act 2, Spence's Juno uses a telescope to desperately find out what Jupiter is up to, which was really funny. Somnus wears smelly socks that almost makes Iris faint.. The way Jupiter appears to snatch Semele from her wedding was so Grand-Kabuki! And the cameo appearance of Semele's son Bacchus (a gym queen in a g-string) climaxed the best of the five operas at Santa Fe this year.

The final opera we saw was Peter Lieberon/Douglas Penick's *Ashoka's Dream*. It really had nice sets and costumes. The story moves rather quickly, but it felt as if it were going very slowly thanks to the mostly static music. It really sounds like an oratorio rather than an opera. Ashoka (also spelled Asoka) is a familiar historical figure to me, since we learn about him in history classes in junior and senior high schools in Japan. So I guess I know more background knowledge about him than most American audiences. What struck me so strange about the opera is that the name of Buddha was not mentioned a single time. It is like the name of Jesus was not mentioned at all in an opera about Saul's conversion to Paul. Because of its oratorio-like music, Act 1 Ashoka (an angry, violent man) didn't sound angry enough and Act 2 Ashoka (a pacifist, enlightened man) didn't sound peaceful enough, either. Given the circumstances, I think Kurt Ollmann sang the title role quite well.

I agree with Richard Wyndham about Clare Gormley's Lakshmi. She had some lovely music to sing, unlike some other people (such as Beau Palmer's Raga, John Atkins' Kroda, and Bruce Baumer's Madu, whose "music" was more or less declamatory recitative). Lorraine Hunt as Triraksha was luxury casting, but frankly, she could have been better used in a different opera with more beautiful music.

Doug and I had a fun lunch with Neil Funkhouser, who later took us to a very fine used bookstore, where I found a copy of a special edition of the Metropolitan Opera Classics Library *Der Rosenkavalier*, autographed by Tatiana Troyanos and Rise Stevens.

Before I attended any operatic/vocal events, I was dragged to the gay porn awards held at a nightclub in Hollywood called Probe on July 19. My lover happens to be the editor-in-chief of *Adam Gay Video Directory*, *Erotica Special Editions*, and the *XXX Showcase* -- which, by the way, was found in Andrew Cunanan's last hotel room.. The *LA Times* referred to it as a "fashion magazine". Anyway, as Doug's date, I am required to attend these affairs.

Inside the club, there were scores of scantily-clad gay porn stars such as Ty Fox, Tom Katt, Derek Cameron, Kurt Young (who squirted water at us with a water pistol), Jordan Young, Jack Simmons, etc. as well as directors such as Jerry Douglas and Chi Chi LaRue. As I am a shy and timid person, seeing the 6'3" 250-pound Chi Chi LaRue up close in full drag was almost as traumatic as the idea of a joint recital by Bruno Beccaria and Lando Bartolini.

Here's some gossip for La Cieca: the whole Santa Fe company was buzzing about a guest stage director who celebrated this summer's success with a wild party in which *les boys* of the chorus were invited to dress up in frilly underthings!

AKIRA

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

Richard Breath

Which would have been the most inappropriate casting of the century: Grace Bumbry as Desdemona? Or Elisabeth Schwarzkopf as La Juive??

Why is Faye Dunaway going to be allowed to star in the film version of *Master Class*? Did Ira Siff want too much money?

Will the next edition of *parterre box's* Talk the Talk (the lexicon of Queenspeak) include the following terms?

- **FAGULOUS:** "Yeah, Waltraud sucked as Carmen, but wouldn't she be FAGULOUS as Countess Geschwitz?"
- **HAMPSON-HIPPED:** "Have you ever seen that David portrait of Napoleon? All those years in the saddle certainly left the Emperor looking mighty HAMPSON-HIPPED, didn't they?"

About which diva (Carol Neblett, Beverly Sills, June Anderson, or Roberta Knie) was it said by a Chicago Lyric bigwig: "She may be the biggest bitch in the business, but at least she's an AMERICAN bitch!"

Which men's room at the Met has seen the most action? And shouldn't the Met honor this location with a plaque identifying "The Grace Moore Memorial Tea Room?"

Can it really be true that Vienna is going to revive *Le Prophete* for Domingo and Baltsa? Isn't it time the Intendant replaced that 1984 calendar on his office wall?

Isn't it dreadful that the Fenice and the Gran Liceo have gone up in smoke – especially when you think what a blessing it would be if it had happened to the Bastille Opera?

Even with all those gazillions at stake, would you be Nicoletta Mantovani for even five minutes?

Why is it that some geniuses (Wagner, Shaw, da Vinci) got better and better as they got older while others (Massenet, Mascagni, Tennessee Williams) peaked early (to put it charitably). Surely there's a doctoral dissertation in this.

Which tenor on the Met's 1997-98 roster has the smallest dick? And how do so many blondes know about it?

Wants to know!

