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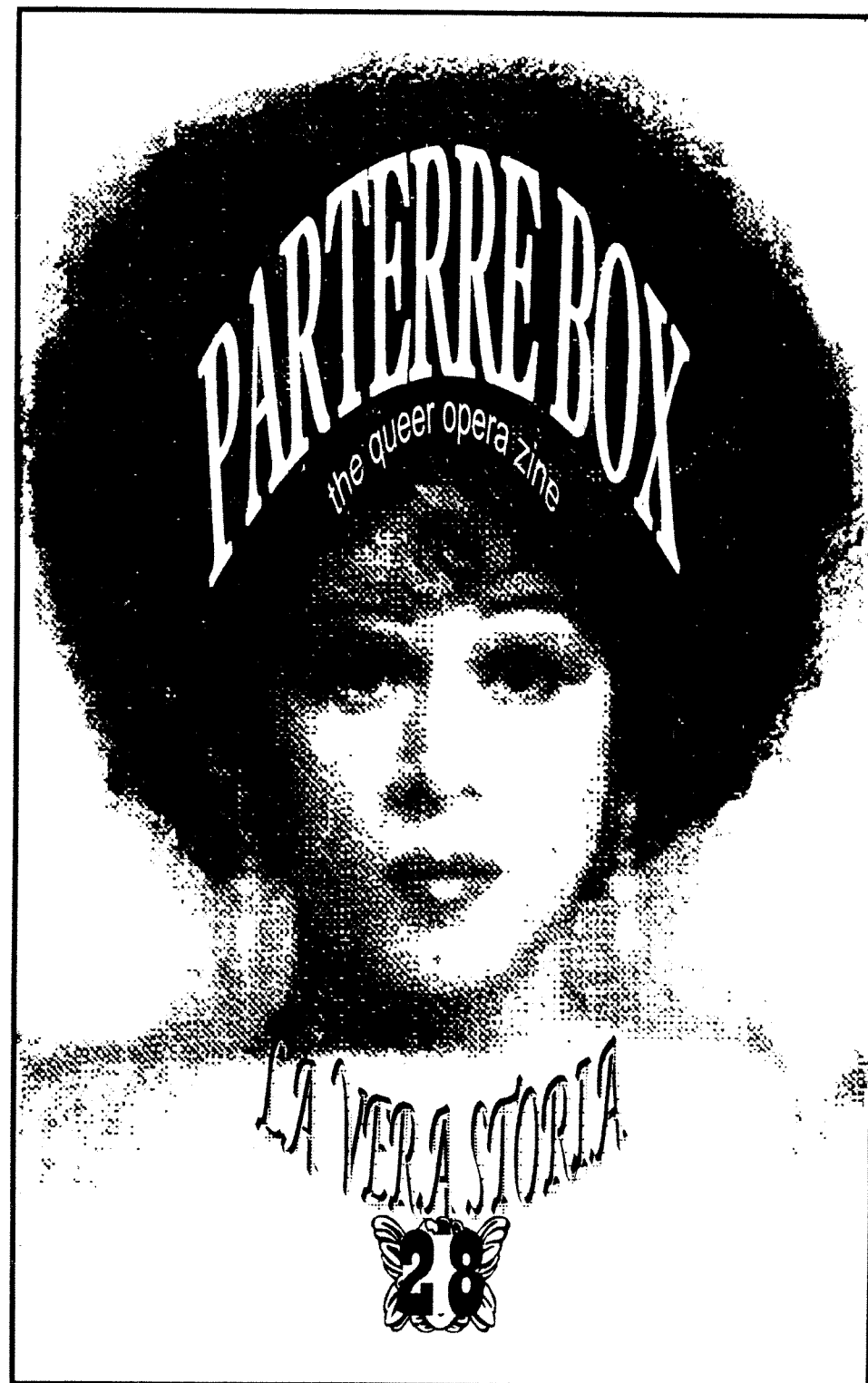
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9 Albertson Avenue, Suite 1
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1-800-32LYRIC

phone: 516-484-5100
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les excuses de M. ALAGNA

In *parterre box* #26, La Cieca expressed concern over a reported "homophobic" remark by tenor Roberto Alagna. According to the April 7, 1997 London *Daily Telegraph*, the tenor viewed a television documentary in which New York opera fans offered criticism of his Met debut as Rodolfo. On that occasion, Alagna snapped to a reporter, "And that man who said I didn't hit the top C. I know he is a homosexual. It's outrageous, outrageous!"

We were offended by that remark, and sent several messages, first to Angel Records, then to Alagna's manager, Lévon Sayan. After a couple of months of playing faxtag, we received the following response:

Although there are many compensations in being a performing artist, one of the less pleasant sides to a public career is the impotence felt when unable to respond to unjust, unfair or inaccurate criticism. Such was the case with the Oxford Television film about me.

The person who was filmed during the intermission at Metropolitan Opera House during my performance of *La Bohème* accused me to have missed in my aria the high B note. In that aria any informed or serious critic would have known that this is a high C.

I am hurt and indignant over the incorrect interpretation of my words during the course of my interview with *The Daily Telegraph* on that subject. Under no circumstances did I wish to cause offense to homosexual people, many of my closest friends being themselves homosexual.

It must be stressed that the interview was carried out in English, which I am not completely fluent in, thus rendering it easy to misinterpret my words. This causing a misunderstanding.

I would be most grateful if you feel generous enough to set the record straight by printing this statement.

Yours sincerely,
Roberto Alagna

We congratulate Mr. Alagna for doing the right thing and apologizing for words no doubt uttered in anger, and offer him best wishes for his return to the Metropolitan this spring in *Romeo et Juliette*.

This issue of *parterre box* marks a milestone for the little zine: our very **first** paid advertising. It was a while before we were willing to compromise our '60s-quality principles, but now we have found the ideal way to sell out. Why not accept advertisers whose product we **believe** in 100%? In that spirit, La Cieca commends to you **Lyric Distribution**, whose ad on our back page offers a mouth-watering variety of live opera performances on audio and video. La Cieca is especially excited about a release that belongs in every opera queen's home library: the **Callas** documentary written by **John Ardoin** and narrated by **Franco Zeffirelli**, a film shown once on PBS in 1978 and never repeated since. This is a reverent fan's eye view of the life and career of the soprano, including some rare performance footage of *Madama Butterfly* and *Medea* (silent, alas!), a clip of *Norma* in Paris in 1964, as well as more familiar bits of concerts and stage performances. Also included are clips of the "Harewood" interview and talking heads from **Caballe, Tebaldi, Guilini, Bing and Rescigno** - and the notorious **Scotto** interview, which allegedly motivated a claque to disrupt a Met *Norma* a few seasons later. (Her remarks sound innocuous enough to me, and even rather charming as Scotto relates her bewilderment with La Divina's mood-swings!)

We also see newsreel footage of Callas changing planes at Idlewild in, I guess, 1958. She is pursued by a couple dozen photographers and reporters (and probably a paparazzo or two). One of them asks, "Why aren't you staying longer in New York, Mme. Callas?" and she snaps back "Because I'm **leaving**! Use your **mind** a bit!" Later, freezing standees awaiting La Divina's return to the Met comment, "She's the greatest... the only star... only for her would I do this..." In the background is a poster advertising the Met's current new production-- *Salome* with **Birgit Nilsson**! The 90-minute program ends, heartbreakingly, with Callas singing "Ah, non credea mirarti" as the curtain of La Scala slowly descends.

David Daniels may well be the most perfect singer in the world today. Certainly La Cieca cannot think of any way in which his Alice Tully Hall program (10/12) could be



questo e quello

improved. Unlike so many current singers who seem to regard the solo recital as no more than an opportunity to manipulate the audience into offering unconditional love, David Daniels earns our admiration by demonstrating that even the most showboating bravura piece is not really about him, it's about the music.

Oh, yes, this young countertenor has all the candy: a ravishingly lovely voice, superb technique, subtle and sophisticated musical taste, expressive diction in four languages, and an assured and sexy stage presence. But all these qualities are apparent only in retrospect; by the time Daniels reached the second stanza of his opening number, Beethoven's "Adelaide", all we were aware of was music, beautiful music.

The natural color of Daniels' voice is that of a flute in its lower register, but that description should not suggest any deficit of sustained power or agility. He closed the first half with a pair of contrasting Handel arias, commanding both the noble classic line of "Stille amare" from *Tolomeo* and the kick-ass bravura of "Vivir tiranno" from *Rodelinda*. For those of you who still may be under the impression that countertenors "lack something below the waist", let me just point out that Daniels dared sing the latter aria -- **Marilyn Horne's** warhorse -- with the veteran mezzo right there in the auditorium. If that doesn't take balls, what does?

Daniels is a "questing" singer, seeking not only offbeat repertoire (like two gorgeous Brahms songs with viola) but new and intriguing takes on the most familiar warhorses. Everyone has sung Lotti's "Pur dicesti" at one time or another; it's a pretty tune, no more -- filler material to rest the voice, right? Well, no, it's far more than that when David Daniels sings it. Running his tongue over his teeth with a randy smirk, the singer teased from the text and music a tingling eroticism that forced at least one gentleman in the audience to cover his lap with his program.

Even after I began to grasp Daniels' unique musical sensibility, he still startled and delighted me by avoiding obvious choices in favor of RIGHT choices. I just *knew* he would purr Poulenc's homoerotic "C'est ainsi que tu es" in a throbbing half-voice thick with desire. And, of course, I was wrong. He let the sleaze in the text speak for itself, finding in the music a hymn to sex as a vehicle for devotion. Conversely, he discovered lust inside the most innocent of love songs. "Sweeter than roses", his first encore, was a one-act opera about stiff-legged adolescent puppy love: you could feel the quiver of boyflesh in every roulade.

Daniels' magnificent performance of "Che faro senza Euridice" climaxed the program. Observing literally Gluck's tempo markings, the countertenor restored to the aria its true meaning -- a cry of anguish at the untimely loss of a lover. We heard Orpheus mad with rage, desperately bargaining with God, and, finally, numb with

resignation. This is indeed a singer who could make stones weep -- and he does it without ever overstepping the vocal boundaries of purest bel canto tone, perfectly judged vibrato and flawless legato phrasing. This is singing of a finish and a complexity that would make proud a golden-age artist with a lifetime of experience. David Daniels' glory days have only just begun.

Cecilia Bartoli works harder than a dozen truckdrivers to try to make *La Cenerentola* work in the Met's dreary new production. She gets some help from the rest of the cast, but her maestro and production staff range from useless to actively hostile.

