MISS BITCHY SPICE, Soprano

MISS BITCHY SPICE is one of Britan's most sought-after (and most often found) young sopranos. A former Spice Girl, she was appearing in a Far East tour of LES MISERABLES when an outbreak of Mad Cow Disease decimated the cast. Miss Bitchy gallantly covered for her colleagues, portraying Madame Thenardier, Fantine, Eponine, Cosette, and Young Cosette in the same performance. This feat brought her to the attention of Sir Andrew Lloyd Webber who cast her as Eponine in the Dinner Car in a Royal Command Performance of STARLIGHT EXPRESS. Miss Bitchy made headlines by refusing to curtsey to Her Majesty after the performance. As she explained later, "I was too tall, I was afraid me bosoms would bounce out in Queenie's face." Sir Andrew then chose Bitchy to sing the role of Mary in a new all-lesbian recording of JESUS CHRIST SUPERSTAR. As Miss Bitchy explains, "I am not at this time a lesbian myself, but I'll say anything to get a gig!"

Reluctantly turning her back on Sir Andrew, Miss Spice tried out her pipes as a classical singer as the Seraph in a concert performance of Beethoven's CHRISTMAS AM OLBERGE with Andrea Bocelli. This was such a success that she was immediately engaged by the English National Opera for LES MAMELLES DE TIRESIAS where she triumphed in the dual roles of La Droite and Gauche. Since then, she has appeared as Lulu (in Peter Sellars' controversial "Loo Lulu" set in a men's room), Zerbinetta in the original 1912 version of ARIADNE AUF NAXOS (opposite Rowan Atkinson's M. Jourdain), and as "Christine Keeler" in Thomas Ades' FLOSS HERS TEETH. Bitchy's first Salome at L'Opera de Lyon (in the 1907 French version) garnered much press attention when Maestro Kent Nagano halted the performance in the middle of the Dance of the Seven Veils in order to attend to a "personal" problem involving his trousers.

This season, Miss Spice looks forward to performances of the Donizetti Three Queens ("What else?" she quips) in Vienna, her Boishoi debut as the Queen of Shemakan in LE COQ D'OR, and a return to Lyon as Massenet's ESCLARMONDE opposite Jose Cura as Roland. ("Now that's what I call a nice bum," Miss Bitchy told the press). Her American debut will be at Santa Fe, creating the role of "Julian" in Tobias Picker's WHORES OF LOST ATLANTIS, based on the novel by Charles Busch. ("I'm a woman playing a man playing a drag queen playing a woman. Eat yer heart out, Julie Andrews!")

An avid web-surfer, Miss Bitchy Spice has designed her own website featuring Miss Bitchy Spice's Diary (moment by moment descriptions of her operatic ventures in her own words), Miss Bitchy Spice Offers Career Advice, and Miss Bitchy Spice Explains It All To You (in which fans can ask questions and receive answers from the Diva).

You know, La Cieca doesn't like being contrary (ha!), but she must say that lately her opinions seem to be running precisely the opposite of the prevailing critical wisdom. Stephen Wadsworth's adaptation of Handel's Serse, hailed as the rebirth of music drama and the dawn of a new age of bel canto - La Cieca hated it. And Jonathan Miller's "Pardon my Zeitgeist" Rake's Progress, which nobody much cared for? Well, La Cieca didn't much care for it either, but she's seen worse. Xerxes was, you know, really cute in a Merchant-Ivory sort of way. It's got kids and dogs and bustling housemaids and a big butch guy in outrageous drag and a countertenor in a supporting role (so we can congratulate ourselves on our open-minded authenticity) and a girl singing the lead (so we don't have to listen to countertenors all night long). It's light, it's fluffy, it's fun! It's also a massive distortion of the opera Handel wrote, but that doesn't seem to faze anyone, least of all stage director Wadsworth, who also provided the clunky "English" translation. La Cieca fails to see any really pressing reason for performing this piece in the vernacular. After all, Serse was composed to an Italian text for an English-speaking audience, so it's not as if the show is text-driven. All the expression is in the music; hey, most of the arias could be sung on "ah, ah, ah, ah, ah" without anyone noticing. As it happens, "ah, ah, ah, ah" would be infinitely preferable to doggerel like "if you don't wed him I will behead him."

And then David Daniels walks on stage. Oh, yes, this is an artist with "enough"! ravishing timbre, formidable technique, and impeccable musical taste;
rarest of all, he has a singer's heart. His quiet, uncomplicated second-act aria was one of those times when 2,500 people all hold their breath for five minutes, and then the whole place explodes: no wonder that Marilyn Horne and Frederica von Stade consider Daniels their artistic heir!

The much-admired Lorraine Hunt is also an appealing and fiercely dedicated stage personality, but she seems to lack the chops for virtuoso repertoire, with shallow breath support, a short range and no particular agility. No doubt she would be fine in less "vocal" roles like Octavia or Charlotte. The dueling sisters, Susanna Waters and Amy Burton, sounded typically "American", i.e., adept but generic. It's a good thing their dresses were different colors.

Just before The Rake's Progress opened at the Met, Jonathan Miller had a long and entertaining chat with the Times in which he drew aesthetic parallels between Stravinsky's masterpiece and 1920's Berlin and pondered the psychology of everyman unconscious gestures. Fascinating, of course, but it didn't add up to anything on stage beyond Denyce Graves strutting around in Joephine Baker drag and Jerry Hadley scratching his nose a lot. The escaped, a big cold inhospitable empty box, dwarfed the performers and thwarted every attempt at characterful movement. The talented cast mostly just stood there; Hadley passed the time playing pocket pool. Not offensive, really. Just boring.

La Cieca caught the "off-night" performance, with Paul Plishka and Stefan Lano doing just fine. Plishka is hardly Gable-as-Rhett casting for Nick Shadow, but he found an overbearing, seedy side of the character that worked. Hadley's love and respect for this opera is obvious; Tom Rakewell is his great role. It is true that the voice is still in a bad patch, but this is a powerful portrayal, suggesting the torment of a Peter Grimes. I wonder if he has taken a look at the Britten score? Vocally, Anne Trulove wants a Fleming (or, in a Utopian opera house, a Steber), but Dawn Upshaw has a wonderful ability to make 20th century music sound like music. The highlight of her performance was not "I go to him", but the lullaby in Bedlam. seamless legato with every word not only clear but meaningful. Not why did Dr. Miller dress her in that dowdy little nylon cloth coat that made her look like an unemployed stenographer?

As Baba, La Graves was anything but drab, but the director vetoed all the character's best gags: no unveiling, no wig in the face, no big exit, nothing. The "Great Auk" song lies in precisely the weakest part of Graves' healthy voice: surely the point of this music is hearing an old bat play ring-around-the-break. As Sellem, Anthony Laciura treated us another slice of his trademark glazed ham. Lano made the score sound crisp and sweet -- quite an accomplishment when you consider how the Met orchestra usually treats quest conductors.

parterre box is proud to announce its latest DivaPage, dedicated to veteran dramatic soprano Dame Gwyneth Jones. The several linked pages include a biography of the artist, appreciations from her fans, photographs, links to other Jones sites, and a defense of the soprano against her detractors. Coming soon: a discography and a videography including rare "private" tapes. The page is located at

http://www.anaserver.com/~parterre/joneshome.htm

Dame Gwyneth remains La Cieca's favorite Turandot, of course -- especially int the video of the Andrei Serban production from Covent Garden. But now she has a rival. In her final Met performance of the Chinese Princess, Eva Marton was ON in a big way, her performance growing audibly and visibly more confident and poetic minute by minute. Certainly the voice shows signs of wear and tear. The vibrato is wide, and La Cieca admits that even on Marton's very best days there is simply no high C anywhere in this voice. Yes, of course she flubbed most of "In questa reggia" -- nerves. (Is this news? Who since Nilsson has sung this piece well on a regular basis?) But beginning at "Straniero, ascolta!" Marton's voice took on a ping and size that La Cieca has not heard from anyone (except La Svento!) in years. I certainly do not remember Marton's making such moving use of sustained quiet singing in middle voice. "Che nessun mi vada! La mia gloria e finita!" took on a really heartbreaking
color of regret, how often do we hear a Turandot who can be wistful? And, while the top was inconsistent early in the evening, Marton rocked Sybil's batta with a massive high A in "So il tuo nome" and even larger B-flat on the final "Amor!" (These moments were, you will remember, exactly where Jane Eaglen crapped out.) I could go on for pages about Marton's fascinating choices, but that would tend to suggest that her performance was a collage of effective "bits", not at all what each act was one sustained moment with a thousand inflections, all or only directly inspired by the text and the music. Even the way she folded her hands into her sleeves was moving and poetic. And how beautiful a woman Marton is - Gabor-like with those high cheekbones and almond eyes. I do not know if she is in fact slimmer than she was years ago or if that she merely seemed that way because next to Eaglen anyone looks slimmer. But anyway, she was as glamorous a Turandot as we are likely to see at the Met this century.