Were Eva Marton and Judi (Mrs. Brown) Dench separated at birth?

Why is Lotfi Mansouri wasting San Francisco Opera's time and money on Andre Previns *Streetcar Named Desire*, especially since the project's raison d'être (Sylvia McNair) is no longer bosting the composer? Why not go for some real blood and guts– say, *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* with Diana Soviero, Sherrill Milnes, Dawn Upshaw and Richard Leech?

Why doesn't an opera company in the US have the balls to mount big, rare stuff like *Palestrina*?

Given the choice between watching Glenn Close in *Meeting Venus* or Jill Clayburgh in *Luna*, wouldn't you really rather have your eyes poked out with a sharp stick?

Is it true that Lois Kirschenbaum is about to publish her memoirs of her life as a standee – and that the final chapter (recounting her reactions to the Met in the '90s) is to be entitled "I Wont Stand for This Any More"?

What semi-promising young baritone would be mortified to learn that circulating underground are recent and sharply-focused photos of him about to pop his uncircumcised manhood into the mouth of a goatced young fan?

Will we ever know the truth about the Met's aborted mid-80's production of *Il piccolo Marat*, set to star Domingo, Freni and Ghiaurov, but replaced with a revival of *Don Carlo*? In other words, who blinked– and why?

Have you heard all this nonsense about playing Pink Floyd's *Dark Side of the Moon* while watching the video of *Wizard of Oz*? Queens in the know discovered years ago that there is nothing so theatrical as playing the Caballe *Salome* as a soundtrack for Jeff Stryker's *Powertool*. The synchronicity of effect is mind-boggling.

What would have happened if Andrew Cunahan had a thing for pudgy conductors?

- Richard BREATH and Peter HUNTER

will be the U.S. prenr

Leonie Rysanek as Mme. de Croissy in *Carmelites* . . .
 Luciano Pavarotti as Raoul in *Les Huguenots* . . . Christa
 Ludwig as Die Amme . . . Zinka Milanov as Helene in *Les*
Veprres Siciliennes . . . Carlo Bergonzi as Lohengrin . . .
 Renata Tebaldi as Santuzza . . . Sherrill Milnes as
 Telramund . . . Jose Carreras as Tonio in *La fille du*
Regiment . . . Joan Sutherland as Lady Macbeth . . .
 Marta Moedl as Elizabeth I in *Gloriana* . . . Kiri te Kanawa
 as Elisabeth in *Tannhauser* . . . Franco Corelli as Otello . . .
 Pilar Lorengar as Rusalka . . . Beverly Sills as Lulu . . .
 Galina Vishnevskaya in *The Consul* . . . Carol Neblett as
 Salome . . . Diana Soviero as Luisa Miller . . . Renata
 Scotto as Minnie . . . Rosanna Carteri as Cio-Cio-San . . .
 Grace Bumbry as Ortrud . . . Jon Vickers as Eleazar . . .
 Franco Corelli as Des Grieux in *Manon Lescaut* . . .
 Fiorenza Cossotto as La Vecchia Madelon . . . Dorothy
 Kirsten as Melisande . . . Maria Callas as Charlotte . . .
 Tito Gobbi as Alberich . . . Denise Duval as Poppea . . .
 Marilyn Horne as Cornelia in *Giulio Cesare* . . . Nicolai
 Gedda as Herodes . . . Roberta Peters as Martha . . . Maria
 Callas as the Three Heroines in *Hoffman* . . . Jon Vickers as
 the Witch in *Hansel und Gretel* . . . Thomas Allen as
 Mandryka . . . Eleanor Steber as Anne Trulove . . .
 Montserrat Caballe as the 3 heroines of *Il trittico* . . .

missed opportunities

Edita Gruberova as The Queen of Shemakhan . . . Helen
 Traubel as Alceste . . . Beverly Sills in *La sonnambula* . . .
 Leonard Warren as Nabucco . . . Ezio Pinza as Attila . . .
 Marian Anderson as Erda . . . Regine Crespin as Fedora . . .
 Evelyn Lear as Emilia Marty . . . Peter Hoffman as
 Ghermann . . . Ljuba Welitsch as Ariadne . . . Rise
 Stevens as Komponist . . . Mario del Monaco as Macheath
 . . . Eileen Farrell in *The Mother of Us All* . . . Anna Moffo
 in *Mahagonny* . . . Elisabeth Schwarzkopf as Vanessa . . .

saddles of queens

were seen lining up for the restroom after *Love's Debris*, ogling the queue as they chatted amongst themselves about The Meaning of It All. Lovers of opera and lovers of high camp ("You can't have one without the other!") heeded advance rumor from Europe and flocked to downtown New York to see the this film. And, lest anyone think only cerebrally- challenged gym rats attended, the meaning of it all was a bit hard to catch.