I have to say Ms. Bartoli's "you must love me" stage persona begins to annoy after a while, like having a cheerleader for a roommate. She's just so intense, so hyper that you don't really feel like giving her sympathy -- since she is so obviously going to win the day, if only through sheer persistence. In this production she gallops around the stage juggling props as if she were doing *Once Upon a Mattress*, which is fun for about 15 minutes, but eventually you want her to settle down and just sing, for Pete's sake. When she does, you notice that the voice is "faster" than ever, but at the cost of the warm, soft color that made it so special. The sound is lean, pure muscle, with a rattling vibrato. The roulades whiz by so fast there's no time for the voice to speak on each note--all we hear is attack and no tone. She "talked" a lot of the ensembles without really singing the pitches, and she was, as always, inaudible if even one other person was singing with her. Her brisk reading of "Non piu mesta" roused the audience's enthusiasm, but to me she sounds like a middle-aged soubrette. This high Bs were MINISCULE and shrill, not at all what I think of as a mezzo sound. I think we can all agree she is in fact NOT miked, for surely if she were she'd be louder than THAT!

Best singing in the cast came from **Michele Pertusi** (Alidoro), who really brought down the house with the very difficult "La del ciel". It's a solid bass-baritone with both meat and flexibility, and he has a wonderful sense of propulsion in this music, real forward flow.

The other two low roles were not so fortunately cast. **Simone Alaimo** camped unbearably as Don Magnifico and sang his three(!) arias in an undifferentiated woofy bluster. Baritone **Alessandro Corbelli's** debut was not much of an occasion: the voice is dry and unglamorous, and his attempts at fioratura were approximate and laborious. He's obviously at home on stage, but his Dandini lacked sparkle or any real sense of humor.

Ramon Vargas has a more substantial voice than one usually hears in the role of Don Ramiro, a sweet lyric tenor with clean if not particularly graceful agility. His high Cs and whatnots were all pingily on-target. If he is not a very romantic figure, he at least behaved with dignity and

an easy sense of humor.

The sisters (**Joyce Guyer, Wendy White**) performed their various pratfalls with gusto and held up their end of the ensembles. **Clorinda's** aria was not given.

The staging was drab and unfunny, with a handful of wierd and irrelevant ideas. **Cesare Lievi's** idea of comedy is people falling off a rickety sofa (which lost some of its wit after about the tenth time), and of course that old standby the foodfight. Now I ask you, did **John Belushi** sing roulades in *Animal House*? (La Cieca has also heard it whispered that Mr. Lievi was rather, uh, "difficult" during the rehearsal period, especially to the American artists, resulting in at least one walkout by a normally placid Met singer.)

Maurizio Balo's set consists of (ready? all together now!) an EMPTY BOX -- this one decorated with a depressing soldier blue wallpaper and an amateurishly built cornice, like the lobby of a disused hotel. He and Mr. Lievi have the decidedly unoriginal idea of wheeling in for the finale a 10-foot tall wedding cake with Bartoli and Vargas posed precariously on top (a la *Dames at Sea*), one of several dangerous-looking and pointless effects slathered on what is really a very simple and human opera. La Cieca is not sure whether the chorus scenes were based on Magritte or *Men in Black*, but the net effect was a bunch of sinister-looking guys in dark suits and bowlers. **Gigi Saccomandi** is very much a member of the modern school of lighting designers, which means a very obvious cue every five minutes or so, regardless of plot or music.

James Levine has been actively hostile to bel canto opera at the Met for some time, and now we know why: with his nose firmly buried in the score, he churned out a performance that was metronomic, hard, cold, rushed, graceless, and charmless. I've heard **Stravinsky** sound jauntier and more tuneful. (Moreover, he allowed the singers to add final high notes in direct contravention of what is generally recognized as proper Rossini performance practice.)

Biggest hand of the night went to Pertusi after his aria (I thought he should have come out for a call), and Bartoli got, I think, three solo bows at the end. Very little booing for the production team, which apparently led Mr. Lievi to believe the production was a success. He beamed and waved and bowed and otherwise milked his meager applause as if he had at least just been crowned Miss America. This production NEEDED booing (as did the woofy Mr. Corbelli), and the audience let the Met down.

Now, La Cieca is amazed at the number of people who say something like "I would never boo a singer-- that would be unforgivable. But of course I boo stage directors all the time." Now, I ask you, what makes stage directors as a group so much more acceptable a target of booing? One hears a line of reasoning that goes something like this:

"The stage director changed the period of the action and distorted the composer's intentions of the plot and the theme. The action he devised was in contradiction to the libretto, and he introduced elements of sex (or violence or whatever) that I feel do not belong in this work." Sometimes a stronger accusation is included, along the lines of "I know this director did all these things intentionally because he wants to get attention and to advance his Marxist agenda." Well, yes. **Andrei Serban's** "gymnasium" production of *Lucia di Lammermoor* in Paris did all this and more (did I tell you about **June Anderson** on the pommel horse?), and the booing as heard on the pirate video really is indeed awesome. Serban deserved every decibel, no doubt.

But, La Cieca asks, if she can boo a stage director for these reasons, why can't she boo a singer whose vocal and dramatic performance is also a distortion of the composer's intentions? La Cieca could name a half-dozen singers she heard in New York last season whose sins against opera were of the same severity (if not the same genre) as **Andrei Serban's**. These artists are almost invariably big names who do not begin to live up to their reputations. However, they show up tired and unprepared, giving performances that are mediocre or worse while enjoying the high fees and unreasoning adulation that are the perks of superstardom. To La Cieca that feels like artistic fraud, and she feels she has the right to protest-- in a nonviolent way, mind you, that does not disrupt the performance.

Moreover, stage directors have feelings too. I cannot imagine that it was easy for **Robert Carsen** to put in months of work on a competent, well-executed (if rather wrongheaded) production of *Eugene Onegin*, only to be greeted with a veritable wall of boos from Met audience members whose main complaint was that the house's management has suddenly decided to balance the budget by mounting all their new productions on \$1.98.

It's unfair to single out stage directors as the targets of audience ire. What's sauce for the regisseur...

La Cieca is pleased to report that *Ariadne* at the Met was superb revival, strongly cast throughout. **Deborah Voigt's** voice has not only grown in size since the last time I heard her in this part, it is also rather a "deeper" sound, with richer and more complex overtones. This is a WOMAN's voice. Since her appearance at the upcoming **Richard Tucker Foundation Gala** is supposed to include a scene from *La Gioconda*, I think we can safely predict that she will eventually move away from "les Wagneriennes blondes" and on to those Bad Girls we all love so dearly. No, she is not one of those "did you see the way she lifted her eyebrow" actresses, but she is never anything less than responsive to the text, with a lovely through-line to all of her gestures. For me, the dramatic highlight of her performance is her simple walk downstage,

step by step, as she sings "Gibt es kein hinuber? Sind wir schon da?", her lovely face mirroring the swelling sense of ecstasy in the music. Voigt and **Thomas Moser** (Bacchus) really were on their own here, extremely exposed, and they managed to bring this scene to life. That's a huge accomplishment right there, as it is long, slow and dramatically subtle -- and since Elijah Moshinsky never seems to have bothered to stage it, so busy was he introducing irrelevant child acrobats and supers with fire batons into the comedians' scenes.

Backstage, La Voigt was elegant in cocktail-length black crepe with a neckline of silvery bugle beads. It was a bit of a wait while the diva got blow-dried and fit to receive, but well worth it -- her trademark blond bubble-cut is SO much more attractive than one of those silly turbans!

I did not know well the voices of Moser or **Natalie Dessay** before tonight, and they were both very pleasant surprises. Though Ms. Dessay shoved a little hard at her final high D, that marred not at all an aria that included the most accurate staccatti I have ever heard from a Zerbinetta. Even more impressive was the street-entertainer toughness she brought to the part, like Nedda's younger sister. Mr. Moser was impressive even without the Met's unsubtle offstage amplification: it's a big, ringing voice with a trim vibrato. That Mr. Moser is also tall, dark and powerfully built is a wonderful bonus: he really looked the part of the "romantic loner" in Moshinsky's conception of Bacchus.

I found Suzanne Mentzer underpowered for the Komponist (she certainly seemed to be tiptoeing around the high notes), but she and her voice are both lovely. Oddly, on second hearing a week later, the voice sounded doubled in size. La Cieca will not venture a guess why that might be.

Now the big surprise: James Levine conducts this piece like a god! I am not a fan of The Great Man in some other repertoire, but "Ariadne" most definitely speaks to him. Perhaps the mannered nature of this opera makes sense to the stylist in Levine's nature the way a more straightforward opera like *Elektra* does not. I will also note that Levine's infamous SLOOOOOOW tempi seem to be a thing of the past: this performance was energetic, fresh, lively, and always responsive to the singers' needs. If this is how Levine is going to conduct from now on, the Met needs to prevent him from even TALKING to Munich!

Frankly, the audience could have shown a little more enthusiasm: this is A-list opera, the Met at the top of its form, and deserving of more than a measly two curtain calls. It's a great show, in spite of Moshinsky's alternately boring and annoying production. I wonder if all that opening and closing of "closet doors" in this show has some symbolic meaning for the director.

Much-discussed barihunk **Nathan Gunn** sang his first Harlekin at the Met a few weeks later (10/10). Even

allowing for opening night nerves, I would have to say that Gunn's performance was promising, nothing more. True, this is his first attempt at the role, with not much rehearsal time, but he did not seem a natural mountebank. He moved diffidently, with little confidence, and he did not look at all as if he was having a good time. That's really what this part is about, and frolicking just doesn't look to be Gunn's long suit.

I had not heard Mr. Gunn sing before, except in *Manon*, and that hardly counts. The voice is surprisingly dark, darker even than Dwayne Croft's. The top seems to work okay, but there's no real lyric-baritone bloom there. The sound is "tight", perhaps because of tension, or perhaps because he just doesn't get a decent breath. Meanwhile, he "chews" words, to little avail -- I missed almost all his lines. And it's not the size of the theater, because **Mark Oswald** landed all the words the previous week -- and he was funny, besides.

Gunn is a living example of how onstage and offstage beauty have little to do with each other. I have seen the baritone close up a couple of times, and he is quite frankly a dreamboat, with a face beautiful enough to do nighttime soap opera, and, as *The New York Times* has reminded us, the body of an underwear model. (Ah, so that's what the extended arts coverage is all about!) What a shock it was to see onstage a stocky-looking fellow who facially resembled Nathan LANE! A Nathan Lane, that is, **who wasn't funny!** Now, how disappointing is that?

Well, not so disappointing as witnessing the much-dreaded comeback of Phillip Creech, whose musicianship is now as shoddy as his tattered voice, derailing the ensembles on more than one occasion. Whatever talents Creech may possess, you sure as hell can't see (or hear) any of them on stage.