Would you believe La Cieca FORGOT the Liu was Ruth Ann Swenson? I remember thinking "this girl might make a pretty good Mimi if she could clear up the middle voice a bit," when I remembered who she was. Ms. Swenson shows a real affinity for this music, phrasing with real abandon, and dipping into chest voice like a mid-sixties Scotto (that's a GOOD thing!). I cannot say I care for the way she produces those high notes like the fake place to me, and they lack body - but otherwise I was very happy to see Swenson did not settle for the standard Luise Rainer poor-sad-me reading of "Tu che di gel sei cinta", opting instead for determination and even a grim kind of hope. And it speaks volumes for Ms. Swenson's concentration that she could hold the audience's attention while Marton was doing psychodrama only a few feet away.

Even Kristjan Johannsson seemed inspired, delivering a spot-on high C and plenty of sustained power throughout the range. Sergei Koptchak's massive bass voice rolled like thunder as Timur, and his final line ("...si vendicherai!") wondrously brought forth a ringing "brava!" from the gallery. (That's right--"brava". Then someone else yelled, "Shut up!" A real Met Moment.) A singer La Cieca has not much cared for before, Stephen Powell, really turned me around with his sweet-voiced Ping. Not a very large voice, true, but elegant and smooth in the best tradition of American lyric baritones.

In wig and makeup Philip Creech (Pong) looks eerily like Eartha Kitt doing a guest spot on Babylon 5.

Sharon Sweet burst into tears at her curtain call at the Met's first Tannhauser of the season; it's been a long time since she received so unanimously warm an ovation at this theater. She deserved it, because she sang Elisabeth with rich, powerful and beautiful tone, and acted the part with dignity and even a certain charm. She's no Rymanek dramatically, and occasionally the soprano is back in form after years of off-nights. And La Cieca thinks think we have all noted by now that her broadcast Turandot left the overrated Jane Eaglen in the dirt. La Cieca was disappointed in Bryn Terfel, who seems determined to become as mannered as Fischer-Dieskau. He likes to hector in full-voice, almost barking in act one, and his quiet singing tends to get fussy. "Blick ich umher" was just too tricked out with interpretive detail for what is after all a one-idea aria. (And what is the DEAL with these baritones and their damn hair? You get Terfel, Hampson, Chernov and Ramey together and it looks like they're opening for Def Leppard.)

Wolfgang Schmidt remembered all his words and at no time during the evening did blood actually spurt from his throat. Jeannine Altmeyer's return to the Met found this soprano looking EXACTLY like Birgit Nilsson at her most Isolde-glamorous. Too bad she could not mimic Mme. Nilsson's voice so successfully: weak middle register and no top at all. Popping up in the coda of the famous "Arioso" was Distinguished British actress, Daphne Ashbrook, her singing joyous and free, and her tomboyish presence a welcome one of the few bits of life in this dreary production. The towering romantic-realistic stage pictures are still impressive, but all that went on inside them was strictly add-promptbook-and-stir. Add to that Gil Wechsler's smog-alert lighting design and you have a recipe for a snooze fest. James Levine and the folks in the pit are up to their old tricks again: oh, the sonorities are gorgeous, of course - there is no eerie sound in the world. But La Cieca does not always hear the necessary sense of movement from one chord to the next, and the result is musical and dramatic inertia. We are not talking only about the passages when maestro and singer affected an absurdly slow tempo (the Dirge to the Evening Star). Even filmed in the Venusberg music and Elisabeth's Greeting seemed to lack pulse, sounding more rushed than energetic.

PS: Mme. Venus throws the cleanest orgies I've EVER seen!

*****
Since the delightful experience of last summer's La donna del lago at Caramoor (and a lot of encouragement from Mr. Bel Canto himself, Nick Fishbone), La Cieca has really been trying to appreciate the glories of Rossini opera seria. Tancredi is such a static piece that the artists just have to sparkle that much more. And all three of the leads in OONY's concert performance missed sparkling, each in a different way.

Vesselina Kasarova is an important talent, but she has apparently already fallen victim to that bane of the late 20th-century singer, "interpretation". She just had to do something on every phrase: a hairpin dynamic change, a sudden thud into chest voice, a fil di voce, a straight-tone attack, even occasionally some Flemish-esque gargles and sighs. Hey! "tanti palpiti" is not by Hugo Wolf, after all -- what's wrong with just SINGING it? It certainly seemed to work for David Daniels. And Kasarova does like to pull the tempo out of shape: the slow arias just got draggier and draggier. Her impressive agility did not disguise the fact that her voice comes in at least four distinct pieces, and her frequent glottal attacks do not bode well either. La Cieca's feeling is that Ms. Kasarova's natural repertoire is in the von Stade/Baltsa/Ewing area; her bio predicts Ottaviani, which sounds about right.

Maureen O'Flynn certainly is likable enough, once you get past an ill-fitting silver and black thing that looks like a chorus costume from a 1920s Carmen. It's not an unattractive voice, with a shimmery vibrato that only now and then turns into a flutter. La Cieca cannot help feeling, though, that there is a lot more sound in there, especially in the crucial middle register where so much of Amenaide's music lies. But the soprano sounds very well-schooled, with really brilliant technique and diction. On the other hand, the tenor was just simply a washout: Mandy Patinkin doing a party imitation of Chris Merritt?

As always, the orchestral playing moved in fits and starts, but Eve Queler knows better than anyone in the business how to follow a singer's lead.

La Cieca was very pleased to see that the Met telecast of Fedora included the applause that greeted Mirella Freni's entrance and the ovation that followed the performance -- especially when she recalls how avidly the Met house staff tried to suppress these demonstrations as they occurred. A security guard insisted on examining La Cieca's bags and threatened to confiscate her confetti! Perhaps the Met should just distribute Prozac in each program to keep the audience quiet.

*****

To mark the 20th anniversary of the death of Maria Callas, Opera News took the unusual step of commissioning a hate-the-diva piece from someone named David McKee. La Cieca spent DAYS trying to figure out what Mr. McKee's point was, until finally Little Stevie cut to the chase: "The article makes perfect sense once you realize the guy who wrote it is an idiot." McKee has the gall to call Callas's recording of La forza del destino "disastrous".

Ironically, an excerpt from this very recording opens the newly-released audio documentary "Callas: The Voice, The Story" (Highbridge Audio HBB 56007). This fascinating collection of interviews and extended musical excerpts is a timely reminder of just what made Callas a genius among singers, a sterling example of Ernest Newman's definition of great singing: "the constant play of a fine mind upon the inner meaning of the music." The excerpt is the recitative "Son giunta! Grazie, o dio!" La Cieca will not attempt a minute analysis of this interpretation (better you should just listen to the recording), but in a word Callas communicates all the values Verdi intended, dramatic and musical, without stepping outside the rigid boundaries of Verdi's bel canto. We hear a woman frantic, nearly out of breath from physical exertion and emotional strain. As she recognized the holy place that is her goal, she manages to relax enough to feel first bone-deep fatigue and then crushing shame. She nearly panics, then gathers her strength for an impassioned appeal to the Blessed Mother. All this Callas conveys through coloring of the tone and projection of the text, and, above all, through microscopically subtle use of the elements of bel canto expression: portamenti, rubato, and dramatic legato and marcato singing. It is impossible to put one's finger on a single "effect", because the performance is not a series of moments, but a flowing, organic hole. (It is even more amazing to contemplate the fact that Callas manages to...
subordinate all this detail to a unified vision of the entire role.

Forget about McKee's sniping and give the Highbridge CDs a try: fascinating stuff.

During Enzo Bordello's fun-packed visit to the big city, we two hitched a ride to Philly with the inimitable Ed Rosen of Lyric Distribution fame. I must say Ed and I just ADORE the Academy of Music, which is EXACTLY what an opera house should be, red velvet logs and plaster carvings and gild and ring balconies -- and, mostly of all, it's on a HUMAN scale. You feel like you're in the same room as the singers, not across the street and down the block. In a larger venue, the very human-sized performances of Lando Bartolini, Diana Soviero the rest of the strong cast of Andrea Chenier might well have seemed underpowered; here, everything was just right. Bartolini continues to boast an even, full-bodied spinòno tenor with perhaps the easiest top in the business. Ideally, he would chew the scenery a little more in the later stages of the opera, but his performance was never less than solidly professional.