For those who have yet to hear (darlings, you need to get out more!), *Love's Debris* is a new film from Euro-director Werner Schröter, who asked a bunch of opera singers, with their families and lovers in tow, up to a semi-ruined abbey (with very flattering acoustics) in France to be filmed singing and opining about the nature of love. The movie has lots of notables, but the three big names-to-make-the-heart-go-pitpat are Anita Cerquetti, Marta Mödl, and Rita Gorr.

Werner-baby is just too cool for words, incorporating all kinds of artsy stuff, like shots of dead leaves (get it?), a Sphinx-head fountain gushing water from its mouth (get it? well, don't worry!), and a naked boy on horseback into the interview-and-song format of the film. Editing is random, with mistakes and expletives included, and the whole thing looks like a well-financed film- school project. Cynical Americans that we are, we laughed at some foolishness when we were supposed to be reverent, especially when the naked man in the hamster wheel rolled across the screen during Gorr's aria.

Luckily, the director was able to get his singers to take the enterprise seriously, and there is much to enjoy. Cerquetti is given a great deal of screen time, though she doesn't sing solo as her other senior colleagues do. She is interviewed about life, love, and singing, and also coaches various young singers before the cameras, helping them find the passion in their singing. Though she is not pretty, strikingly large, made up like a tart, and dressed like a Fifties Tosca throughout, Cerquetti never loses her dignity.

During one interview, asked why she stopped singing, Cerquetti says that she had developed a "tic" which made it difficult for her to sing as she wanted to, so she took time off to rest and never went back. It is clear that it was not easy for her to give it all up. Key diva moments

include Cerquetti singing along in a husk of a voice with her old records or with the younger singers she is coaching, and a moving final scene, in which Cerquetti lip-synchs to a recording of herself.

As the opening notes of "Casta diva" play through the room, our diva tears up, and then begins to sing silently along. The longing for her lost career, the pride in her accomplishments, the serenity gained with age, and the pleading and channeled desperation of Norma herself are all there to see. It is a transforming moment, well worth the silliness that has preceded it. I hummed "Casta Diva" all the way home (and, yes, I did finish with a note-perfect "Ah! Bello a me ritorna...!").

And what a Diva Discovery: I loved Martha Mödl! She didn't seem at all taken in by the hoakiness of the film overall. She was quite serious when appropriate, but also very funny, especially when puncturing some of the inflated pomposities implicit in the interviews. When she is asked if she teaches singing, she bursts into laughter, and then explains that she cannot teach singing because she herself does not understand how she does what she does. Memory for her is a two-edged sword: she has obvious respect and affection for Fürtwängler, saying that she can recognize his conducting instantly, that there is an ebb and flow to the tempo that is unique, etc., but listening to old recordings of herself, she grimaces and breaks into smiles when she hears things that are not right, or at least not as she would want them.

On a related note, she makes the point that nowadays, no one is allowed to make mistakes. She talks about how singers must be perfect, which discourages risk-taking. Her star turn comes as she sings the Grety aria from *Queen of Spades*. She sits motionless on a couch and gives us a simple, direct version, focusing everything on just singing it. She may be in her mid-80's, but I would love to see this great artist live! She is utterly herself, humble in a believable way, and also dignified; funny and also intense about things that mean something. After chatting with Isabelle Huppert (she, like most everyone in the film, is not identified), as director and movie star move to the piano, Mödl asks "can I go now?," not realizing she is to coach the actress. Taking Huppert quite seriously, Mödl immediately suggests something simple, like Barbarina's cavatina. The divine M.M. works with Huppert as she sings it, and the force of will and intensity which got her through the aria earlier is focused on getting Huppert through the Mozart. It is quite astonishing to watch. Mme. Mödl is clearly a great artist, and her genuineness shines through much of the nonsense going on around her in the film. And she manages to do it all in a silly, silly wig only a great lady could have carried off.

I left the film asking, "Who was the African-American woman who sang the hell out of various things?," and was soon informed that it is Gail Gilmore, and American based mostly in Germany. She is first

shown at full throttle in "Entweite Götter," Ortrud's curse from *Lo-hengrin*, and she is frightening in her intensity: eyes popping, tongue wagging, huge mouth full of bared teeth. I won't vouch for her voice in another five years (the vibrato is disturbingly wide already), but it was very impressive in the film. She has a ringing high range, a rich, rich middle, and some punch down low as well. I'd love to see her in something really dramatic like *Macbeth*! Rumor has it that Ms. Gilmore is the ex of Deb Polaski. Apparently, their breakup caused the vocal distress and withdrawal from the stage of Ms. Polaski a few years ago.

It was fun to see Gilmore thwart the pretensions of the director, parrying his "deep" questions with relatively practical answers. I can't remember the specifics, but at one point, he asks her "doesn't blah blah blah?" intending to get a long, existential answer. She just says, "No.," and he covers his confusion/annoyance by babbling and blathering on - seeming quite uncomfortable that she won't play along. And she has another great moment as she lets loose with a spiritual at the piano. It was too cliché that she be asked to sing one, but she does so with great, uh, spirit (Ahem. Perhaps that should be "brio?") and not an ounce of the pretension that marks much of the rest of the film.