According to a 1992 edition of the program "**Gwyneth Jones**-- This is Your Life", the soprano had a rather unusual experience at Bayreuth in 1970, the year she sang her first Kundry. Following the performance, she was approached by a man who identified himself as one of **Stanley Kubrick's** production assistants. He was taking a brief holiday from the sound editing of a new film called *A Clockwork Orange*. During the scene of Kundry's awakening in Act 2 of Wagner's music drama, the production assistant suddenly realized that he had just heard **precisely** the scream needed for a crucial scene in the film.

The following night, after the performance, he set up the Nagra in his hotel room, and La Jones performed 10 varied shrieks, each more blood-curdling than the last. Then came a knock on the door.

Bayreuth City Police: "We have a report a woman was murdered here..."

Gwyneth Jones's scream was used in the finished picture, at the moment Little Alex bludgeons the Cat Lady to death. Now, let's see **Leonie Rysanek** top that!

At the first Turandot of the season, the **Pav** sounded fine and looked healthy, if not exactly comfortable. He didn't get around to learning Act One or Act Three. (One "lasciatemi passare" caught him sipping from a water cup!) But he is having a good time. And, to repeat, he sounded fine, high C and all.

Jane Eaglen was attentive to the words and focused on stage and she is obviously an intelligent and sincere artist. But the voice is not very big, rather shallow, and very frequently sharp; the phrasing is sometimes artistic, sometimes choppy. The top notes are accurate but pinched-sounding. And she has this distracting habit of shifting from foot to foot (nerves? bum knee?) that looks like a warmup for a **Richard Simmons** exercise routine. Frankly, I think Ms. Eaglen may be a victim of "appearance-discrimination": if she were slimmer she would likely be a very fine Donna Anna, Fiordiligi, Countess, maybe Elsa or Ariadne. But, as obese and ungainly as she is, she is forced to take on the heaviest dramatic roles -- for which her voice simply lacks the requisite heft and color.

Hei-Kyung Hong got the biggest hand of the night: she reminded me of Tucci in her sincerity and shimmery vibrato; otherwise the voice is resolutely unitalianate and occasionally suspect of pitch.

Ms. Eaglen's liberties with the score were far less frequent than Mr. Pavarotti's, but she did lead Mr. Levine a merry chase in "Figlio del cielo." Fortunately, the maestro kept all together, even if the result did not always bear much resemblance to anything Puccini wrote.

A very touristy audience indeed: lots of chat during the "dull parts", a mediocre hand at the finish, but enough flash photography for a **Billy Ray Cyrus** concert.

The male body has become the dominant advertising icon in America, especially buffed-up bodies... It's a remarkable change culturally. Why shouldn't opera reflect this?

So says **Paul** "Get Those Butts in the Seats" **Kellogg** hyping the NYCO's new (i.e., recycled from Glimmerglass)

Iphigenie en Tauride. He and Director/Designer/Annoying Dyke **Francesca Zambello** apparently did not trust either the music of Gluck or Ms. Zambello's own direction to hold the interest of their audience, so they hammered at the "homoeerotic" element in an over-the-top *New York Times* puffpiece, abetted by the normally level-headed **Anthony Tomassini**.

The photograph chosen to illustrate the "male bonding" which Ms. Zambello insists her production portrays is a half-page full-color closeup of two "buffed" (Mr. Kellogg's word) and apparently nude young men (**William Burden** and **Andrew Schroeder**) in a pose suggestive of anal intercourse. Closer inspection reveals that they are wearing flesh-colored loincloths, and that, though they are bathing, no one has in fact "dropped the soap." What possibly can be the point of choosing this image as the selling point for *Iphigenie en Tauride*? I'll tell you: "Come to the CityOpera and watch two naked guys have sex live on stage." Sort of like the *Gaiety*, but with better music.

Later in the article, we learned that "Portraying a relationship that will be perceived by many as explicitly homosexual was not a problem for Mr. Burden, who is married." La Cieca only barely restrained herself from vomiting at that one. Can you imagine a writer saying, "Playing Aida was not a problem for **Aprile Millo**, who is actually caucasian?" or "Playing Carmen was not a problem for **Rise Stevens**, who is actually monogamous?" or "Playing Tancredi was not a problem for **Marilyn Horne**, who is actually a woman?"

And, besides, just how honest is it even to imply that the relationship between Pylade and Oreste is really homosexual? It is true that modern scholarship admits that young men in ancient Greece enjoyed physical intimacy as one expression of their devotion. But, remember, most of these young men would then go on to get married and, in many cases, have mistresses as well. Some of them would in middle age openly, and without fear of societal disapproval, take young boys as lovers. I think we can assume, then, that the sexual mores of the Greeks were quite different from our own, and that it is a distortion to imply that Oreste and Pylade were "gay" in our sense of the word. Actually, lovely vis-a-vis **Joanne Melzia-Bordello** explained to naïve Cieca exactly what sort of "intimate activities" these young men are thought to have practiced, citing **K.J. Dover's** *Greek Homosexuality* (New York: Vintage Books, 1980).

Imagine this crusty old British scholar sipping tea and with his Cambridge accent describing (on page 98) how the active partner [or erastes, usually the older man] would thrust "his penis between the eromenos's [the youth's] thigh just below the scrotum." He calls this the intercrural mode. On Greek vases the act is sometimes depicted with the partners standing.

While this sounds like a lovely way to pass time in

Standing Room while nothing is happening on stage, it ain't at all what I call sex.

Again, La Cieca stresses she has not seen this controversial production; she has heard both positive and negative criticism of the staging, and in general those who have seen the show announce that the "homoerotic" stuff is very minor-league indeed. But I am revolted by Zambello's and Kellogg's cynical exploitation of gay imagery in the publicity attached to this production. This publicity sucks in a major way.

A few weeks previously, Kellogg kicked off the season with a pre-curtain speech noting that this was the beginning of "the first season completely planned by the new artistic staff." Unless Mr. Kellogg was attempting to be subtly ironic, I can only assume he had not sat in on any rehearsals of the disastrous production we were about to see.

First, the triumph over adversity: **Lauren Flanigan** was a fascinating and imaginative Lady Macbeth, with ringing top notes, fluent coloratura, and a surprisingly rich lower-middle register -- she resorted to full chest tones only very occasionally (wise choice). The Sleepwalking Scene was quite properly the climax of the evening; Flanigan shaped the phrases dramatically but tastefully, never distorting the line. The infamous "fil di voce" high Db was perfectly judged, a real tour de force. All that said, Lady Macbeth is not really Flanigan's role. Her voice is just too pretty, too girlish for much of the music, and her stage personality is just too winning, too nice. I hope she puts this part aside quickly: singing such heavy, declamatory music might very well play tear apart her lovely lyric middle register. Flanigan has both the voice and the figure to make a world-class Fiordiligi, Donna Anna, Arabella, Marschallin, Ariadne, and I think she would shine equally well in less harrowing Verdi parts like Violetta and Elisabeth.

And that pretty well finishes the good news. **Mark Delavan** (Macbeth), a few ringing high notes aside, was in poorish, wooly voice, and his interpretation was carved in solid plywood. Who talked him into hawking and gurgling his way through "Mal per me"? Other singers were at best City Opera passable-- **Alfredo Portilla** the best of the lot. Once his nerves settle and he stops oversinging "Ah la paterna mano", Mr. Portilla will be a very fine Macduff indeed.

George Manahan led briskly in Muti-esque style, though the mind shudders to think what the Italian maestro would think of the barbaric cuts Manahan inflicts on this score. Losing one of the witches' choruses is not intrinsically evil, but Manahan went farther and slashed out half of Act 3 as well, leaving only the procession of spirits and the Macbeths' duet.

The production is wretched, a horrible mess, the worst kind of junk. Stop me if you've heard this one: **John**

Copley's design includes a central sheet-metal platform, metal scaffolding, a few neon tubes and stark back-lighting. The costumes are a mixed bag of World Wars I and II (did you guess that the Scottish exiles are on their way to a concentration camp?), though Ms. Flanigan is a hostess with the mostess' in a royal blue Dior that contrasts oddly with her buzzcut. (In her short hair, Flanigan looks eerily like **Dawn Upshaw** with implants.)

Leon Major, a regional-opera hack making his NYCO directing debut, had about three ideas, all of them bad. For hours on end his principals stood around doing NOTHING, then servants schlepped Duncan's body down two stories of fire escape and dumped the dead geezer on the ground, where maidservants waited to wrap him in a shroud. And I wondered how, say, **Leonie Rysanek** would have reacted to the idea of leaving Macbeth on stage for "La luce langue"?

The Times' first-string bullshit artist **Bernard Holland** reported

An opening night audience, with many dressed for the festive dinner afterward, seemed to know that something unusual was going on and that this season opener was tendering some promises that might actually be fulfilled ... Everyone, including chorus and orchestra, was welcomed.

Hardly. The bejeweled benefit audience all stood at the end of the show and **BOOED** the production team to **FILTH**. Perhaps Mr. Holland could limit his reviews in the future to "The opera last night was enjoyed by a festive audience, among whom I noted...", like the small-town Society Page reporter fate obviously intended him to be.

La Cieca sneaked into the Met's final dress rehearsal of their revival of *Manon*, and this is what she thought:

Marcello Giordani's voice sounds so freely produced, with a wonderful evenness and ping throughout the entire range. "En fermant les yeux" revealed a really ravishing half-voice (but not falsetto or crooning) and long, long, long breath. He rose to the dramatic challenge of "Ah! fuyez, douce image" with ringing high B-flats and some gorgeous diminuendi. He is an efficient actor, and, what is more important, quite edibly cute, especially in the black velvet tailcoat and ivory breeches he wears to Hotel Transylvanie.

Roberto de Candia's voice is undersized for the vast expanses of Sybil's Barn. I did hear backstage that this was his first time singing in the house, so it may be he will make adjustments later.

Renee Fleming was not so bad as I feared, but she is still not my idea of a Manon. The highest reaches of the role held no terrors for her: the performance includes four high D's and a roulade that touches high E. Lower down, she sounded a lot like (middle period) **Anna Moffo**, with a

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wide, "fuzzy" vibrato and a habit of sliding through notes instead of singing them solidly on pitch. She was best in the "Gavotte", with only a few of her trademark gulps and swoops to mar the line, and a smiling confidence that was quite charming if not quite "hard" enough for the little gold digger. Alas, "N'est-ce plus ma main" she pulled completely out of shape, slow and slower, and enough heavy breathing for a **Donna Summer** album. It's an important and lovely voice -- anyone can hear that. So why won't she just TRUST it and not slather all that goo over it? The soprano's need for control mars every aspect of her performance, from diction to plastique; she's completely "inside her head", editing herself into rags.