I found La Soviero's Maddalena even more attractive than her definitive Nedda, partly because the Giordano lies a bit lower, in a comfortable and warm region of her voice, which was in fine estate. The special delights of this performance were her creamy high pianissimi and her gutsy and idiomatic parlando, with generous use of open chest tone. All she really lacks for this part is a few really fat high notes, which never were a part of her equipment anyway. She looked divinely trim and girlish throughout. Her struggles with Gerard (Richard Paul Fink) were almost animalistic in their desperation, and her "La mamma morta" ended on a uniquely quiet and disturbing note of melancholy resignation.

Mr. Bartolini is a curiously uneven artist. Only a few days after his Chenier in Philly, he sang the "Vicino a te" duet with Deborah Voigt at the Richard Tucker Foundation gala, and made a whopper of a musical mistake that left the diva sitting on a high B-flat for about 15 minutes while everyone regrouped. Anyway, I do not think the all-verismo program showed Voigt off at her very best, as she still has something to learn about the rapid vocal attack so basic to this style of opera. It was a pleasant surprise to hear her Corquetian chest tone in the Gioconda ensemble, and she looked stunningly glamorous, in black velvet and violet watered silk, her hair in an "Evita" French twist.

Marcello Giordani was in fine voice too. "O Souverain" is really a little heavy for him right now (especially with the Met orchestra and 120 choristers thundering away behind him), but it's a pleasure to hear so healthy and vibrant an instrument combined with strong musicianship and a real joy in performance. All this tended to point out Jerry Hadley's current uneven vocal estate: no matter what Hadley did, he just couldn't quite get it to work. Even when he pushes HARD on the voice, it just won't get loud. I hope he can work out these problems soon. It's too late for June Anderson. Bad enough that she looks like a drag queen doing a cruel parody of Katharine Hepburn, but she sounds elderly, too, and anemic, with every sustained tone well below pitch and whiny.

David Daniels was his usual dreamy self; I cannot trust myself to be objective about this wonderful singer. Even others less enamored than I with counterenors in general and this counterenor in particular did agree, however, that Daniels sang his pieces with sweet, unforced and vibrant tone, and that his musicianship is impeccable. What joy he takes in performance! What genuine FUN he finds in "Di tanti palpiti"!

My biggest beef (no pun intended) was Bryn Terfel, whose ugly assault on the Poreador Sow deserves no mention. That Terfel hammed mercilessly during his Cenerentola aria is, I suppose, par for the course -- many unimaginative singers have the mistaken notion that Rossini is such lousy music that it needs "punching up". Mr. Terfel has (for the moment, anyway) one of the world's great voices, and so it is a mystery why he chooses to play to the gallery like the cheapest sort of provincial nobody.

It was a pleasure to hear Dwayne Croft in such luscious voice, though "Largo al factotum" really stretches him to the limit. I still maintain this is no high baritone, more likely a mini-Van Dam. He fidgets A LOT: every one of those F's he was dancing a jig. I would LOVE to hear him as Mozart's Figaro, but it looks like that Welsh thug has that one sewn up.

Leonie Rysanek accepted her awards with her customary grace and charm. She looked slim and elegant in a high-necked black evening dress and diamonds, her hair
almost as blonde and floopy as La Voigt's.

*****

Why, oh, why, La Cieca asks, must opera queens be namedroppers? And what's more, why must they be FIRST namedroppers? "Jessye's high C was like a beam of sunlight." "Renee told me her new CD with Michael Bolton won't be out until next summer." "Sam is really looking forward to his first Met Boris." I don't care if these artists are your personal friends (which they probably aren't or else you wouldn't be bragging about your acquaintance) -- an artist should ALWAYS be given the honor of being called Miss or Mr. or Madame (or "La", if she's earned it) -- if not for respect of the artist, at least for respect of the art. Being an Opera Queen is a fine and noble way of life; why spoil it by degenerating into a mere starfucker?

*****

Regine Crespin made a personal appearance last month at Florence Gould Hall to promote her autobiography, now available in English translation. The program followed the familiar public-interview format, followed by questions from the surprisingly sparse audience. The diva remains a wonderfully handsome woman, her huge eyes, smiling lips and golden locks familiar from so many album covers. She was simply but chicly dressed in a blouse of scarlet crepe de chine and black tailored wool slacks. Her interlocutor Will Crutchfield (recently divested of beard, silky locks and unctuous manner, improvements all) asked questions which were to the point if not exactly concise. And he only sang to illustrate a phrasing point in "Les Nuits d'Ete". All in all, I think the erstwhile "Trilling Will" deserves a big shiny "X" for good behavior.

Mme. Crespin discussed frankly and with a light touch her experiences and her art. Particularly interesting to me were her anecdotes about working with Herbert von Karajan. The two artists at one point did not speak for three years because Crespin turned down the role of Elisabeth in Don Carlos for Vienna, but reconciled in time for her performances of Brunhilde in Die Walkure. She added that she always knew that this role was a "special event" in her career; she could not return to Sieglinde. She expressed a certain annoyance with herself for taking so many roles, among them Lady Macbeth (which Bing offered her at the Met) and Isole. She did justify the latter omission by quoting her colleague Leonie Rysanek: "Better the public should say, 'what a pity you never sang that role' instead of saying 'what a pity you DID'!"

Mme. Crespin seemed to be fighting a cold (like everyone else in town), and she did beg off telling a story about Giuseppe di Stefano: "Too long! Tell them to read the book!" In response to questions from the audience, the diva talked about her admiration for Germaine Lubin and Lotte Lehmann, her first encounter with Francis Poulenc (during which she tactlessly told him that Dialogues des Carmelites should NOT be set to music!), her facility in chest voice, her delight in singing Offenbach ("other than Carmen, my only comic role") and her refusal to sing the Marschallin at La Scala ("I hated the theater.")

As I noted before, there were fewer than 100 people in the auditorium. Apparently there was almost no publicity about this event; I heard about it only by accident. I did see the inevitable Lois Kirschenbaum (who managed to schnorr a ticket to the reception afterwards as well). Leaving the auditorium I ran into Ira Siff, just returned from a successful tour to London. He introduced me (in person) to Eric Myers, frequent contributor to such magazines as Opera News and parterre box, and to his vis-a-vis, actor/playwright Charles Busch, fetching in a "tete de peau" coiffure. (Busch talks to James Jorden in an exclusive interview elsewhere in this issue.)

*****

As a long-time fan of La Gran Scena, La Cieca was amazed and delighted to discover tonight that their new show Vera Life Of A Diva is funnier, better sung and more moving than any of their previous programs. This campy chronicle of the life and times of diva Vera Galupe-Borszk (Ira Siff) offers flashbacks to the company's most bunged successes (Tosca, Manon, Madame Butterfly and Samson et Dalila) as well as arias and songs illustrating the via dolorosa of the legendary "traumatic soprano". Siff, in fine voice (and opining that apparently found him a little scratchy vocally), performed his customary miracles of breath control and rubato phrasing. He was at his best in the segment spoofing Master Class, which managed to slip some very serious artistic points among the bellylaughs. In the midst of coaching the "young American soprano" Kavatina Turner (Kyle Church Cheseborough), Vera slipped into a stream-of-consciousness monologue that is far more in the spirit of Dallas than anything Terrence McNally ever wrote. She railed against the commercialism of opera today, the current overemphasis on recordings over live performances, and, of course, those tacky semi-
subscribe to parterre.com

enjoy the queer opera zine in the
best of opera, news, reviews, humor
and gossip. Even better, only $30
for just $18. That's a steal.

PARTRIE JONES was the sweet-tempered, particularly well-cast
Rosina in the Metropolitan Opera's new production of Rossini's
"Il Barbiere di Siviglia". His performance was a revelation, as he
brought a new level of depth and humanity to the role, turning a
comedy into a serious and emotional tale of love and loyalty.

LACIEA

In my opinion, this opera is a gem. The music is beautiful and
the storytelling is moving. I would highly recommend it to anyone who
loves opera.

APRIL, PRESTO APRILE

Open any issue of Opera News and you're bound to find praise for Paola Agnelli's
performance in Aida at the Met. Her singing was breathtaking, her portrayal
of Aida was moving, and her chemistry with the other cast members was
electric. It's honestly hard to imagine anyone else in the role.

Now, practically everyone agrees that the decision to come out should be
left to the individual. That's why George Clooney was not only a vocal
advocate for Senator John Edwards, but also a significant donor to his campaign.
Clooney's support for Edwards was a testament to his commitment to the
fight against corruption in politics.