Gorr wasn't on screen much, so fans will have to look sharp to catch her. And don't expect to be told who the winsome English tenor is (it's Lawrence Dale), or the Sapphic Ciesinsky sisters, or Sergei Larin and his pouty boy companion, or anyone else, for that matter - we are left to guess. Everyone has their moments, and there is a fair portion of missed notes and false starts, too, in case we thought singers weren't human. One whose name I never did get but would like to see again is the stylish, German singer who cracked up in the middle of "Nanna's Lied," by Weill. She curses and gets right back into it. She is obviously great to work with, and the torch is transferred in a nice moment when Cerquetti coaches her on Adalgisa's entrance number.

All in all, a fun film. As I left the theater, I thought that, whatever its Eurotrashy aspects, it was the sort of film that could never have been made in America, which is a shame. Even with all the silliness, the film asked some interesting questions about why singers sing and how people need each other, and showed some examples of music conveying great emotions (that people had difficulty expressing in the spoken sections). The moments with the three retired divas alone justify the making of the film. I guess I found the willingness of everyone in the film to take some of the silliness seriously and give it a chance - and the sometimes surprising successes that brought - refreshing. If Love's Debris hits your town, go see it.

THE ULTIMATE ARBITER

and through some Very Good Friends, I got on the list. Of course, when I got the call, I had no idea what a Lightwalker does, but I was willing to do anything to get inside. You see, I just **had** to get on the War Memorial Opera House stage **before** Rysanek, Sills, Horne, Swenson, von Stade, Domingo, Morris, Ramey etc. thread on it at the gala reopening of the house . Once I was tagged, labelled and security-proofed, the answer became obvious. Lightwalkers stand on the tilted disk of the *Guillaume Tell* set on stage and **walk** in the **light** when so instructed by the technical people. Qualifications? The ability to stand and walk on command, and "don't wear anything dark." In the event, I was only a **substitute** Lightwalker, so I didn't get on stage, but my! I got into every crook and nanny otherwise.

I had this illusion that after \$95 million and 20 months, somehow the War Memorial would become La Scala or the the Staatsoper. The truth is that the new War Memorial bears an uncanny resemblance to the old War Memorial, except it's brighter, cleaner and it now has air you can breathe inside. Otherwise, almost all the structural changes are where they belong: in the structure. One very visible change is the complete restructuring of the top of the Dress Circle: solid walls on the sides, a new row of seats in the back, and a narrow walkway where the spacious standing room used to be.

The sound? No way to tell yet, of course, but from what I heard (conversations between tech people in the seats and those on-stage), my guess is that acoustics will be pretty much status quo ante ('89) bedlam-- that is, okay, especially from the top balcony, but any time you violate the "small shoebox" model for music, you pay for it in sonic "dead spots."

The main reason for the renovation, seismic upgrading, is responsible for more than half of the cost (\$50 million), but it's largely invisible. John Priest, project director of the redevelopment project, explains how this upgrade is done: "Surround and strengthen walls, basically box 'em in, with steel, reinforced concrete, injection of epoxy -- at every six inches at some places." There are some new enormous steel-reinforced concrete shear walls supporting the structure, steel beams wrapping the 125-foot high, 130-foot wide proscenium arch (which has an inconvenient hole in the middle, covered only by a silk curtain -- or nothing, the better to see what's on stage) -- the most difficult challenge in "making the structure solid."

"It's not much, but it's home" was exactly the right description for the old War Memorial. And now the good news is that our humble abode is turning into something as wonderful as faulty memories made the place to be. A glorious new gold curtain, spanking-new plush seats, gilded ceilings, \$28 million worth of backstage and technical improvements, air conditioning -- why, this is a home that has just become **livable**... and then some.

Janos Gereben

The Royal Opera presentation of the American premiere of Pfitzner's *Palestrina* at the Metropolitan Opera was the musical centerpiece of the Lincoln Center Festival in late June. Considered by many to be Pfitzner's masterwork, *Palestrina* was regularly revived in Germany until the 1970's. This novelty factor, coupled with the composer's controversial anti-Semitism (which many mistake for his being a registered Nazi, which he wasn't), made the Royal Opera's presentation a must for opera-goers in the New York area.

I must confess to finding this much-anticipated event a lot of pretentious rumination on not much of interest...certainly not anything that hadn't already been explored musically and dramatically before the time of its *prima* in 1917. The first act chimed in at 1'45" and was an endless reflection on creativity, spirituality and inspiration – Palestrina is asked to uphold the polyphonic tradition at the time of the Council of Trent so that the traditional form of music will continue forever; he refuses, talks to a bunch of ghosts, has a vision and writes a Mass in one night. The second act (1'15") is set at the Council itself and consists of clergymen gossiping, a few references to Palestrina, a group scene and riot. After all that blathering, the final act at 45" is sheer bliss in its dramatic and musical cohesion. Palestrina, who's been jailed, has been released, his Mass is performed, the Pope appears and all is well.