I only wish she would pay so much attention to her appearance: when you dress her up, she somehow looks matronly instead of sophisticated. The Ponnelle costumes for this character are famously ugly (who else would put Manon in a brown chenille bathrobe?), so there's no help there. But even Ms. Fleming's wigs were unflattering, especially that Cours-la-Reine powdered number, which looked like something you would give to the Countess de Coigny. And the lighting looked like it was designed by **Ruth Ann Swenson**.

The production has been cleaned up a lot since 1988, but it's still quite ugly and cheap-looking. The vestiges remaining of **Jean-Pierre Ponnelle's** direction suggest he had major issues with women -- or maybe just **Cathy Malfitano**. And how the house ROARED when Fleming suddenly tore off her overdress at St. Sulpice, revealing a RED RED RED gown underneath: "Ne suis-je plus SUPERMANON!"

Maestro **Rudel** repeated a lot of the choral music at this rehearsal, which I must say sounded really sloppy for this late stage of the game-- but, after all, *Carmen* and *Turandot* are in the rep, too, so you know where the chorus have been spending their time. We did hear a lot of classic Rudel French style, with the disturbing addition of some very thick fortes and some exaggerated slow tempi.

As we left the theater, I noted a van parked outside the Met stage door, emblazoned with a sign reading "Boys Choir of Harlem". Quipped my companion: "Wow, Munich must have raised the stakes!"

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PETER AND RICHARD

spent the entire summer holed up in hot, eventless San Antonio, pretending they were unable to travel because of Richard's sprained ankle, while hated rivals Edmund & Bailey, John & John Too, Kurt, and Edgar & Lyle sent back gloating postcards from Bayreuth, Pesaro, Vienna and London. But when came September, the boys were off on a whirlwind U.S. opera tour, thanks to Southwest Airlines cutrate funfaires. They took in four operas in two cities in the course of six days, pausing only to post "We Were There and You Weren't" notes. Opera in Texas is such bloodsport.

First stop was San Francisco, where the only refurbishing we could see -- apart from lots of spanking-new gold leaf, was smaller cocktail glasses. But, first things first. Although they usually nest in luxury suites overlooking Union Square, the boys opted this time for something more atmospheric, a hotel of questionable morals south of Market Street, within easy staggering distance of the opera house. No stars in the guidebook, but a yellowed porn mag of days gone by gave the place a 3-dildo rating -- all the encouragement we needed. Thanks to four free drink tickets each, we immediately became a hit with the hot-and-cold running hustlers in the hotel bar. Ten bottles from a nearby liquor emporium moved the action upstairs to our film noir hotel room. Several European tourists also stopped by for a drink and a visit to Richard and Peter's bathroom, the only private john on the fourth floor. By the time curtain time neared, the boys were in such a "70s never ended" mood that they didn't care if the performances turned out less than stellar.

Scheduled first was *Rigoletto* with Gavanelli, Leech and Swenson. But opera curtains cannot go up without front-page intrigue. Leech canceled due to a family emergency, and a substitute named Carlo Scibelli was duly hired, flown in, and even photographed for the souvenir program before Missy Ruth Ann protested him. Third up was Martin Thompson, who turned out weak and lightweight.

Missy, on the other hand, did not disappoint. Exquisite phrasing, long-lined breath control, that KILLER trill, as accurate as a sidewinder's rattling -- she enchanted. The whole coda of "Caro nome" was obliterated by the frenzied screams of brava queens. And what a delight to hear a real voice sing those cumshot notes above C, instead of the mouse squeaks we usually get. Gavanelli was also in great form, capable of both loud rant and pianissimo bel canto purity. And the flower maidens were out in force, hurling six bouquets to Missy and at least 10 to Gavanelli. To fetch badly aimed floral tributes, both artists had to tiptoe onto the bizarre plexiglass "river" on the apron of the de Chirico ripoff sets.

San Francisco is still not a conductor's venue: David Robertson had no idea what he was doing, though he managed to follow the soloists without mishap. Afterward, the boys held open house in room 406, a blur of Bjoerling highlight cassettes, booze, German tourists watching *Baywatch* on TV, and hustlers listening intently to Richard's allusions to "my trust fund."

Second up was *Death in Venice*, with a big tall adult blond ballet hunk Tazio

well worth dying for. The opera was an exercise in verismo in this venue: the audience (some in tuxes, some in leather and muscle tees) were sighing louder than Kenneth Riegel's Aschenbach. The tenor looked like Tennessee Williams caught in the act of licking medicine bottle caps, but he sounded strained and nasal, like Jon Vickers doing a rude party imitation of Alfredo Kraus. In a very "nineties" moment, the surtitles conked out for the first ten minutes of the show, leaving us all wondering what, if any, language, Riegel was singing in.

Since when does opera have to be about keening divas? What could be a more classic theme than the plight of an old queen yearning for chicken, or, in this production, for full-grown cock? And that eerie soundtrack music transforms the drama in to the most intense cinema of impossible desire. In the finale, the corps lowered Tadzio over the body of the dying Aschenbach, and we all giggled nervously as that massive bulge grazed over Riegel's face.

Alfonso Antoniazzi, who got into the spirit of things by outing himself in a local paper, sang the multiple baritone roles, to accolades from the audience – although the breeder minority in the audience made a few rude comments about his very foppish interpretation of the Fop. The Lotfi Mansouri production, all slide projections, looked like it came in well under its \$300 budget. *Death in Venice* is a short opera, over by 10:20, which left us plenty of time to investigate the legendary Castro night life. Everything stays open until 5 am, which is fine, because in San Francisco apparently nobody goes to work "the next day."

Remember that Texaco Opera Quiz that asked what opera roles were in Tosca's repertoire? Well, when Carol Vaness sings the Roman diva, it's easy to imagine Tosca doing the Countess in *Figaro*. Vaness did the cool, regal thing in the first act of Puccini's opera, looking gorgeous as Capucine from the sixties. She could easily star in an Aaron Spelling nighttime soap, though I don't know how well she'd fare in a catfight with Joan Collins. Even if she was a little chilly, we should count our blessings. In LA, we would have got Maria Ewing. The soprano was even more gorgeous in Act Two, her court gown looking like something Ingres might have designed for Josephine's coronation. Meanwhile, someone must have reminded her that "if it's Tosca, you're supposed to throw props", so she impetuously flung her shawl in Scarpia's face. And the rustling sound of her silk train during the tense silences of the second act finale made a thrilling effect. Along the way, Vaness contributed lots of cool smooth singing: "Vissi d'arte" as Mozartean lamento.

Her Scarpia was James Morris, so wooden you wanted to check his legs for termites. Just how consumed with lust is a man who spends all his time staring at Nello Santi? (Don't answer that question.) Mario was Richard Margison, a big boy with a big voice and big high notes that excited the balcony, where these things matter. Meanwhile, Nello hacked his way through the score in Nelloesque fashion.

Peter tuned out Morris's barking by musing on this subtext: Scarpia is gay, hot for Mario, and therefore delights in playing mindfuck with his rival. Well, it's an idea. His mind further wandered to his glory nights at the War Memorial, starting in 1973: Rysanek nights, Kraus nights, Caballe nights –

he was so moved by the Proustian interlocking of past time and regret he almost missed the stabbing. Every operagoer should keep a detailed diary of every performance attended – some day, it will get you through some very long late nights. Peter found comfort this night in the memory of a Dallas *Tosca* two decades ago with Olivero and Pavarotti.

Strolling back through Haight-Ashbury to the hotel, Richard and Peter stopped at a garage sale on a deserted street, where they discovered, for \$5 each, some rare 19th century French opera scores. Peter grabbed up *Le Cid*, *Herodiade*, *Dinorah*, *Cendrillon*, *Le Songe d'une Nuit d'Ete*, *Etienne Marcel*, *Robert le Diable*, *Le Barbier de Seville* (with "Di tanti palpiti" as the Lesson Aria) and a *Lucrece Borgia* which included that adorable first act cabaletta that Richard wouldn't let Joan sing because someone else found it first. Peter had to buy a thriftshop suitcase to lug these treasures home.

Next stop, Chicago for the opening-night *Nabuccol*, with a cast (Agache, Ramey, Guleghina) to put the Met to shame. The traditional parade of zillionaire widowed crones bedecked in the haute couture of the late 1940's set the stage for High Glamour. The Chicago Lyric, a gorgeous Art Deco structure, is kept immaculate and gleaming, staffed with wholesome, healthy, and helpful ushers, which is enough to reinforce Richard's determination never to return to Lincoln Center.

Maria Guleghina is the Ethel Merman of opera, with two volumes, loud and louder. Even her pianissimo was loud. According to your taste, she has either a lively vibrato or a wobble as wide as Pavarotti's butt, but that hardly matters when she annihilates the orchestra and chorus in the big ensembles with that flame-thrower of a voice, or when she caps the daughter-father duet with an electrifying high E-flat. Her acting, it is true, is all lurch-and-stagger, with the occasional train-kick for variety – like Theda Bara tanked up on Spanish Fly.

Agache, announced as indisposed, sounded like '80s Cornell MacNeil, only weaker; surely he must sound better when he is well. But true superstar allure was present in the person of Sam Ramey, who portrayed Zaccaria not as a doddering graybeard, but rather as a young, virile stud...well, as Sam Ramey, basically. But where is it written that the character must be 80 years old, especially when he sounds like a blend of the best parts of Pinza, Siepi and Ghiaurov? They should name streets after this man. Ramey and Guleghina sang both verses of their cabalettas, but Ramey embellished his.

Peter once helped decorate the high school gym in Tyler, Texas for the senior prom, and it looked a hell of a lot more Babylonian than Michael Yeargen's embarrassingly tacky sets. Jane Greenwood's costumes suggested a lavish '50 science fiction flick, with Nabucco's warriors transformed into Japanese firefighters and Fenena (Robynne Redmon) done up like Jane Mansfield. She and Guleghina brought down the house when they played tug-of-war over Daddy's crown. Blame Elijah Moshinsky for this mess.

Richard Breath wants to know: what tribute will the Met offer the late Sir Rudolf Bing? Answer: none. It might conflict with the Gala Concert (and PBS telecast) Celebrating Ten Years Since Jimmy's Last Haircut.

Peter Hunter and Richard Breath

"La Gran Scena is UNBELIEVABLE! Ira Siff is the GREATEST artist in the world! Though they are calculated to be a spoof, they are the FINEST singers I have ever heard. They have EVERYTHING that is top-drawer in an *opera* *ambiance*. I JUST ADORE THEM!"