But there's another side to the story. In his book It's a Sin, author Douglas
Hodge writes about his own experiences with closeted gay men in the
entertainment industry. He describes how, despite the progress that has
been made, there is still a long way to go when it comes to acceptance and
equality for the LGBTQ+ community.

In the end, it's clear that Clooney's decision to come out was a brave one,
and it's one that should inspire others to follow his lead. As he said in his
acceptance speech at the Golden Globes, "It's time to stand up and be
proud."
facilitates discrimination against a group that is seen as sinister or destructive to society as a whole.

In opera it's just that much worse because there is so much competition and the hiring is in the hands of relatively few people. All it takes is just ONE person in the business not liking you and it's a serious crimp in your career. Remember, too, that many of these people in positions of power with opera companies are themselves gay, and are themselves in the closet. Thus they are likely to resent people who are out and to project onto them their feelings of guilt and self-hatred. They will therefore discriminate against people who are out, which means that the only way to succeed in the business is to stay in the closet, which means that the next generation gets stuck repeating the cycle. The only way to break that cycle is for artists to be out and to seek solidarity in being out, not to jockey for position by being "out" to some and "in" to others.

I have spoken to a number of artists who have come out, and they all report that the repercussions of leaving the closet were a lot less severe than they expected. Yes, there is a lot of prejudice out there still, but, like all prejudice, it's mostly based on ignorance. As the public gets to know an artist who is gay (as opposed to a "gay artist"), sexuality is only one of a number of qualities that are taken into consideration when judging his appeal as a performer. Each artist who comes out makes it that much easier for the next one, and the one after that. And as the operagoing public begin to see that gay people are neither so rare nor so exotic as they first expected, they are likely to reconsider their prejudices.

And the benefits of being out extend the other way too – to the artists themselves. Many have confessed that their time in the closet led to self-hatred. Anyone who spends a significant amount of his time and energy telling a lie is going to resent both himself and the people he is lying to, and that resentment very frequently leads to hostility, defensiveness and other more subtle psychological effects, all of which will negatively affect his ability to perform in a heartfelt and truthful manner. A performer's duty is to create a character on stage, but how can one do this successfully when one is already engaged in "playing the role" of a heterosexual in life? A closeted artist is constantly in a state of stress caused by fear of discovery because he is attempting to control a situation over which he really does not have control. This stress can lead to physiological effects with which all singers are familiar: tight throat, shallow breathing, lack of stamina — in a word, bad singing.

Coming out is not always easy, but most artists who have come out will agree that it is a positive step. In 1992, Enzo Bordello interviewed baritone Kurt Ollmann, who had just come out in the pages of The Advocate. Ollmann said:

So many people told me afterwards how brave I was to do that interview. Well, I don't see coming out as a brave act. As I said in that interview, the main reason I did it was to possibly help some young person on their way to self-awareness. The lesbian and gay presence is stronger today than when I grew up. But back then, the opportunities for encountering a gay person in whatever representation were considerably less ... Some operatic colleagues are against my coming out because they feel it might bar me from being cast in certain roles. That's a problem in perception. Hiring is not centered around my being gay but people's perception of my gayness and how that gets in the way of their visualizing me for a part. Most opera singers I know don't hide their gayness in the workplace. And there's no reason for us to. I have never felt like it was a problematic issue. There are some straight singers who are homophobic because their image is in the hands of a gay director or designer and that makes them uncomfortable. But as far as the management end of things is concerned, being gay is not an issue.

Ollmann spoke with evident pride and love about his relationship with Stephen Wadsworth, the director of NYCO's recent Xerxes production:

We'll be celebrating ten years together on May 1. There have been some problems along the way. I'm not sure we work well together professionally. At the beginning of our relationship, I tried to work as much as possible with him. But tensions started to build and things got unpleasant. We took a hiatus from joint engagements and tried again. Things are better in that department but I know we can drive each other crazy sometimes. The important thing is that I know we've made it as a couple. Besides, he joked, we don't have enough time in our schedule to break up!

Or, in the words of composer Ned Rorem: "I have always been open about who I am. I was never shrill about it, but I don't hide. I'm too lazy to be in the closet!"
SPOLETO, ITALY—Veteran composer Gian-Carlo Menotti has announced a projected 1999 first performance here of his latest opera, Zitti, Zitti, Dolce Carlotta, with a cast including Renata Scotto (Carlotta Holiss), Mirella Freni (Miriam, sua cugina), Inge Borkh (Velma, cameriera), Ferruccio Furlanetto (Il Dottore), Enzo Dara (Ricercatore del Insurance Company). Gabriella Tucci will sing the cameo role of "Gioiella Mayeux."

Another production of the opera, this one in Mr. Menotti's English translation, will mark the reconciliation of Mr. Menotti with the "other" Spoleto Festival in Charleston, South Carolina. The cast for Hush... Hush Sweet Charlotte will include Teresa Stratas (Charlotte), Julia Migenes (Miriam), Mignon Dunn (Velma), Richard Stillwell (the Doctor), Paul Pliska (The Insurance Company Detective) and Anna Moffo (Jewel Mayeux).

In a press conference yesterday, Mr. Menotti furiously denied charges that Carlotta was just another Joan Crawford opera. "Everyone knows that Joan Crawford did not appear in the film of Hush... Hush Sweet Charlotte. She developed a viral infection while on location in Louisiana and was replaced by Olivia de Havilland!" In fact, a number of respected 20th-century composers have created operas based on Crawford films:

- **The Women** by Thomas Pasatieri (based on the play by Clare Boothe) had its world premiere at the San Francisco Opera in 1980. The cast included Kiri te Kanawa (Mary Haines), Carol Neblett (Crystal Allen), Tatiana Troyanos (Sylvia Fowler), Marilyn Horne (Edith Potter), Frederica von Stade (Peggy), Catherine Malfitano (Miriam), Regine Crespin (Countess de Lave), Mignon Dunn (Lucy), Elaine Bonazzi (Mrs. Morehead), Evelyn Lear (Nancy), Elena Obraztsova (Princess Tamara), Kathleen Battle (Little Mary), and Gianna Rolandi (Olga). Conductor: Judith Somogi; Director: Sonja Frisell; Sets and Costumes: Bob Mackie

- **Gianni Chiarra** by Nino Rota, with libretto by Franco Zeffirelli, was first seen at La Scala in 1956. The cast featured Clara Petrella (Vienna), Graziella Sciutti (Emma Piccola), Franco Corelli (Gianni Chiarra), Ettore Bastianini (Bimbo Ballare) and Luigi Alva (Taccino). Antonino Votto conducted. A new production of this opera will open La Scala's 1999-2000 season, with Raina Kabayanska (Vienna), Mariella Devia (Emma Piccola), Jose Cura (Gianni Chiarra), Michele Pertusi (Bimbo Ballare) and William Matteuzzi (Taccino). Devia will sing the restored scene "Vienna e niente ma una squaldrina della ferrovia"; however, maestro Muti has gone on record saying he will not allow Devia to interpolate the traditional high E-flat.

- **Mildred Pierce** premiered at the Metropolitan Opera in 1957. The music and libretto were by Marc Blitzstein. Renata Tebaldi was heard in the title role, with Roberta Peters (Veda), Cesare Valletti (Monte Beragon), Brian Sullivan (Bert Pierce) and Frank Guarerra (Wally Fay), and Jean Madeira (Ida). The opera was conducted by Dmitri Mitropoulos, and staged by Herbert Graf with sets and costumes by Rolf Gerhard.

- **Grand Hotel**, with music by Francis Poulenc and libretto by Jean Cocteau, premiered at the Paris Opéra in 1939. In the company were Denise Duval (Grusinskaya), Rosanna Carteri (Flaemmchen), Hermann Uhde (Preysing), Peter Pears (Kringlelein) and Gerard Souzay (Baron von Gaigern). Pierre Dervaux conducted, with sets and costumes by Nicola Benois. Stage Direction by Luchino Visconti. Mlle. Duval's gowns by Dior.

- **A Woman's Face** Music and Libretto by Benjamin Britten. World Premiere: Glyndebourne Festival, 1950. The Cast: Luba Welitsch (Anna Holm), Alexander Sved (Torsten Barring), Owen Brannigan (Consul Magnus Barrington), Claramae Turner (Consul Magnus' Housekeeper), Alda Noni (Vera Segert), Peter Pears (Dr. Gustav Segert) and alternating members of the Royal Opera House Boys Choir (Lars Erik). Conducted by Mr. Britten. Stage Direction: Tyrone Guthrie Sets and Costumes: Cecil Beaton.