The evening was a crashing bore

, with little of interest in neither the orchestral nor vocal line. The spouting of timeworn sentiments and nondescript music added up to a big zero, despite fine playing by the orchestra under Christian Thielemann and a luxury cast list filled with major singers singing tiny roles. Of special note were Thomas Moser in the name part, whose stamina in the first act was admirable; and Alan Held as Borromeo, who worked frantically to bring drama to the music, sometimes with success. The straightforward production had a few truly lovely moments, including the tableau vivante at the end of the first act featuring winged angels and a painting of Eve.

People streamed out in droves at both intermissions. The house wasn't full downstairs, even with obvious papering, and was easily half empty when the curtain fell at 11:45. The response, from those who weren't totally enervated at the end was enthusiastic, but it can hardly be called a triumph. To be fair, however, the evening was a wonderful opportunity to hear this score, in which some people can actually find music. John Rockwell who coordinates the Lincoln Center Festival, was given space to spew nonsense in the program at all Festival events. (The program space given to him for the Royal Ballet on Friday pre-empted the list of the entire company of dancers – I guess the house staff – starring in your home on PBS – is more important than the "moving scenery.") His justification for including this piece seems to be that he spent two years as a youth in Germany, likes German culture, and this piece was important to some Germans at some point in history – not enough in my books to justify almost five hours of mediocre opera. For those of like mind, *Mathis der Mahler* and *Doktor Faustus* are superior works which could benefit from the love and care that went into this *Palestrina*.

- *La Sirena*

Si, tornerò!

Although he has largely forsaken the opera house, Enzo Bordello is keeping abreast of things operatic through an entirely new medium: the Internet! Yes, my dears, Enzo has gotten with it in his old age and purchased a computer, thus enabling him at long last to shoot off his big mouth online. Cyberspace is a brave new world and, honey, I've been boldly going where few opera queens have gone before in challenging idiocy, rebutting old canards and decrying the reductionism of received wisdom. It's a hard life being a guardian of the *sacra fiamma* but somebody must do the job. With the help and support of cyberbuddies like Dr. Rep, I find ways to rebound from the flaming attacks launched by our enemies. You know their ilk: the kind who think opera begins with Thomas Hampson and ends with Renee Fleming. Like Don Quichotte, I take pride in "fighting the good fight."

But the infidels are at the gate and the relentless onslaught of tastelessness does get wearying. Sometimes you even want to give up and retreat. But after words of encouragement from the true believers, plus liberal doses of Stolichnaya to fortify the spirit, Enzo finds his shrill voice again and enters into the fray once more. What follows below is a sampling of some of the more outrageous calumny that Enzo has encountered online. Given the overall climate of The Three Tenors era, with its pervasive "dumbing down" of classical music for yuppie consumption, you quickly learn to choose your battles wisely. But I am simply unable to walk away from certain provocations. Ladies and gentlemen of the queer opera world, I submit for your examination: Big Lies in Cyberspace!

Old Singers Suck!

One of the sadder things I have observed in my years as an opera fanatic is the intolerance shown aging singers. I know that prejudice against the aging and elderly is rampant in our society, but this bias seems particularly vicious among opera queens. I especially remember the harsh assessments dealt Leontyne Price after her farewell Aida at the Met. The fact that Price was retiring from the opera stage, had sung Aida with distinction for three

decades (including that evening's performance), had recorded the role twice commercially, etc., went unnoticed by the majority of queens. Instead, they focused exclusively on every single struggle, large or small, that Price faced that evening as a 57 year old singing her signature role. This struck me at the time as the height of ingratitude and pettiness. If anything, ageism seems more rampant than ever. You encounter it daily on any Internet discussion of opera.

I continue to be dismayed by people's ugly attitude's toward a singer facing old age and declining resources: "That dried-up Jones cow needs to get off the stage and take that mile-wide vibrato with her!" or "f I have to suffer through one more screech fest with that over-the-hill Scotto, I'm going to boo my head off!" And so on. So much is written about what a singer is losing or has lost in their presentation of a role. But what about the compensation older singers bring by way of their immersion in a character? The deep, spiritual connection with a role that they have lived with for two or more decades?

Nel trionfal

Remember Scotto's last Met Butterfly in 1987? or Soederstrom's Marschallin (same year)? Or how about Vicker's last seasons in opera? I would never trade these experiences for the vocally more adept performances of younger singers. The joy of seeing Diana Soviero sing Nedda at 51 or Catherine Malfitano play Cio-Cio-San at 49 is observing the way they adapt themselves to the ravages of time. Yes, the voice in both cases is not what it was, but the eloquence of their interpretations is, IMO, more than ample remuneration. Witnessing Soviero and Malfitano give soulful performances year after year for a quarter of a century also has been instructive. Each has moved skillfully and gracefully from ingenue roles to more mature heroines. Watching them come to terms with aging and its effect on them as performers teaches all of us something about acceptance of our own mortality. And that is far more compelling than one more insipid performance from RENAYYYY.