The inimitable speaking voice of Leontyne Price soars through the East Village studio of La Gran Scena's impresario/diva Ira Siff. His eyes twinkle as we listen to taped interview in which the great American soprano gushes about a recent program of the company. He stops the tape, and after our delighted giggling sputters out, Siff finishes telling the story. La Price heard him (in his persona of "traumatic soprano" Vera Galupe-Borszkh) sing the demanding "Poker Scene" from Puccini's *La fanciulla del West* and rushed backstage to offer her congratulations, confessing that she (Price) counted Minnie as one of her few failures on the operatic stage. "It wasn't the notes, my dear. I had the notes – the highest of which is only a C-sharp..." The 60-something diva then demonstrated that tone directly into the ear of the astonished but delighted Siff.

That's just one a myriad of great backstage tales Ira Siff has amassed in his 16-year career with La Gran Scena, as well as over 30 years as a regular attendee at virtually every "event" in the New York opera armament. Meanwhile he has built a solid reputation as one of New York's finest coaches in the operatic and cabaret repertoire; the latest of his "discoveries" is club superstar Varla Jean Merman. Siff took an hour off recently from rehearsals of the company's new show "Vera: The Life of a Diva" to talk about, well, life and art, what else?

James Jorden: If you were going to live your life as another person....

Ira Siff: (laughing) If? How do you think I have spent my life so far?

JJ: I mean, besides Vera...

IS: Not Mother Teresa! Do you have to take the whole life, or just the *brani scelti*?

JJ: You can have just the one disc.

IS: I would love to be Leonie, but I know how she must suffer. I've had the fantasy part of being some of those great divas. I get to draw my own costumes with, as Renata Scotto would say, "sleeves importante." I get to come out and hear a wall of screaming, which is the big "I'm not worth this" level of self-fulfillment. You know, I think I would go to another place entirely – like maybe be a shrink. In a sense, a lot of what I do with my voice students is therapy, so maybe I could be a therapist – and get paid like a therapist instead of like a downtown opera coach. And definitely to have a villa in Tuscany, which

I've longed for and longed for – and realized that I would have to settle for something in the Catskills.

JJ: If you were going to change something about yourself...

IS: I won't go cosmetic, because that could all be changed anyway—either a thicker skin or a stronger sense of self, maybe, where I could be as diplomatic as I like to be but more assertive. Not in a "nineties" way—to be there, be present, be secure, to have enough confidence so that when I balk at something, people will not be so shocked that it doesn't go over well. I'm not a good networker, not really aggressive. If I were more like that, maybe Gran Scena would be farther along, even the way some of my travesty counterparts are in, say, the pop field.

JJ: If you had the opportunity to work with one artist -- from past or present?

IS: Speaking as myself—because I know what Vera would say: "Visconti and de Sabata, doing *Anna Bolena* – I still can trill" -- but as me, I would love to be involved in a production with Scotto, as a director, as a stagehand, as the hem of her dress, even as her "sleeve importante." She is the one left who can still draw from that well of "then" that is now going very dry. Plus she is still coherent – the other ones, I'm not so sure.

JJ: Now, if you could cast one favorite opera, including the production team, for your favorite opera – what would that be? Since it's a fantasy, you can draw on artists from now or then.

IS: Whoa. Well, I love *Adriana Lecouvreur*, but I've seen Magda, and Scotto and Caballe, and that opera has a certain potential that I think was very much fulfilled by those performances.

JJ: So what I'm saying is, an opera that has potential that you haven't seen fulfilled?

IS: I've never seen a great *Norma*, though I've heard plenty of tapes of great *Normas*, which makes me suspect that *Norma* improves if you don't have to watch it. *Don Carlo* is one of my favorite operas. I would have to go with a five-act Italian version, not the French version, because that's just my background. Who would do it? Oh, dear! For the production end, Visconti, because he understood mise-en-scene and characterization. This opera calls for a setting that looks incredibly real and impressive, in which the characters are vivid and human. The scope of the physical production would place in relief the pain of Elisabetta, the intellect and the heart of Posa. That's much more interesting to see than bits and pieces. I would love to have Christoff as Filippo, Talvela as the Grand Inquisitor,

because that was the most menacing noise I ever heard in that role, Mattila as Elisabetta I have not yet seen, but in my mind's eye and ear, it's heartbreaking. Leonie's was heartbreaking too, though not so well sung at the time she was doing it, and Scotto was transcendent. Choosing a soprano is always tough. Gobbi as Posa, and you can take that from 1948-1952. Carlo: an algam of Berg with someone else's body. Eboli. There are some mezzos from the 30s that I love. Do you know Meghini-Cattaneo, a demented woman who sang at La Scala, a real wild woman? Her Azucena's fabulous, but could she get through the Veil Song? I would have to say Cossotto about 1968, or Shirley about 1968. I saw them both, but of course I preferred Cossotto's Italian. The conductor. Serafin. The opera needs a strong hand, but not his propensity for cuts. *Don C* really needs the shape and sense of pulse he can give this music. But I get to choose the cuts.

JJ: On the other hand, which opera would you prefer never to hear again?

IS: I have some operas like *Tosca* that I really feel like I have heard everything anyone can do with the part. "Don't make me" is the feeling, having seen Callas and Olivero—having seen them all. My mind just goes away, I can't get through it. But I never say never. While I was teaching in Italy this summer, I went to La Scala and I heard Millo do the part, and it was like hearing Stella. So Italianate, the way she did the enunciation, the declamation was so beautiful. And of course at this point the role of *Tosca* holds NO vocal hurdles for her. Even the C in "io quella lama", which I thought might be a problem because it comes after a lot of stressful singing — piece of cake!

JJ: She's bringing the role to New York, I hear, opposite Jose Cura...

IS: Great! They didn't give Millo a good supporting cast in Milano. The conductor, Bitchkov (however it's spelled, that's the way it should be pronounced) favored Gorachakova, but Aprile was fabulously non-dishy about that. She made the best of what she got. The only thing was that Bitchkov, who led everything like a bizarre Elisabeth Schwarzkopf wetdream, the tempi were so peculiarly slow all evening. — in the "Vissi d'arte", Millo hit a rather excellent B-flat, and Bitchkov rushed the orchestra forward. What do you do? I literally wanted to leap from the box and kill him.

JJ: Of all opera performances, which left you feeling the most cranky?

IS: Mmm. A 27-way tie, I think. Certainly well up there would be the *Lucia* the Met did for June Anderson — or should I say *against* June Anderson — that plot against poor June. There was a *Tosca* with Pavarotti and Caballe in the mid-80s where they both just walked through it. That's the one where she was playing with her jewelry before the murder. I couldn't figure out what was going on. She started to take off her bracelets and rings, and I thought, he just said he's not "venal", and then I realized suddenly she was undressing to have sex with Scarpia! That's the one where she didn't jump at the end, just strolled offstage, like she was looking for a better spot to leap from. Now, something that made me quasi-cranky was the *Francesca da Rimini* — at that point, making that choice of that repertoire. If they really wanted to do a verismo opera for Scotto, that wasn't perhaps the most desirable choice. I personally would have chosen *Zaza*...

JJ: You know, they were talking about a revival of *Francesca* for Vaness—but she turned it down.

IS: Well, she's getting smarter. She must have looked at the score and did a Peggy Lee, "Is that all there is?" You really have to be a Magda, with that vocal

thrust, to make the "nothing" that's there seem like something, and at that point, Renata's voice was thickening, and no matter how you gussied it up with sets and costumes, there was just no "there" there. It does come off better as a video, but—this was very sad—the following season, she had it much more under control. Sometimes, you know, these things take a while to get into the voice. I went back, because I had to see what I could see of her, because it was clear there wasn't going to be much more. They gave her Mauro, and the house was half-empty, but the performance was the performance she should have given opening night. Much more voice in the center, much more thrust to the voice. But even when it became a heavier voice, it wasn't the **right** voice — Freni's had more the rapidity of vibrato and thrust that makes this music work.

JJ: In your career, what do you most regret?

IS: I never sang the final scene from *Salome*.

JJ: Now, how is "Vera... Life of a Diva" different from your other shows?

IS: The format of "Vera" is not the gala business hosted by Sylvia Bills. It begins at the end, with Vera close to demise in Villa Costatropo, fading fast due to Opera Malaise, exacerbated by disappointment in love, vocal ups and down, the humiliation of having to teach master classes... She feels that it is time her story be told, and if she doesn't tell the story, someone else will, and you know what that means: *Master Class*. So she comes back, "out of herself" and recounts her life. It begins with her birth in Russia, offstage, underscored by the *Forza* overture. Vera springs forth, the doctor slaps her, and she emits her first sound: a long, floated "PAAAAA-CE!" The doctor announces, "It's a diva!" And so the show recounts her life, with bits and pieces of arias and songs. For example, when Vera leaves Russia, she sings "Ebben? Ne andro lontana". On the long train ride from Odessa to Rome she meets Philine Wannelle, a disappointed Miss America contestant. They support themselves as gondoliers in Venice, singing the cabaletta to the *Norma* duet. Vera saves enough money to coach with Maestro Galupe, the last living castrato. Galupe falls in love with her and proposes by singing Denza's "Occhi di fata". They fall in love, and their singing is a metaphor for sex, but the maestro dies while chasing her around Mount Aetna (he can't get an eruption) singing "La danza." As Vera Galupe-Borszkh, she begins her "really great career", until demanding conductors leave her "totally fached up." She forms her own opera company, presenting such fare as *Samson et Dalila* with Philine Wannelle and Bruno Focaccia, and falls in love with Hungarian baritone Fodor Szadan. During a performance of *Tosca* — should I give away any more plot twists, or is that twisted enough? Suffice it to say that the second act follows the later life of Vera, when she is giving a master class on "Io son l'umile ancella" to the young American soprano Kavatina Turner. And Vera makes another comeback as *Manon*, in a program narrated by America's Most Beloved Retired Diva Sylvia Bills, and so the story comes full circle. The finale is suggested by the film of Sara Scuderi at the Casa Verdi singing along with her recording of "Vissi d'arte".

JJ: Breathtaking!

IS: It takes a lot of breath, that's for sure.

JJ: Are you an opera queen?

IS: Of course!

JJ: And exactly what does that mean to you?

IS: It means your heart beats a lot faster when you're considering any aspect of this cockamamie art form. And you have an especially deep commitment that seems idiotic to academics. Now, it's nice to transcend the opera queen thing, sometimes to get more intellectual— but mostly it's an emotional thing, that high B-flat in "Pace" or *Gioconda*. It's about who did what in which performance that was only surpassed by that other one in that other performance. It gives you, as Stefan Zucker said for so many years, "CATHARSIS" (only he said it an octave higher). If you achieve catharsis from opera, you're an opera queen. If you do, but you don't admit it, that makes you a closet opera queen, and if you don't — I feel sorry for you.