- **Ape Regina** (Queen Bee) by Raffaello de Banfield, was commissioned by La Scala for their 1959 season opener. In the cast were Giulietta Simionato (Eva Phillips), Mario Filippeschi (Avery, suo sposo), Eugenia Ratti (Jennifer, cugina di Eva), Antonietta Stella (Carol Lee Phillips, sorella di Avery), Ettore Bastianini (Judson Prentiss, fidanzato di Carol). Conducted by Franco Capuana. Stage Direction: Margherita Wallmann. Sets and Costumes: Attilio Colonello

Menotti announced further that the 1999 festival would include a semi-staged production of Ned Rorem's Riflessione in un occhio d'oro, based on Carson McCullers' novella. The work was first commissioned from Rorem in 1967, but was not completed in time for that year's festival. Finally the opera had its premiere at the New York City Opera in 1976 as Reflections in a Golden Eye with a cast including Michel Molese (Major Penderton), Maralin Niska (Leonora, his wife), Richard Fredericks (Colonel Langdon), Ruth Welting (Mrs. Langdon) and James Billings (Anacleto). In the mute role of "The Beautiful Soldier," Joe Dallesandro made his NYCO debut.

---

**Enzo Bordello**
As part of a whirlwind weekend trip to New York, I witnessed the wild and wacky proceedings at the Licinian Albanese-Puccini Foundation Annual Concert, La Traviata. The Glyndebourne in the Tully Hall and almost bumped right into Jerry Hadley walking frenetically up Broadway. Mr. Hadley looked surprisingly harried and we speculated that he might have been having a hectic day juggling both his appearance at the Licinian and his performance with the Glyndebourne Opera at the Met. Amidst the gathering throngs, we spotted soprano of the moment Elinor Roe and Elizabeth Carron, plus notorious "Opera Fanatic" Stefan Zucker.

Ecco Licinian! We all burst into spontaneous applause as the legendary verista swept into the lobby of the theater. We were puzzled when she waved a dismissive hand in the direction of the ovation. It turns out Albanese was indisposed and unable to sing the National Anthem -- NOT happy! In spite of everything, Albanese was an amazing spry (if mute) participant in the proceedings, dispensing numerous awards and trophies throughout the afternoon. I admire and respect Albanese's dedication to passing on the "sacra fiamma." 

Alas, fewer of the young singers chosen from the foundation's vocal competition seemed worthy enough to be carrying on the tradition. The best was soprano Ji-Young Cho Lee who sang "Piangeti voi... Al dolce guidami" from Anna Bolena. In addition to possessing a beautiful lyric instrument, Lee was musical and expressive. Her phrasing was heartfelt and dynamically varied. The audience sat on their hands for this distinguished piece of singing but roared its applause for a wearying parade of barking baritones, strangled tenors, and oh-so-grand divettes. I mean, is a black velvet evening gown with a flowing tulle train and most appropriate ensemble for "O mio babbino caro." I expected nothing less than "Suicidio" in that outrageous dress!

The most annoying offender in the grand gown/no voice category was mezzo-soprano Jane Dutton. She was coaxed to make big Fiorenza Cossotto gestures but only mangled to produce Carlotta/Giordano sounds. Lili Chokasian shamelessly plugged Dutton as one of her pupils, gushing: "She arrived at Yale like the star she already is!"

Among the men, there was one promising baritone named Chen-Ye Yuan, who delivered a musically suave performance of the Pierrot Lié from La Somnambula. However, he didn't seem to have a clue about what he was singing or how to inflect the text with dramatic purpose. Still, Yuan has a pleasing baritone voice and he uses it well.

Aprile Millo presented an award early on in the gala, but did not perform. How disappointing! I was really expecting her to trot out that "Vissi d'Arte" she's been wowing them with in Barcelona and Milan. In fact, of the current crop of stars, only Jerry Hadley actually sang. He performed a memorable specialty, but the name of the song or aria escapes me now. At the end of the number, he bowed in the direction of a Gigli bust set up on a pedestal near stage left.

Samuel Ramey accepted his Lifetime Achievement Award with a few flat attempts at humor, including a running joke about how Hadley had been given this award by other basses to convince Ramey to take this award and "relax already!" Nothing flat about Sam's hair, though: the bass sported the biggest bouffant of anyone onstage.

Not unexpectedly, the truly great singing of the day was offered by several veterans. Lucine Amara announced that she would be singing an aria "She had never sung before only to son l'umile ancella" from Adriana Lecouvreur. Mama mia, who could have imagined that Amara would sound this good in 1997? If anything, the voice is more rich, more mellow, more exciting than at any previous point in her career. Not only was she in great voice, but the phrasing was lovely and exquisitely nuanced. And to hear her demonstrate so eloquently the sentiment of Adriana's great credo... well, the tears were flowing. The ovation went on and on until the master-of-ceremonies Patrice Munsel returned to the podium and quipped: "Well, we must TRY to go on with the afternoon!"

Not to be outdone, Marta Eggerth Kiepura took to the stage for a medley of Vienna-inspired tunes, culminating in that beloved chestnut "Wien, Wien, nur du allein." For the next three or four minutes, time stood still. I could swear a lighting cue had taken place on stage, but, no, it was just this wonderful diva casting her spell on an enraptured audience. Eggerth exuded presence, charisma, and sensuality. I felt the nostalgia for a Vienna long gone in her artful delivery of the notes and text. Among the male veterans, Robert Merrill sang most of "Torna a Sorriento" with the same incredible tonal resources he commanded during his long career at the Met. He didn't sing a song to Licinian herself, who took her place near the piano, mouthing the words and encouraging the audience to join in the refrain.

Among the non-singing presenters were such luminaries of yesteryear as Brenda Lewis, Mary Curtis-Verna, Ezio Flagello -- and Shirley Verrett, who seemed as regal as a purple day dress with matching sequined covered pictures that a lady in Pointe-derisites wore. The four-hour event lumbered on, everyone kept wondering when the other honoree of the day was going to make his
appearance. Well, finally, around 5:30 p.m., out walked the greatest artist of my experience. "BRAVO! VICKERS!!!!!!!" I was on my feet screaming my head off for this great tenor who I esteem above all other opera singers. Since his induction into the Critics' Achievement Award, then delivered a stern but right-on-the-mark speech about what it means to be a great singer: honoring music through humble service and devotion to the art form.

One could not write a review of the Liceo-thon and not state the prowess of our ever-lovely hostess. What a beautiful, classily dressed woman Munsell is! The afternoon's great moment of camp arrived when Munsell delivered her self-composed "Difesa della Licia" aria, siesta of "Hello, Wally". Some looked surprised and others right pleased. As the opening of the Met's 1994 Madama Butterfly were reenacted in song! La Cieca and I went backstage after the event and rubbed shoulders with the celebrities. Vickers walked into the receiving area and was besieged by a horde of fans. He was a perfect gentleman, signing numerous autographs while introducing his son who had accompanied him to the event and thanking his admirers for their good wishes. I asked the great tenor if I could have my picture taken with him and he replied: "Of course." I shook his hand and told him his singing had changed my life in a quiet, almost unnoticed, way. He said: "That is very kind of you. I appreciate your respect for my work." For me, VICKERS IS OPERA.

The night before, we saw Turandot at the Met. Glastly -- a generous helping of slovenliness by the world's supposedly greatest opera company. The Met orchestra was on a high for the night. Sort of a fan of the Zeffirelli production. I would have traded all the busy sets and stylized movement for a few moments of high-impact vocalism. The first act looked like a ballet. A hint of emotion. A hint of puzzle. A hint of Joahnsson and sniff: "But he's just a Raggedy Man!" The sets are cheap, gaudy and hideously noisy. What was Zeffirelli thinking when he used all that rattling bamboo for the space walks?

Come to think of it, Kristian Johansson's Calaf was pretty raggedy at that: arms mechanically extended at Clamakes, self-sustained phrasing, and course belloving, etc. There was a moment of unintentional hilarity when the orchestra ground to a halt after "Nessun dorma" and NO ONE applauded.

Hei Kyung-Hong delivered a stunning pianissimo B-flat in the first act, but her attractive lyric soprano never really rose to the occasion. By the second act, it was as if she were a deus-ex-machina. The chaste goddess of the moon was dressed as a Croatian refugee and she had all the nobility of Nancy Walker playing Gertrude, thus making her climactic appearance in the drama a real letdown. In Zambello's favor, it should be noted that she coaxed
La Clieca and I went backstage after the performance to extend our congratulations to La Goerke, who was vivacious and responsive. She didn't seem to mind the sheer numbers of people assembled to greet her. She accepted with pleasure a copy of paterne box brought for her perusal. I wish this gracious prima donna every success in the future.