Chris Merritt is the Greatest Tenor of the 20th Century!

Provided the artist in question has an interesting message, I have a high tolerance level for bad singing. I can get something out of listening to somebody like Elena Suliotis or Gerhard Stolze. I even like late Moffo records! But pig shit is pig shit and Chris Merritt sounds like a sack of it deep-fried in rancid oil.

Maybe Enzo's becoming more intolerant with time, but what in the world do people hear in this guy? Even in his so-called salad days, I thought he possessed the ugliest tone quality of any singer I have ever heard. Granted, he had some technical abilities that made up for his nasal, gritty sound, but not enough to tip the scales in his favor. I suffered through many a belcanto opera when Merritt was in the cast. As the voice began to unravel, Merritt and his agent decided they could hoodwink people into thinking he had the tonal resources to undertake parts like Manrico and Lohengrin.

This dismal (not to mention futile) campaign culminated in his disastrous attempt to sing the Prince in the Mets *Rusalka* revival with Fleming. By all accounts, Merritt was booed off the stage at every performance.

Now that the voice is totally and utterly GONE, Merritt has resorted to singing roles like Loge. This might just be another sad story of an overrated opera singer extending themselves beyond their limited scope.

sorriso dell'Arte

But Merritt fanatics routinely refer to their idol on the Internet as "the greatest tenor since Caruso, possibly the greatest tenor of the 20th century." They predict even greater things to come from their hero. They cast him in fantasy productions of everything from *Idomeneo* to *Death in Venice*. They dismiss singers like Di Stefano, Del Monaco, Corelli and Pavarotti as commonplace in comparison to the great

Merritt.

Everyone is entitled to their opinion but this idea fixe about Merritt reeks of delusional, if not downright psychotic, thought processes. There is something about this tenor's arrogant refusal to accept reality that seems to excite the grandiosity of mediocre minds.

Perhaps they revel in his ability to take himself seriously as a singer when everything he undertakes speaks to the contrary. So be it. Just don't expect the rest of us with a functional set of ears to accept, much less support, the absurd notion that Merritt is a great singer. Whatever Merritt had, it's gone.

Booing is the Work of the Devil!

Just listen to any live recording of a standard repertory item performed in an Italian opera house. You will invariably hear booing. Booing has been a time-honored part of the operagoing experience for centuries. In its purest form, booing is the spontaneous, passionate counterpart to "bravo" or "brava." Imagine my surprise when the behavior police on one of the opera newsgroups labeled all booing as "indefensible." Furthermore, audiences that practice this behavior in Italy and other European countries are "heathens."

In other words, the live opera experience is supposed to be pleasantly painless, preceded by advance gushing for the upcoming production and performers, responded to with indiscriminate applause and concluded with self-congratulatory babble about what a great evening was had by all.

This is the master plan of opera house managements contemptuous of audience input and promoted by all those with an investment in the business of producing opera. Booing threatens the whoremongering foundation upon which today's opera world is situated. That is why I will continue to boo mediocrity or worse passed off as greatness.

Remember Boulez' imperative to "blow up the opera houses?" I don't think it's the houses themselves that need to be destroyed. It's the commercial, capitalistic, corporate mentality at work inside of them that deserve annihilation. Booing is oneway of foiling the record companies dastardly plan for prostituting opera performances through video and CD sales.

Homosexuality Doesn't Matter!

The backlash has arrived, ladies and gentlemen. After decades in which the homosexuality of composers and performers alike was covered up and ignored, the queergeneration of the 1990's began to explore the impact of gayness on the artistic sensibility of people like Bernstein, Blitzstein, Barber, Britten, Copland, Pears, etc. It was a brave and rewarding attempt to reclaim gay artists from the imposed invisibility of homophobic scholars and academicians. But now the homophobes want to take back their heroes and restore their tarnished lustre before the queer studies movement sullied them with frank discussion about their sexuality. Just the other day, a posting was sent out on one of the opera newsgroups requesting supporting evidence for a young woman's thesis project. Her idea? Benjamin Britten's homosexuality had no bearing at all on his output and any trace of the composer's sexuality in his works was grossly exaggerated to serve the political agenda of the queer community. Bullshit! I, for one, will not allow Britten or any other composer or artist who was gay and unable to celebrate his gayness in the oppressive pre-Stonewall era to be sanitized for the comfort and convenience of a homophobic society. We must work hard to preserve their link to a community eternally starved for role models. You need look no farther than the pages of *Opera News* for evidence of

io voglio . . .