JJ: What opera today are you going to crawl over broken glass to hear?

IS: It's sounds depressing to say "nothing", but let me preface that by saying when you do this —not just sing, but also run a company — there are periods in your life in which you are so overworked and stressed out and overburdened time-wise, and trying to consider everyone. My head is in New York, Spain and London — and even right now I have to keep one ear out for the phone, because it may be the venue for the Spain show-- at those times you just can't stop and think, what do I want to see? Of course I'm going to hear Voigt do the *Ariadne*, and I would love to see the *Don Carlos* with Mattila and Alagna, but I couldn't afford to fly to London. Anyway, that's just not where my mind is now. And I think Leonie has retired once and for all, right? I wouldn't mind seeing Scotto's Kundry, which I've heard on tape. I've certainly done my share of walking on broken glass, sleeping on the street for three nights to hear Callas do Tosca, and all that stuff. I don't think it's over. But my mind right now is on the company: where it's going, it is over?

JJ: I mean, I don't like to think of you as one of the hundred neediest cases, but you perform this enormous service, and yet, what you do is so much fun...

IS: All I really want to do is to continue giving people that fun. The fun and the commitment from the performers are things that are lacking a bit in the real opera—that's why we're doing this. Of course, it was also an event for what I wanted to do myself, but there are other people in the company with tremendous amounts to offer in the line of searing intensity. Our main problem is: **if we had the bookings, with just a bit of fundraising, we could be making it.** The reason the company seems to be going under, and may go under this year, is simply that there is insufficient work.

JJ: Do you think that's because of the gay thing?

IS: I think that's a lot of it. The travesty thing, the drag. There is a kind of homophobia that affects us deeply. It's not so bad for Les Ballets Trockadero, because when a ballet company comes to town, everyone just **assumes** they're gay, so there's no surprise. We are a very hard booking in the US. Even Columbia Artists has trouble, and they were sure booking us would be a breeze. But when we do get a booking in the states, audiences adore it, the press adores it, the public comes to the reception on bended knee saying they never had so much fun in their lives. Yes, they do get it, because you know it's layered so **everyone** can get it. So we could make it if people would just **RELAX** and book us, or else if we had a couple of opera queens — or opera devotees — dropping \$10,000 on us a season. All we need is for someone to understand that a not very large tax-writeoff for them would save our lives. We have a lot of fans who are

wealthy people who support Glimmerglass or are on the board of New York City Opera, even on the board of the Met or OONY — what they consider a "serious" opera company. And that's another dynamic: La Gran Scena is funny, and no one realizes being funny is hard work. When you go to, say, the Ridiculous Theater and you laugh and laugh, who guesses how much angst and trauma poor Everett [Quinton] is in? We got this ridiculously cumbersome grant from Alice Tully Hall, \$5,000 to perform there — when it costs us about \$25,000 to put on the show. If we can pull this off, it will be the most wonderful night — sixteen years will culminate in La Gran Scena INVITED to Lincoln Center. I wish I knew who those people are, who can help us.

JJ: Who can take you seriously.

IS: When you go to something funny, you tend to forget the seriousness of the nuts and bolts that go into it. It doesn't feel like it's art, because it's funny. The humor is there totally to communicate an ideal. Ross Barrentyne has come back to us for our performances in Spain, and in rehearsal of the *Trovatore* scene, he said, "You used to do the register break there, and now you do it there. Why?" Now, the register break is funny in itself; it's a signature thing I do in Azucena's aria. But it's **THERE** because that's what Azucena does, chest voice is a tradition in this repertoire. Every tiny thing has a reason, tied to some tradition, something that really happened. I saw a Scarpia move after he was dead — Bastianini eased himself into a more comfortable position, and Tucci just **GLARED** at him. So our Scarpia sneezes.

JJ: I know exactly what you mean. The humor is a vehicle for truth, not an end in itself. Really, I flatter myself that *parterre box* does something similar—truth through humor, I mean.

IS: Oh, by the way... just an aside, Inez...

JJ: "Ah, narratami il strano avventimento!"

IS: Thank you. The only review quoted on the brochure for "Life of a Diva" is from *parterre box*. I mean, I'm not going to print reviews from certain sources I don't care to name (even though they have "expanded" arts pages, and therefore no excuse for not reviewing us on time), but your writer understands us. I open the zine, and I think, "Oh, I wasn't in the best voice, and this could have gone better..." but I read your review, and I feel so vindicated because you saw what we were trying to do. Other critics, say, the *Times*, we can be in phenomenal form, in great voice, and no matter what the review says, it's still disappointing because.... they didn't get it. Audiences make the cognitive leap easily enough, and come backstage full of praise, even though I want to say, "Oh, you should have heard it last Friday!" But those "reportage" critics don't feel anything or have any opinion. They don't have that opera queen "heart-beating-faster" stuff. They just tell what went on — "this joke, that joke, this note, that note..." Anyway, I think you said you wanted to have a word with Vera?

JJ: I know you're fiercely busy...

IS: But this is my fun! Here's Vera...

JJ: Mme. Galupe-Borszkzh, if you were...

Mme. Vera Galupe-Borszkzh: Please, we are all friends here. You may call me "Madame."

JJ: Madame, if you were going to live your life as another person, who would

that person be?

Mme. V G-B: Who could be better than I?

JJ: Is there anything you would change about yourself?

Mme. V G-B: I would like chromatic scales to be cleaner. I am working on this. I have joined a twelve-step program, but since there are thirteen steps in a chromatic scale, this may be the problem.

JJ: You are both diva and impresario ...

Mme. V G-B: I prefer "*directa*."

JJ: If you had the same choice I gave Mr. Siff earlier, how would you cast your ideal opera?

Mme. V G-B: I would not be in this opera? Ah, that makes it difficult. I am thinking I would like to see *Norma*. I would like to see Callas and de los Angeles (as Adalgisa). I would like to see Corelli, but I always would like to see Corelli, singing or no. And Christoff so I can find out first-hand what really happened during those curtain calls. For conductor, not Serafin, instead someone Callas could boss around. Which means anybody, really. Nicky Rescigno would be fine.

JJ: In your career, what do you most regret?

Mme. V G-B: I never sank the final scene from *Salome*.

JJ: Is there anyone who hates you?

Mme. V G-B: In all things I try to remain oblivious. I float above petty scandal as I float ravishing pianissimi above the staff. There are perhaps some composers who would hate me if they were alive, but fortunately they are not, so I can have my way with them.

JJ: Joan Crawford once said, "The most important thing an actress can have, after her talent, of course, is a good hairdresser." What, after your talent, is most important to you?

IS: My hairdresser. No, really, he is. My hairdresser has been my partner for 21 years now.

Mme. V G-B: He was asking me, I think.

JJ: Oh, yes. Next to your talent, Madame, what is most important?

Mme. V G-B: Next to my talent, **nothing** is important.

Ira Siff stars as Vera Galupe-Borskzh in La Gran Scena's production of "Vera...Life of a Diva." The official New York premiere is at the Sylvia and Danny Kaye Playhouse November 25, 28, 29 and 30. For more info, phone 212-460-9124 or email cdomingues@worldnet.att.net or write to La Gran Scena, 211 East 11th Street #9, New York, NY 10003

a boy and his diva

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how it all began?

All I know is that I've been in love with opera for as long as I can remember being alive. Growing up in a strict Seventh-day Adventist family did not, however, permit much time for the enjoyment of what was considered to be the most frivolous of art forms. While my parents shunned opera, they did enjoy singing and so while not with the frequency of Judy, Ella and Trini Lopez, the voices of Mario Lanza and Lily Pons did, on occasion find their way into our home. **Real opera was lumped together with candy, tobacco, red meat, alcohol and sex as "wrong."** But I was a child who would walk around Ozone Park in a Batman cape, wearing Chiquita Banana stickers on his head while putting on outdoor extravaganzas featuring the music of Jimmy Durante, Frank Sinatra and Edith Piaf, so it made sense I would gravitate to so forbidden an art.

The most holy Sabbath day was, of course, reserved for religious observances and neither radio nor television were permitted to be turned on until after sunset. By the time I was eight I realized I could retire to my room to read the Bible or some prophetic volume without causing the folks to be suspicious. It was there, in my room, with my Juliette clock radio with faux walnut trim, that I became addicted to the Metropolitan Opera broadcasts. I would listen only to the music, taking a break during the quiz and plot analysis to make "appearances" in front of my family. These usually involved accompanying myself on a hymn, inserting portamenti, gruppetti and trills into "There's room at the cross for you" or "Tis so sweet to trust in Jesus." The family would get a chuckle and Dad would pronounce me "another Mario Lanza!"

The first voice that I fell in love with is the voice I listen to each day still. La Divina. I thought I would grow up to marry her, age difference be damned, I would save her! The first thing I heard was her first recording of the *Lucia* Mad Scene. I'd never experienced anything like it. Her voice, like her picture on the box, beautiful and heartbreaking. Shortly thereafter I heard *Medea* and my whole world changed. I'd never heard such violence emanating from a human throat; such torrential explosions of sound tearing through a body. I visualized her soul, her blood, even bits of internal organs flying out through the speakers for me to drink in, inhale, devour. The sheer schizophrenic cacophony of pure, raw emotion in her voice traversed fury, erotic longing, nobility, pity, terror, and most of all revenge -- within the space of a single recitative. Obsessed, I would play it, over and over, often wrapping myself in a deep burgundy quilt, jumping onto the sofa and in my most menacing 10 year old voice hurling "Taci, Giason, e affissimmoto il solo?" into the farthest



reaches of the living room.

I'm not certain I was even aware of what these emotions were and yet, it mattered not at all. I was feeling. I was alive. And I needed more. I needed everything. I'd save my allowances for another "fix" of Maria.

At boarding school I cut classes to hitchhike into the city to buy more Maria. I procured a job as an accompanist in the music department, the only place on campus with a turntable. I would often skip meals so I could be alone in the building with Maria. Tosca, Traviata, Butterfly all became "real" to me here. Closing my eyes I could see her lay the candles at Scarpia's head, watch her tearfully read Germont's letter, and peering through the shoshi I watched her plunge the dagger into her breast.

Not for me the restraining artifice, or the pretty warblings other singers could provide. I was an addict and as such I needed the pure stuff, the real stuff, the stuff that made Puccini, Verdi, Bellini and Cherubini write as passionately as they did. I needed it sung by this woman; this sorceress, capable of transforming herself into the composer's slave, obeying his will with savage abandon, offering herself proudly and without hesitation as the ultimate sacrifice and, whether unaware or unconcerned, always accepting of whatever harm he should inflict upon her. That is what La Divina did for this little boy. It is what she does still for the man he became.