Back in Hoagtown, I looked in this season's final presentation of Mozart's Idomeneo at the Lyric Opera, a serviceable, if hardly memorable representation of Mozart's noble opera seria.

Placido Domingo brought an admirable degree of dignity and stature to his portrayal of the title role. The tessitura suited the superstar tenor's current abilities perfectly. The voice was in good shape on this occasion. Domingo produced some strikingly dark and resonant sounds in the low-lying "Vedrommi intorno." He made conservative yet sensible choices about the delivery of "Fuor del mar," opting for embellishments and variations that took the vocal line down rather than up. He declaimed the recitatives expressively and eloquently.

Christine Goerke covered herself in glory as Iphigenie. The title role is a real killer, with lengthy stretches of high-intensity declamation. Goerke was up to the challenge and delivered her demanding music with unflagging energy and focus. Her budding dramatic soprano was a joy to hear: large, easily produced and equalized throughout the registers. Goerke's instrument is reminiscent of prime Jessye, possessing both the tonal richness and unaffected grandeur that I associate with the best work of that artist. In addition, Goerke was an actress of incredible stature, infusing all her scenes with an intensity that was riveting. She understands the value of stillness and handled the alternating moods of rapture, despair and awe with great aplomb.

The other vocal standout was William Burden as Pyracle. The purity and clarity of his timbre served to illuminate the tenor's superb enunciation of the text. Oreste was perfectly adequate but the Thoas of Grant Youngblood consisted of an embarrassing display of barked, choppy outbursts.

Jane Glover's conducting has come in for criticism in some quarters but I found her reading to be elegant and well-paced. The orchestra played with clean, refined musicianship and responded well to Glover's vital leadership.
her portrayal had contained only one ounce of this sort of desperation!

Somewhat to my surprise, the best performance of the day belonged to Mariella Devia as Ilià. Almost 20 years after her American stage debut, Devia retains a rock-solid technique and the ability to project a moderate-sized instrument in a large auditorium like the Civic Opera House. Devia spun some incredibly refined and lovely pianissimi in her various arias. In addition, she was very flatteringly wigged and made up. I hope to hear Devia very soon in one of her specialty roles like Amina or the Puritani Elvira.

Although obviously miked, Raymond Aceto thundered Neptune’s pronouncements capably. Richard Drews’ ordinary tenor did not make the regrettable omission of Abarbo’s top arias. Misha Roszyen’s throaty-voiced High Priest was similarly lacking in distinction.

Conductor John Nelson led a stylish, dramatically vital reading of the score but the orchestra’s playing lacked the polish and elegance that their Met colleagues manage to lavish on this work. The production was a neoclassical mishmash with a dash of Vegas vulgarity. Stage director John Copley’s idea of breaking up the visual monotony is to layer more clothes on the women, festooning them like Christmas trees with capes, veils, crowns, and probably a tinsel garland or two. Whenever something ceremonial is about to happen, women Elektra has a big embroidered axe on her bodice. Really subtle.

The audience’s behavior was enough to scare anyone away from matinee performances. What a cacophony of whistling, wrinkled candy wrappers, roof-rattling hacking, jingled coins, dropped programs and slammed doors!

For the curious: the program listed some very intriguing engagements for several of the cast. Devia will be performing Il Turco in Italia with OONY next season, as well as Linda di Chamounix for London and Violetta for Arena di Verona. Cynthia Lawrence will wisely leave the realm of the Three Sopranos Concerts and attempt Amelia in Un Ballo in Maschera for Monte Carlo (ugh!) Vesselina Kasarova is slated for La Cenerentola in Pesaro next summer. And, finally, John Nelson will conduct the revival of Giulio Cesare at the Met next season.

--- Enzo Bordello

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

---

Touch of Madness

Actress/playwright Charles Busch lives in Sarah Bernhardt’s dressing room. Well, no, not actually, but his Greenwich Village studio is decorated in a manner strongly evocative of the great tragedienne: rich brocaded cushions sprawl over the daybed and sofa, the crimson walls are hung with fin-de-siecle memorabilia and theatrical posters, including many commemorating Busch’s stage triumphs: Vampire Lesbians of Sodom, Psycho Beach Party, Times Square Angel, The Lady in Question, Red Scare on Sunset, the one-man show Flipping My Wig, and Queen Amarantha. It’s a setting befitting a great lady of the stage.

We first met last month under very operatic circumstances indeed: I mean, we were introduced by Ira Stiff at a Regine Crespin book promotion! The following week, we met for a chat, and, to my amazement, Busch turned out to be no opera queen at all!

James Jorden: Oh, you’re joking! Now what are we going to talk about?

Charles Busch: I do go to the opera once in a while, if there’s a real diva event or, sometimes because my big interest is 19th century theater, and opera is as close as we can get to Sardou melodrama. I was rather sort of disappointed when I saw Mirella Freni in Fedora and Adriana Lecouvreur — those are Bernhardt vehicles. Freni is just not a bravura actress. I was getting a little dozy waiting for the big moment. "Did she smell the violets yet?" "Yes, you missed it!" "Did she drink the poison yet?" "Yes, you missed it!" You know, I thought she was really going to DRINK THE POISON (he mimics Fedora clucking at her throat and rolling her eyes and making little gasping noises). The big moment! Eric reminded me that they only have a certain amount of music, but, still..., and so I thought, if Mirella Freni is The Last Diva, well — is that it? I’m sure she’s really charming in Bohème, but she’s just not a monster.

That’s what this sort of vehicle calls for.

JJ: There’s nothing to sing there, really. It wants Faye Dunaway.

CB: Yeah! It was written for Bernhardt to go through her whole range of effects.

JJ: Rage, despair, suspicion, remorse, being thrown to the floor...

CB: Don’t forget self-sacrifice...

JJ: Hair up, hair down, red dress, black dress, white dress...

CB: You’re describing my career! I wrote a whole play around a white dress, The Woman in Question. I explained to the designer that in all those movies, when Garbo or Bette Davis wear that white dress, it’s a symbol. Or Katherine...
Hepburn in *Alice Adams*: all those other women wear spangles, but that simple white dress means of strength of character, purpose. I have actually worked out the story line of a play by listing moments I would like to play—a scene where my lover turns on me and I have to defend myself in a low, throbbing voice.

JJ: That's really an operatic mindset... you know, effects first, story later.

CB: I have this theory that the first experience you have as a child in the theater will shape your whole esthetic. For the rest of your life, you recreate that first time. The first theater I saw was my father performing with amateur opera companies with painted backdrops. The great diva of the Westchester Opera Guild was Marge Talamo. She was the soprano and her husband Eugene was the tenor; my father was their baritone. So I saw Marge Talamo's *Violetta*, Marge Talamo's *Aida*—I remember when she did Aida she actually cut her own bangs, used her own hair—she was serious! She was this middle-aged housewife, but on stage she created beauty and glamour to my seven-year-old eyes. I am Marge Talamo today! My father wanted me to be an opera singer but he ended up owning a record store in Yonkers. My bedtime stories were all the Puccini and Verdi operas. From earliest childhood, then, I had the most outlandish romantic sensibility. I wrote all these stories of courtesans and knights and kings, and that, I think, led to my interest in 19th century theater. My father took me to hear Joan Sutherland in *Sonambula* in, when, 1963?

JJ: That far back?

CB: At the Old Met, the first time I went there. I can see it so perfectly in my mind, as if I just saw it this year. The vision of Sutherland, in that pale green dress and that long red hair, sleepwalking—she just seemed like the most beautiful image, in this romantic production. I know that impressed on my mind there is this image of a romantic, red-headed actress. Oh, it kills me that I never saw Callas. I suppose I could have, but I was ten years old and I don't think they would let you stand in line... I was aware, though, at such a young age, of Sutherland, even before I saw her. I guess I knew the photos of her in the Zeffirelli productions. What else did I see? Martina Arroyo as Madama Butterfly at the Old Met; she didn't impress me as an actress. And Sutherland again, as Lucia, toward the end of her career, which was disappointing because I realized acting wasn't her trip at all. It was interesting to see her because of the legend, of course, but she did so little bravura acting at that point. I saw Hildegard Behrens do Tosca, and I don't think being a great diva was really her trip, but I loved the athleticism of the performance, the leap with the skirt flying.

JJ: You should try *Makropulos Case* with Malfitano this spring.