the backlash. Just check out those "Breeder Bulletin" features in *Opera Watch*, complete with baby photos and heterosexual displays of affection. Where's the picture of Kurt Ollman and Stephen Wadsworth nuzzling at home? Or Brian Asawa and his boyfriend? And the homophobic lies they print! Nonsense like Philip Landgridge saying Britten's homosexuality is irrelevant to understanding his work. Oh, and that **REALLY OFFENSIVE** comment about Britten and Pears being an extremely "private" couple, thus requiring the true nature of their relationship to be forever concealed out of respect for the now deceased pair. Well, what choice did they have, Mr. Landgridge? They lived during an era of incredible prejudice and

persecution! Never mind the fact that Pears went public about his and Britten's homosexuality in the last years of his life. And would someone at *Opera News* finally GET THIS--gay people have a lot more going on in their lives than just SEX!!!! To view sexual identity and its expression solely in terms of sexual behavior is beyond insulting to those gay and lesbian readers of *Opera News* who lead the same fulfilling lives as the straight people the editors so relentlessly profile in its pages. If you subscribe to *Opera Snooze* and have Internet access, check this crap out for yourself in the archives at the magazines's website.

Dolora is No Carmen (or Stick to Your Fach, Bitch!)

A debate has sprung up at one of the opera newsgroups about whether Dolora Zajick has what it takes to be a great Carmen. I have no idea but I know how to find out: **LET HER DO THE FUCKING ROLE!** But I'm sure she won't be given the chance because of narrow-minded fags with rigid ideas about what constitutes "appropriate" and "inappropriate" fach for a singer. One reads with astonishment such foregone conclusions as "Zajick can't act" or "Zajick can't dance" or "Zajick is not the right sort of voice." Without ever having heard her in the role, some people have concluded that "Zajick is no Carmen." **HOW THE FUCK DO THEY KNOW???** How quickly we forget that Sutherland achieved the impossible in her initial performances of Lucia, delivering a poetic, graceful, haunting portrayal of the title role. Prior to her collaboration with Zeffirelli, she was stiff as wood, insecure in her lack of acting skills and uncomfortable with her appearance. But with Zeffirelli's encouragement, Sutherland overcame all odds. Is it not possible that Zajick could achieve similar results as Carmen within a supportive framework? The real issue here is whether an artist of the stature and immense artistic endowment as Zajick has the right to sing whatever stimulates and challenges her artistic sensibilities. Can you imagine if Beverly Sills had been forbidden to sing *Roberto Devereux* on the grounds that she wasn't a dramatic coloratura? Or if Birgit Nilsson had been denied the opportunity to sing *Salome* because she didn't "look right" for the role? The whole fach system is useful for categorizing certain types of roles. But when this system is tyrannically applied to singers who require a more flexible, expansive consideration of their possibilities, then it has

lost its utility. Worse, it has robbed a singer and his or her audience of a potential revelation in a certain role. Why are so many people satisfied to remove the element of risk from performance? Just ask Renata Scotto how boring playing it safe is. She made a whole second career out of flaunting people's long-held prejudices about what a voice like hers could and could not do. In the process, she refined and enlarged our ideas about what makes a great Norma, Elisabetta, La Gioconda, Lady Macbeth, etc. Her ambition and talent were too great to be hemmed in by endless repetitions of Gilda, Adina, Mimi, etc. The voice may have been sorely taxed, even damaged, by these later role assumptions, but the illuminating power of her interpretative genius was ALWAYS ample compensation. There is nothing more annoying than an opera queen with control issues, routinely shoving stimulating artists into confining little pigeonholes of the repertoire that tell us next to nothing about the parameters of their artistic personality. Unfortunately, these types populate artist management agencies and opera house administrations the world over. Small minds are best left to establishing and maintaining petty bureaucracies. They have no place in the casting of opera

Mercadante Is Better Than Wagner (Give Me Elitism or Give Me Death!)

It takes all kinds, I guess, but what is the deal with these elitist snobs who have the chutzpah to declare to the cyberspace community that Halevy and Meyerbeer were greater composer than Wagner? Or that they would rather hear anything penned by Mercadante than a performance of *Die Meistersinger*? **GIVE ME A FUCKING BREAK!** I have no intention of defending Wagner the man. He was a bigot and I respect people's decision to not listen to his music on the grounds that he was a despicable human being. But the quality of the music certainly requires no defense. Wagner was a genius whose creativity impacted all aspects of Western culture and whose artistry legacy is still very much in evidence. To deny him his rightful place as one of the great innovative minds of 19th century opera is a philistine position. I admire Halevy's *La Juive* and Meyerbeer's *Les Huguenots*. Christ, I cut my opera queen teeth on these sort of operas in New Orleans! But they are unwieldy pieces, heavily reliant on spectacle and staging to mask their many uninspired musical moments. The dearth of Meyerbeer

stagings in this era is frequently attributed to a shortage of appropriate singers. But, truth to tell, these operas began to lose their hold on opera audiences worldwide in an earlier age full of fantastic singers. And even if we did have singers available today with the kind of spectacular technique and tonal amplitude necessary to sing French grand opera, does anyone really think the opera managements of the world are going to trot out *Les Huguenots*? If so, you are seriously out of touch with reality! We have no casts for *Aida* or *Il Trovatore*, folks!