— Paolo

A few weeks ago, I was doing some house-cleaning, and ran across some of my old textbooks. I thumbed through a particular tome, and there, staring me in the face, was the "autograph" of my all-time favorite singer, Zinka Milanov. This "autograph" was really one of my day-dreaming doodles, as I sat in the classroom at Queens College (why does that school name seem most appropriate?) centuries ago, awaiting the end of class, so I could run madly to the Met and stand for yet another Zinka Milanov performance, one of 87 that I attended during the "last Golden Age" at that beloved old theater where my opera life began.

I attended my first opera, *Aida*, on the afternoon of November 11, 1951, in an orchestra seat that cost a fortune, an amazing seven dollars! Now, who, I wondered, could that fat lady with the frizzy hair be? Why was she wearing a

purple queen-sized bed sheet? And why did she keep hugging the scenery? She reminded me of the silent film actresses. . . maybe someone who would have appeared opposite Valentino or John Gilbert? I have no specific recollection of her voice, only the visual element; little did I dream that only a few months later I would be wearing out the grooves of a recording of an aria called something that sounded like "D'amor Sally Rosie." As I look back and listen to "D'amor sull'ali rosee" and all the other treasurable moments in the career of my great Zinka, I shed a tear or two, remembering what it was like to spend all those many freezing hours on the line, waiting for the moment when my first favorite diva would make her entrance in *Gioconda* or *Aida* or *Forza* or whatever it was that evening. I see an actual bloodstain on the jacket of the old RCA "Milanov Sings" album...next to her REAL autograph. I have been really excited that night—or maybe one of those high ppp's caused it!

Yes, that was the era of my very misspent youth, a time I would not trade for all the millions I might have made had I spent my time on Wall Street instead of on that line.

Ah! The line! Now, that was the only place to become a diva-lover! All those endless conversations that often evolved into fist-fights as we extolled the praises of our beloved favorite divas! What a child I was then! Fortunately I have more recently learned impeccable maturity and good taste, thanks to my new mentors, the editors of this magazine.

But, meanwhile, in the past. I did make a terrible error, I must admit, in admitting the existence of a person named Renata Tebaldi, who appeared to be a tremendous threat to some of the members of the Milanov clan. How, they wondered, could I POSSIBLY like Tebaldi — or ANYONE else who DARED to sing Zinka's roles, except possibly Herva Nelli ("Helluva Nervi"), who did not matter anyway. It irked them no end that Renata called me by name and treated me (and everyone else) like her adopted family. They even brought TEABALLS to the Met and screamed, "TEA-BALL-DEE!!!!" Somehow I managed to survive all this horror (I even lived through admitting that I liked Antonietta Stella's *Aida* MORE than Zinka's) and I was proud to be a member of Zinka's fan club.

You know, I was even more naive then than I am now. Would you



believe I actually WATCHED THE STAGE during the performance? I never knew what was going on I never realized, as I was later informed, to my chagrin, that there were some "goings-on" behind me in the standing room. I did take note of the fact that one night, when it was more crowded up there than the NY subway system at rush hour, I felt a kind of "pressure" upon a certain part of my body that made me wonder if it was really THAT crowded -- but to this day I never figured out if it was the pressure of all those people, or if that was the night I lost my virginity.

So, you very young prospective opera-lovers, I tell you -- go out and find yourself a diva you can adore and worship and worry about and fawn over and defend—a diva whose every hiccup you collect on live recordings -- a diva whose entire repertory you can rattle off, role by role, year by year. A diva whose voice one day, when you are in your twilight years, you will hear-- and the tears will well up within you, and you will remember what it was like to be young and foolish and happy. Well, I am a bit older, but I am still foolish and eternally happy that I loved Zinka and Renata and Regina and Virginia and Diana.

And for all of it I give thanks to thanks to Zinka Milanov, the greatest singer I ever heard. **Zinka adorata! Ah, come t'amo!**

Charlie Handelman

Unlike many operaphiles I had the luck to grow up in a household permeated by opera: my musically cultivated parents take their vocal music seriously. So I crawled and ran and played to the sound of Tourel, Danco, Callas, Steber, Deller, Fischer-Dieskau. Moreover their excitement and expertise imparted the sense that operatic singing could be an event to prepare for and discuss and recall with relish and feeling. Lucky boy! And yet my interest remained passive, since I had no musical talent and as a child was drawn chiefly to history and politics. Still, as new enthusiasms entered my parents' musical lives I would hear amazing new sounds and try to imagine the people that made them. Sutherland, Horne, Baker and Sills broke in successive waves across my father's turntable. **Initially I would ask of any female voice, "Is it Goan? Is it Goan?"** (By the time I was old enough to say "Joan", my parents had grown disenchanted with Sutherland's increasing bent for moaning and she was rarely played.)

The first singing that I recognized a "face" to was Baker's: "It was a lover and his lass," and then a BBC broadcast of "Erlkoenig" that held me (intuiting the precipices stretching avid before my youth?) riveted in a hotel room in London. The first recorded sounds I found so beautiful that I needed to know, instantly, whose they were came from: Milanov: the pianissimi and broad phrasing in her early "Madre, pietosa Vergine."

With trips to London came increasing sophistication and a wide exposure to theatre, well-performed. In a real sense my first divas were actresses like Janet Suzman, Susan Fleetwood, Maggie Smith and Joan Plowright. Unlike music

this was something I could do, and I memorized the seating plans and histories of Broadway theatres, tramped off to acting lessons at HB Studios and spent my allowance at the TKTS booth (\$8 for a Broadway show). The more I knew, however, the less I enjoyed (A Critic is Born) and the riper I became for an operatic awakening.

Strangely enough, though my parents had taken me to Shakespeare and Gilbert and Sullivan and all manner of theatre, they were very gingerly about opera, perhaps because my older siblings had been so quivocal about it--my sister's comment upon successive viewings of *Boheme* and *Traviata* was, "It's the same opera, she dies in the end." (With Moffo in both casts she was doubtless correct.) Sills in *Roberto Devereux* (1971) I had enjoyed, but only as a dramatic performance. My first Met outing that year (an Arroyo/Domingo/Milnes/Giaotti/Schippers *Ernani* I'd love to hear today) left me bored and puzzled.

The misery of adolescence--from which all my parents' books and records could not protect me a whit-- readied me for opera. **When the first thunderbolt struck, at 15 in 1975, I was all too well aware with Sills' Elvira that to love meant to cry.** I don't know what I would make of that *PURITANI* today but Sills was electrifying in pain and exultation, with the whole audience "with" her through the evening. I saw and admired and craved the gift of riveting a crowd; if personal happiness was unthinkable at least one could communicate. My own dramatic efforts at this time took on the strain of this ambition, each demonstration of operatic power upping the stakes. Haunted by Bellinian cantilena I poured my soul into English class readings of Richard II and Becket, making crescendos and whispering and attempting feats of breath control. (Less happily, I tried to writhe through a *Spoon River Anthology* staging with the intensity of Maralin Niska in *Salome*.) Other performances that year that fueled my imagination: Brooks as Violetta, Hines as Boris (utterly magnificent), Jones as Leonore, Caballe and Verrett in *Norma*, Dunn as Amneris and von Stade as Penelope. Awestruck as I remained at the sheer fact of singing, I began to know the repertory; to make comparisons; to note that famous singers did not always sing well-- alas, to gain the understanding that passeth love.



And then I heard Leonie Rysanek.

My mother had given me the Boehm *Walkure* for Christmas, and was good enough to indulge my demand that she exchange our subscription seats for the one (!) performance that year which reunited Rysanek and King. Fascinated by the sexy pictures of them in the LP booklet and by the odd, sometimes hollow and unearthly sounds she made (I have to say I loved the scream right off the bat and love it still) I still focused with the records mainly on Nilsson and on the music per se. February 24th, 1977, we made our way to our seats (mid-orchestra on the right aisle) and my idea of what a night at the opera could be was changed forever.

Was it (is it?) the pain in the voice? The fascination of its light and shade? The radiant high notes spoke for themselves. The yearning and the great sadness and the greater hope flooded the stage, and she roused King and Leinsdorf to something close to passion and the audience to a screaming standing ovation at the close of Act One. Of the rest I remember Hunter's impressively clean *Battle Cry*, a superb Fricka from Dunn and King all bronze command; but then it's back to Leonie, guilty and frightened and singing on her back, for God's sakes, then limp with devastation as her lover fell. **I can't describe what she did during "O herstes Wunder" because she sang it so thrillingly that I experienced a kind of short-circuiting, a visual hallucination that the stage was filled with waves of radiant white light,** and it took me most of the rest of the opera to settle down and concentrate on Hunter and Bailey's earnest efforts. Then and so often after Rysanek's great generosity lifted me onto a plane above critical analysis, beyond evident faults: beyond hers, and beyond mine. Free-- and in a throng-- simply to love!

-- David Shengold

What was the matter with me? Obviously I was different. I had no interest in Little League (especially not after getting hit in the side with a pitched ball.). My brief encounter with Boy Scouts was a disaster. I spent most of my time alone reading. I was the child of two sports-minded people; Dad was the star of his high school basketball team. It was difficult for someone with artistic leanings. Dancing lessons helped (until they were judged "unmanly"). It was, at least, creative. But I was drawn to the stage. I wanted to ACT. For some reason the "sports-minded people" found something unsavory about this. "Do you know what kind of people do that?" Did I? Probably. People like me.

We managed to reach a compromise. I was "allowed" to take voice lessons. My first instructor was a retired opera singer. -- she had played Santuzza and Aida (and had photos of herself in costume hanging on the wall of her studio to prove it). Her name was Miss (always "Miss") Kathryn Angle and she introduced this lonely child to a whole new, wonderful world. I started listening to the Metropolitan Opera broadcasts. Instead of playing outside on a beautiful Saturday afternoon like "normal" kids, I holed up in my small bedroom with my ear pressed against the portable radio, fantasizing about the

beautiful music enveloping me. There was an ad in an issue of *Opera News* for a 19 record set called *Der Ring des Nibelungen*. Miss Angle had spoken of this work. While not a Wagnerian soprano herself, she loved the music and transferred this love to me. I HAD to have this set for Christmas.