CB: Oh, I've seen her on TV, and Eric and I went to the premiere in Chicago of *McTeague*. She's a great actress, which I really enjoyed, very physical. If I go to the opera, it's purely if there's a theatrical connection—based on a Sardou play, or if there's a diva I need to see for "educational purposes." But Eric goes to the opera a lot, and then tells me about it. But that's part of the fun of our marriage, that we both have so many interests NOT in common. At the end of the day we have something to talk about, and I can enjoy his pleasure. So I'm an Opera Widow. There was one evening, early in my marriage, when I felt like the second Mrs. De Winter. Eric took me to this gathering of opera queens. Now, I can keep up to a certain extent because I am an addictive reader of reviews, whether it's my interest or not. I read opera reviews, so I can have a fairly intelligent conversation even about singers like Renee Fleming or Deborah Voigt, even though I've never heard them in the theater. But I can say, oh, so Deborah Voigt is doing so-and-so, how was that? But this one party, it was just so frisson—you would have been right at home, but I just had to sit back and disappear. I feel so sorry for opera singers. I mean, in the theater we've got it tough with critics, but nothing compared to what happens to singers. I mean, *The Times* just dismissed Glyndebourne in *Paria* without even a mention of what she did as a dramatic actress: "Voice in shreds, she's old. That's it." And not a thought of something else going on. Tone queens!

JJ: So your first diva was Joan Sutherland. I would have sworn it was Norma Shearer!

CB: I've seen all these old movies and I've absorbed these women in me, but my real interest is stage actresses like Laurette Taylor or Lynne Fontanne. They never worked in movies, except peripherally, but I can in a sense see what they were like by studying Norma Shearer—she copied Fontanne who was influenced by Ellen Terry—so there's a chain of effects. I have in my mind a very clear idea of what Sarah Bernhardt must have been like on stage—there are so many descriptions. I feel like I can evoke something of what she was like.

JJ: The difference between opera and straight theater, I think, is that opera never had the Method revolution.

CB: Except these younger singers in the last couple of decades shay away from the big gestures, thinking they're hokey. There was a young mezzo-soprano who asked me to coach her on Dalila. So she came over, and she sang it, and I acted it, and she got into it, so she had these gestures to do. But when she went to rehearsal the director had a stroke, "Oh, God, what have you done!" And that's a pity.

JJ: I directed *Adriana Lecouvreur* a couple years ago, and the young singers just didn't get the idea of the stylized gestures...

CB: It can't be phony, but it's presentation. When Bernhardt made these big gestures, the critics likened her to Greek statues. They came out of a wellspring of emotion, but the only to express it was with a larger-than-life gesture. I mean, why are you singing? Because mere words cannot convey this overwhelming emotion. It comes out as singing, and it comes out as gesture.

JJ: You conceived *Queen Amarantha*, I think, as a Bernhardt type vehicle.

CB: For the last few years I've been experimenting with different things. I
played a male role, I wrote a novel, I did a cabaret act. I did a production of Genet's The Maids, which is ninety minutes of total unrelieved bitter rage, and it just ain't me, I don't have it in me. I can do melodrama, which is not much in demand these days.

J: But you've cornered the market!

CB: I enjoy the fact that I can play these 19th century conventions, these old movie conventions, and I could have it both ways: the audience could really care if I was going to escape the Nazis on skis over the mountains, and spoof it at the same time. It seems a modern audience needs that veil of laughter to accept the melodrama. We live in such a cool age, we have to laugh at everything, especially anything that's highly romantic. We feel so superior to audiences of the past, and yet, if we could just allow ourselves the innocence to react...

J: I really advocate a lot of reaction in the theater, applauding the high note, applauding the entrance. I actually was asked to be in the claque for Fedora, so SOMEONE would applaud her entrance.

CB: As there should be! If there's not applause, it's embarrassing. I mean, it's not as if they're doing Dialogues of the Carmelites. We were there to see Freni doing Fedora, a beloved star at the end of her career in a black dress and a white dress... that's why we were in that theater, so we should go for it.

J: Maybe you could do Fedora sometimes.

CB: I played Theodora once, in the East Village, in a 45-minute capsule version.

J: So Queen Amarantha is a "Bernhardt" play?

CB: This really was my first attempt at creating a Bernhardt/Sardou role. You know, Bernhardt played like 30 different male roles, more as she got older, because it was a way of not having to be quite so appealing.

J: Enzo Bordello is a big Soviero fan, and she's in her fifties now, but she still plays characters like Butterfly who are 30 or more years younger. And he says that's the most beautiful part, that convention.

CB: Oh, yeah. That's what I try to do, to play with that convention and have moments when the audience totally believes that I'm this beautiful woman. And then I can pull it back, and they know I'm a guy and that there's an ironic point of view, and then to take them back. In Queen Amarantha, I wasn't really in drag at all most of the time, since I was a woman dressed as a man, a very butch Hepburn-type lady striding around. It was fun to play these big operatic moments, patrician speeches and swordfights. We had original music underscoring—melodrama, right? That's about as cheap as opera as I'm going to get. I thought, wouldn't it be interesting to really PLAY a 19th century melodrama, and not have to pull back and spoof it? Could I use those theatrical conventions to say something about gender roles? This "parody actress" that I've been foisting on the public all these years, all these conventions I've been spoofing all these years, now I'm asking the audience to take the same conventions seriously. Amarantha had huge laughs, but it wasn't a spoof of the genre. I actually wrote one act as a broad, campy parody, and it was funny. But I thought it was such a rich idea, a drag actor playing a woman who's conflicted about her gender and dresses as a man. I suppose it could have been done satirically and still made its point, but I wanted to play scenes full-out, without apology. I wanted to take the next step. A lot of people liked it, and I enjoyed every minute of it. I was very proud of the play.

J: But maybe that's just not the play the audience wanted to see.

CB: If I saw "Charles Busch in Queen Amarantha" with Ruth Williamson. He plays the queen of a fictional kingdom who dresses as a man"? I'd expect this to be a campy hoot. I tried to make it known in the press release that this was something different. We didn't call it a comedy, because we didn't want to mislead them. The reviews seemed to be, "why would he NOT spoof something that is so ripe for parody" or else they thought it was meant to be a spoof and misfired. That really hurts—if I do a spoof, you'll know it! But that was not my intention.

J: You really do have a lot of the rewards of being a drag.

CB: These strange moments happen to all of us who have a career in drag, where the line between your fantasy and how you're treated in real life just disappears. Lysippan, whose image is being this faux-fashion model, has done runway modeling for Thierry Mugler. And I was invited as this parodist grande-dame to speak at this luncheon with ladies of the American theater, and so there I am with June Havoc and Elaine Stritch discussing women in the theater today. They talk about the pressure. I did this AIDS benefit called Coup of the Year, and they put me in a dressing room with Carol Channing, Carol Burnett and Phyllis Newman. We're sitting there combing out our wigs, and took a while for me to realize—what's wrong with this picture? I should be next door with Nathan Lane and Patrick Stewart—especially Patrick Stewart! The identification is so close: here I am dressing with the actresses I emulate. Becoming them, really. They've all had this struggle, and I am beginning to think of myself as the Joan Crawford of drag, the glamour girl determined to prove she's a great actress. I think in my next play I should be a lesbian with breast cancer. That would finally show them all that I am a SERIOUS actress!

J: But still a white dress.

CB: Cardigan sweaters, I think. But, yes, of course, even the lesbian play would be a vehicle for me. So many of my plays have really been about, "Wouldn't it be fun to be Norma Shearer in an anti-Nazi melodrama? Wouldn't it be fun to be Barbara Stanwyck in a Capra Christmas story?"

J: You're very out.

CB: Yes.

J: That's something not all actors feel the freedom to be.

CB: That's a sad fact, but it's true. I mean, Ian McKellan, who never plays star roles, or rather roles with sex appeal, he doesn't have a problem. But the assholes who hire actors are awful, and the worst ones are gay. These showbiz gatekeepers are going to get in the way of an actor: "he's gay, no one will buy
him as a romantic lead." It's really sad. The self-hatred that goes on! Any group that's not totally accepted is going to suffer a degree of self-hatred. If you're brought up to believe that you don't belong, that you're invisible, you're going to have problems no matter how well-adjusted you think you are. I'll suddenly find myself saying something like "He's a real man" and I realize I'm not as cool as I thought I was.

JJ: How is being out connected with creativity?