Is the Met going to squander a decent cast for these warhorses on something like *L'Africaine*? I think not. The driving force behind this elitism is a particularly loathsome form of opera queenery that shuns the familiar for the estoteric. It is so convenient to espouse the superiority of a highly specialized body of work-- particularly if no one has the chance to assess the merits of these works in an opera house! Such convictions allow those who promote snobbery to elevate themselves to the same rarefied status they bestow on their precious repertoire.

Kathleen Battle's Crimes Are Unspeakable!

Some people just don't know when to quit. Almost five years after her scandalous dismissal from the Met, Battle is still everybody's favorite punching bag. Folks, it was everybody's loss when Battle was driven from Sybil's Barn. The world is not so rich in first-class singers that we can afford to celebrate, much less gloat over, the firing of Battle. I don't care any more what she did to forfeit her

inelitism

position in the operatic firmament. All I know is I miss her unique artistry and lovely voice. And let's be brutally frank about what fuels the continued vilification of Battle. Her real crime is that she's a WOMAN. I read a posting on the Internet recently that gleefully referred to Battle as "a bitch" who needed marriage and a husband to "keep her in line." Well, why not just take away her right to vote, for heaven's sake? Singers like Luciano Pavarotti and Roberto Alagna have pulled every unprofessional stunt in the book but no one would suggest such a "rehabilitation" for a man. And, what's worse, Battle is a African American woman. Underlying all of this blatant misogyny is a subtle but powerful racism that delights in uppity colored folk being dragged over the coals for not minding their place. Look, folks, I'm not excusing Battle's arrogant, abusive behavior towards colleagues and fans. But let's not be hypocrites about it. Lots of singers are wretched human beings when they step out of their stage personas.

That Battle is a disturbed person I have no doubt. But she needs to be supported and guided in her distress, not figuratively stoned to death. Remember all those so-called colleagues and friends--Zeffirelli included--who flagellated themselves to no end after Callas died for not trying harder to help the suffering diva? I suspect there will be similar self-recriminations when and if Battle tragically self-destructs. And what's the bottom line here? No more Battle in the opera house. I, for one, would love to see her have a go at Lulu. Given all the degradation and chauvinistic treatment she has been accorded lately,

I think she would find PLENTY in the Berg heroine to identify with. That she will have no opportunity to explore this and other repertoire is a great shame. Battle certainly had a hand in her misfortune, but the white male establishment will never allow her the chance to learn from her mistakes. I never badmouthed Battle, but I certainly gave Aprile Millo a hard time when she hit the vocal kids. I did it privately and in the pages of *parterre box*. I felt betrayed that a

rently, phone to flashli.
a growing

singer whom I had invested so much love and support in could implode way before her shelf-time expired. But you know what? That was MY problem, not Millo's. Kicking someone when they are down and out is inexcusable and I sincerely apologize to Madame Millo for doing so. Artists like Battle and Millo deserve our sympathy and understanding; given all the pleasurable performances they have granted us in the theater, it's a small consideration. The fact is we all have our pockets of craziness. ALL OF US. Work your shit out elsewhere, people. Battle has enough on her plate to struggle with.

Opera Happens in The Recording Studio!

Not a day goes by without some opera newbie asking online for a recommended recording of *Aida* or *Boheme*. Always with the same restriction: "Please--digital, studio recordings only." Even when people don't qualify their wish for a recommendation, others will respond with statements like: "Steer clear of the Callas/Del Monaco/Simionato Norma. I know the singers are good but the sound is dreadful. I much prefer the Eaglen version because it's a digital recording." "Digital? Studio? WHO GIVES A FUCK? Who in their right mind is going to discard Callas, DelMonaco and Simionato burning up La Scala in live performance for the cold, dowdy Eaglen lumbering her way through Norma in state of the art sound?

I realize Eaglen is also performing in a live situation. But her plastic, prepackaged performance is certainly no giveaway. And therein lies the problem: today's singers emulate the conditions of the recording studio, not the stage, regardless of the venue.

The recording industry has created an entire generation of opera singers whose greatest triumphs occur in front of studio microphones, not in an opera house. Cheryl Studer recorded everything except *Evita* for the big labels, but who remembers her work in an opera house? And now that she has gone to seed, Roberto Alagna, Bryn Terfel, Angela Gheorghiu and Goddessa RENAYYYY are all poised to succeed her -- anemic automatons who depend on a recording engineer to create impact for them. I'll pass on the knob turning. Show me the money onstage--where opera belongs.

Enzo Bordello

... ancor!