To the parents' credit, they managed to get it for me. I played the records over and over again, driving everyone else in the house crazy - especially my brother, who loved Dean Martin. All too soon the discs were worn out, but I was already worshipping at the temple of my first diva - Birgit Nilsson. **My God! What a voice! What a woman!** I used to put on the "Immolation Scene" and act the scene out in my bedroom with the door closed, away from prying eyes. Somewhere along the way I saw the movie *Interrupted Melody* on TV which was about the soprano Marjorie Lawrence. Marjorie actually leaped on a horse when she sang her role and this was the staging I used ... leaping on my bed and riding into the burning funeral pyre of my dead husband, while singing in Birgit Nilsson's voice.

I never saw Madame Nilsson live. Indeed, I loved opera for quite some time before I saw an actual live production. I tried to win a school contest for "artistically gifted" students. The prize was tickets to various performances at the Met, New York City Opera, and the New York Philharmonic. Unfortunately, I was not judged "gifted" enough and I lost out to the accompanist of the school choir. This loss felt all the worse when he tried to molest me in the school nurse's office just a few days later.

Miss Angle took me to see a production featuring my first, "in the flesh" diva. The opera was Handel's *Giulio Cesare* and the diva was Beverly Sills. It felt like she was singing just for me. Everything seemed to have a meaning; each gesture, glance, movement, ornament. I was enthralled and immediately purchased the RCA recording.

Unfortunately, Miss Sills and I were soon to be separated. I was about to go to college - in Kansas, to a school affiliated with the Quakers! But my going away present was a concert performance of *Semele* at the Waterloo Festival with Sills singing her heart out as the love of Jupiter. Afterwards, the ballsy Miss Angle pushed her way backstage where I met Miss Sills. I was so in awe of her, I'm sure I came off like a idiot, but she was exquisite.



Banished to Kansas, which really does look like the black and white segment of *The Wizard Of Oz*, I kept up with Miss Sills; her recordings of *Roberto Devereux* and *Cesare* and the "Bellini and Donizetti Heroines" album helped me stay sane. I know Sills has said that she didn't enjoy the recordings, preferring live performance. But I don't know what I would have done without them. And then, just when things got particularly rough my first year, my goddess made a personal appearance.

The school ran a trip to Tulsa to view a production of *Lucia di Lammermoor*. I had no great expectations for this (I mean ... TULSA, OKLAHOMA?) but at least it was opera and I was starved. On the bus, I settled into my seat and opened the program. Lucia: Beverly Sills. WHAT? What was Miss Sills doing in Tulsa, Oklahoma?

WHO CARED! She was here! And I was going to see her! I breathlessly awaited her first appearance. "Ancor non giunse!" Oh, God. All of my problems disappeared and for the next three hours I communed with my favorite diva. Yes, I cried during the "Mad Scene", because I was so involved with the character and partly because I knew that, once the scene was over, she'd go out of my life again.

But I still had my recordings. I used to sing along with the *Roberto Devereux* recording while trying to get my voice back after a nasty cold. You see, I had finally admitted to myself that I was in love with my college roommate only to have him get married -- and to request that I sing at his wedding. "Alma infida, ingrato core, ti raggiunse il mio furore!" That's what I should have sung, but instead I did a version of "Ave Maria" that was based on the "Meditation" from *Thais* -- an opera I would see Sills do at the Metropolitan years later.

When I returned from Kansas I finally saw the *Roberto Devereux* production (and cried for Elisabetta and myself and what could have been. And then I had to see it all: *Maria Stuarda* and *Anna Bolena*, *Barbiere di Siviglia* and *Il turco in Italia*. *Manon*. Lucia, again. And *Puritani*. The Met *Siege of Corinth*, which I was able to get one ticket for in the second season, and later *Don Pasquale* and *Traviata*. Finally, too soon, *La Loca*.

So very many memories.

— Senta

Renata Scotto is perhaps the finest artist of my generation, a truly poetic interpreter blessed with superb musicianship and fearless, almost reckless commitment to her art. She was also my first diva.

First I read about her: a review of her first two Columbia recital discs in *High Fidelity*, strong praise for the beauty of her voice and particularly for the sense of style in offbeat Verdi and warhorse verismo. I tracked down the discs at Baton Rouge's one record shop with a decent opera section, and I heard: a uniquely energetic, lean sound, ravishing in pianissimo, fiery in forte, with an

exhilarating sense of on-the-edge forward propulsion.

Meanwhile I was reading about her in *Opera News*. This guy Robert Jacobson was (as I would say today) a very major Scotto queen. I remember his awe as he discussed her Met "comeback" in *Vespro Siciliani*, and his amazement and joy at her assumption of the three lead soprano roles in the Met's new-that-season *Trittico*. Wow, I thought, if these performances were anything like the excerpts on those Columbia discs, those lucky New Yorkers really must have heard something special. Lucky New Yorkers... then I found out that the Met's annual tour to Dallas included the *Trittico*. With Scotto! And Dallas is only 12 hours from Baton Rouge by bus! Well, as it turned out, I didn't get to Dallas by bus (another story), but I got there. And I must say the Met really put its best foot forward for me:

Carmen with Troyanos and Leona Mitchell (what a voice!). *Aida* with Arroyo, Dunn, McCracken and Quilico (about which all I can remember is that Martina threw her back out during the Triumphal Scene, and thus had to die standing up). A perfectly passable *Figaro* in which Lucine Amara really SANG the Contessa (and how often does that happen even NOW?).

And then came the night that changed my life. Before *Trittico*, I enjoyed opera; after *Trittico* I knew had found my religion.

Now I should preface this with the confession that I approached this performance with one reservation: I couldn't figure out how anyone who looked like Scotto could be a real diva. Her album cover photos revealed a short, dumpy, fortyish woman with a taste for ruffled organza, heavy eye makeup, faux pearls and frosted hair. Frankly, she looked like Prunella Scales in *Fawlty Towers*. In no way did she measure up to my standard of operatic glamour, which was Maria Callas, florid in red velvet (Tosca) or svelte in black chiffon (Carmen). Well, it's funny how these things work out. My first sight of Scotto was as Giorgietta in *Il tabarro*, and, hey, the blonde bouf and the come-fuck-me heels and the double chin all worked -- she was supposed to look like a *squadrina*, right? And only five minutes into the opera, I was so mesmerized by her committed plastique (the exact visual analogue of her vocal style) that I forgot, then and forever, Scotto's limitations of appearance. From that moment until now, she has always looked to me like the character, period.



I recall the fire and passion of her Giorgetta, and the terrifying abandon with which she flung herself around that precarious barge setting. I recall the oddly moving blend of tenderness and revulsion with which she regarded Michele (Cornell MacNeil) in the final scene. Most vivid of all, still audible in my mind's ear, is the huge crescendo she made on the high C in her "nostalgia" aria, **from whisper to full-throated cry, evoking with a single sound the character's desperate hunger to escape her stifling conventional life.**

Scotto ruined the role of Suor Angelica for me. Perhaps Diana Soviero can match La Scotto (I have not been fortunate enough to hear Ms. Soviero live in this part) but no one could ever surpass her. Besides her hauntingly beautiful singing (the rubato and portamento effects in "Senza mamma" were those only the greatest of artists would dare-- and **Scotto made every liberty she took sound inevitable**), I remember best the look on her face as she returned to the stage to brew the fatal potion. She literally glowed from within. Her interpretation of the Miracle was breathtaking: with no help from the Meet's cheapjack production (a single white floodlight stood in for the Heavenly Host) she walked slowly upstage toward her "baby", then crumpled, as if the spirit had simply and suddenly departed her mortal form. After perhaps a minute of breathless silence, the 4000 in the audience burst into what can only be called a riot of cheers, bravos, applause and sobs. The weeping diva staggered out for perhaps a dozen curtain calls, and then **THE APPLAUSE CONTINUED UNTIL THE MAESTRO ENTERED THE PIT TO BEGIN GIANNI SCHICCI--** a half-hour at least!

And her Lauretta was at once adorable and wonderfully funny-- one roll of her eyes during "O mio babbino caro" had the audience howling and applauding at the same time! The climax of this opera was Schicci's (Cornell MacNeil) entrance during the final love duet: he listened, rapt, to La Scotto soaring up to a radiant high D-flat, then hissed his final sung line ("Get out of my house") to the departing relatives in a tone that suggested, "You idiots almost made me miss my daughter's gorgeous singing!"

And that was only the **first** time I heard Scotto. There were many more, and she never, never disappointed. Now, about that fistfight in standing room with the jerk who called her "Miss Piggy" . . . perhaps some other time!

-- Dr. Repertoire

PARTERRE BOX is about
remembering when opera
was **queer** and **Dangerous**
and **exciting** and making it
that way **again**.

Boy, was I disappointed

when I visited the celebrated men's room at Yale University's Woolsey Hall (glowingly reviewed on the "cruisingforsex.com" website) the other night. In all the coming and going I saw only one penis -- and that one was there to go, not to cum.

But the evening was not a total loss. Leontyne Price, singing a recital upstairs, more than lived up to her exalted reputation, offering the sort of vocalism we all have come to love and hate and love-to-hate. Indeed, the evening seemed more of a personal appearance for the 70-year-old diva than a musical event, but that hardly seemed to matter. The voice still makes a visceral impact on the listener with a creamy tone uniquely her own, a top voice seemingly untouched by the years, and a stunning ability to spin out a gorgeous line in every register. The diva seemed to regard this program as not so much an opportunity to make music, but rather to unleash her voice. For example, "Befreit" went for naught until the climactic phrase "und mit mir weinen" when she suspended the pianissimo high note in the air for what seemed like an eternity before swelling it to a real forte and then finishing the phrase with breath to spare. It was one of those moments that even the most unrepentant stimmqueen couldn't improve after years of recalling and retelling.

In her signature arias and in the English-language songs that Price finally came alive interpretively, even going rather overboard. The maddest drag queen would not dare interpolate into "Pace, pace mio dio," Ms. Price's whoops, growls, grunts and moans, not to mention arm-flailing that would do pride to a home plate umpire. In the spiritual "Witness" she mixed scratchy belting and shouting, going over the top with some oddly compelling facial tics and body english. Her coy Japonaiserie gestures had to be forgiven rather than enjoyed, but not so her singing of the "Death of Butterfly" for her first encore, which was monumental in the outpouring of sound and emotion. In "Io son l'umile ancella" Ms. Price ironically revealed that music is the servant of her voice (and not the other way around) while "Summertime" was almost unrecognizable for all the jazzy "interpretive" overlay until a glorious pianissimo high note at the end.

She left us, as she has for always done, with Hall Johnson's arrangement of her mother's favorite spiritual, "This little light of mine," sung with sincerity and simplicity -- and a high B-flat as a reminder that, for all her eccentricities Leontyne Price is still one of the world's greatest singers.

"Barbara Sorte"

make no assumptions about anyone's sexuality, including your own.