CB: There's a very definite connection between being at ease with who I am sexually and who I am theatrically. I was already sort of gay when I went to college, but my roommate and I both really came out together and we were these wild queens on campus, really notorious. I was so taken with the joy of being gay, of expressing myself and being outrageous, that playing some straight person in an acting class just didn't interest me. I was still discovering who I was, and I had no interest in discovering anyone else. But I did find a connection in improvising with my friends that these female roles from old movies came so easily to me. At the moment, I couldn't quite understand how you had a career doing THAT. But after I saw Charles Ludlam and some others, I realized that theater could be whatever I choose it to be. For the first six years I did these one-man shows, but with this very complex narrative where I had to play all the characters. First I'd be the young man searching for the truth about his mother, and he goes to see the mysterious countess...and I'd be all of them. And I knew in my heart that these male characters I had to play just didn't interest me. I HATED to play the old Irish fisherman, the Barry Fitzgerald part. I was more at home as Maureen O'Hara. Eventually I got a little theater company at the Limbo Lounge, and I thought, thank God I don't have to play these dreary roles any more. Surprisingly, in the last few years I've actually had something to say as a writer. Now, that's a problem, because the writer in me wants the play to be good, and the actor just wants it to be about ME. I did You Should Be So Lucky a couple years ago, and my character, who started off as a very flamboyant gay boy, became more recessive, and the play ended up about the other boy. I realized that I write better female roles, and the women in the cast were walking away with the show. So the actor in me said, "Goddamn it, I've got to rewrite this play so I can be Lucy!" I finally had to play it as written, but I hated being second fiddle. From now on, I guess I'm the star lady.

JJ: There are so few plays where you get that anymore: "Here comes the star lady!"

CB: Bernhardt performances were filled with these tour-de-force moments completely unrelated to the plot or the character. Like she'd be doing an exposition scene and meanwhile arranging flowers, talking out front and then walking away, and the audience would gasp, because she would make the most perfect arrangement ever. And now, we're not living in a flamboyant age. Actresses want to play Norma Desmond, but they don't want to be her. Faye Dunaway and Kathleen Turner are ridiculed for being outrageous, and it's our loss. You have to have a touch of madness!

Night of the Unpronounceable Cast

Everyone at San Francisco Opera's Nozze di Figaro was talking about Sylvia McNair during the intermission, if only because one could say her name without fear of withering glances from the maven. But tonguetwisters Solveig Kringelborn, Angelika Kirschschlager, Bryan Terfel, Bo Skovhus, and Bojan Knezevic were also chitchat-worthy. Terfel is LOUD, with a rich and ringing voice and infectious enthusiasm that permeates the house. After all the lamenting of the passing of the Old Guard, it's nice to know we do have a superstar or two to get us into the next century. We were concerned that the rare beauty of Mr. Skovhus would be smothered under powdered wigs and floppy garb, but he turned out as always in a light-brown ponytail, a true bardhunk. Yes, the voice is on the small side, and there were no coloratura at the end of Count's aria, but his sexual byplay with Susanna was downright arousing. Peter can't wait for his Billy Budd in Houston. Kirschschlager is a worthy successor to von tade as Cherubino: young, charming, spryly. Kringelborn sounded low-powered as the Countess; McNair stole the spotlight in their scenes together.

Der Fliegende Holländer was a test of endurance. Pierre Strosser "designed" a minimalist black and white room with no hint of ship, sea, spinning wheels or cliff. The only color was a garish red light symbolizing the ghost ship. The girls fended sails around a giant potbellied stove, and Act 3 took place on a rundown resort boat. Vanderdecken's ship obviously has a superb laundry service, for James Morris looked very comme il faut in his cravat and frock coat. His nasal and acidic singing inspired the audience to bravos, interrupting the music of the entrance monologue. Jeanne-Michele Carbonnet can't help it if she is no Rysane, but she might at least understand that interpretation means more than "moldie notes soft, high notes loud." She deserves praise for being a good sport. She spent a chunk of the second act plastered to the wall apparently listening to a conversation in the adjoining boiler room. And her "leap" was nothing more than a slow-motion faint into the arms of Gosta Windberg (well, wouldn't you?)

Most satisfying vocally was Franz Hawlata (Daland), a big, booming sound that made me wish he were the Dutchman. The male chorus was splendidly lusty, and their drinking song positively toe-tapping. Donald Runnicles' breakneck tempi were augmented by flyovers of the Blue Angels precision team doing their part for Fleet Week.

A Wise Old Opera Queen once explained to Richard that you just can't have Callas singing Verdi every night of the week. In fact, most weeks, you don't even get Caballe singing Donizetti. "Verdi," said the WOOQ, "is good for the balls, but Pelleas is good for the soul - even for a cabalalette queen like you!" So the boys entered the Memorial with some reluctance, fearful this would be the last time ever to hear Beloved National Treasure Flicka. Soon they basked in mesmerizing shimmering incandescence, and realized that this would be a Great Night. The sets (Colin Graham) were FABulously pre-Raphaelite, glimpsed through gauzy scrims. And, you understand, Peter is not particularly fond of scrims. In
fact, he once disrupted an NYCO Pearl Fishers with shouts of "RAISE THE SCRLM!", which tends to confirm Operagoing Rule #4: "Staggering into the auditorium immediately after guzzling a bottle of half of champagne can be disorienting." But this time, the scrum made sense. Then there was the glory of von Stade's perfect diction. No surtitles necessary: anyone with basic Tyler, Texas High School French could catch her every word. Our lesson: maybe opera has more to offer than cabaret—the it might sometimes be about tone word sounds. Pelleas was Simpson Kearle, side a handsome vigorous young man. Even when Melisande unspools her yard of blonde tresses into Pelleas's fondling grasp, that gag was to be heard. Donald Runnicles conducted with gossamer purity.

Guillaume Tell got off to an ominous start when the wag behind Richard thought he was the first person in history to describe "Hi-So Silver" during the overture. If revivals of opera depend on the presence of Chris Merritt, then it's time to get out the mothballs. Ten years ago, when Merritt was hurling out high E's, who could predict that now the only repertory he should be singing is (maybe) Alain. Jean-Philippe Laffont blustered through "Sois immobile" like a provincial Scarpia, but Patricia Racette redeemed the dreary evening with her formidable coloratura and stunning presence. Her performance was "painterly" in contrast to the dirty graffiti all around her. With proper management and a few decent breaks, Miss. Racette may become a very big star indeed. With cuts, the evening was not a marathon, merely long and boring. As is traditional in San Francisco, the audience applauded the showering of the apple off Jenny's head.

The boys have seen the Andrei Serban Elektra three times now, and it doesn't get any better. One gets distracted from Elektra's fury by the sight of a Nekkid virgin atop a bull's carcass dragged across the stage. And all those duck leather dykes put one in mind of Women of the Cellblock E. We were almost disappointed that the Fifth Serving Maid was not boosted out like a Linda Blair. Elizabeth Connell's idea of frenzy was to hold out both arms and slowly turn around. In moments of agitation, she skittered across the stage like Edith Bunker answering the front door. She did have the high notes. Inga Nielsen was a little blonde mouse with a look in her eyes that said: "Don't hate me because I'm not a diva!" Juri Krout did what he could to whip the orchestra into a frenzy, but who could tell with all that distracting stage business? The one good thing about this performance was: even including ovations, everyone was in the bars by 9:30. And it didn't occur to anyone to rush home and catch the end of Veronica's Closet.

If ever they award the Nobel Prize For Being a Good Sport, the first recipient will doubtless be Catherine Malfitano for what she had to endure in Houston when she sang her first Lady Macbeth. As soon as we opened the program and glimpsed the phrases "maverick stage director", "nontraditional interpretation", "unconventional approach", "modern retelling" we knew we were in for it. Aida on the moon? Masetto's dream? No, just Macbeth in a 60's hospital. Out came these witches in crisp white uniforms, mopping up blood. During the dagger scene, portraits fell off the walls and loudly clunked to the floor. Later, "Power Secretaries" in red leatherette suit and black plastic charm screened a grainy 8mm film called "Il futuro," reviving Macbeth with a primitive defibrillator. The murderers donned BJ ski masks and stalked Banquo amid a forest of upended picnic tables.

Malfitano, a ringer for Juliane Prowse in a red pixie cut, sang her first cabaretta standing on a metal folding chair. She greeted her husband by wrapping her legs around his waist, a bit of staging that drew boos of derision from most of the audience, and loud cheering from a solitary fan. "La luce langue" offered her a moment of rest, reeling on an orange naugahyde sofa, but she climbed up on a metal folding chair for the brindisi, later riding around on the shoulders of two boyso, something one sees often at Cafe Momus but only rarely in medieval Scotland. The only reasonable moment in the opera was the Sleepwalking Scene, when she held her hand immobile in a spot of red light. During the finale, Macbeth's corpse was dumped on top of her (on the orange sofa) and they were doused in gasoline and set ablaze, in what seemed an unnecessarily dangerous piece of business.

Meanwhile her voice brimmed with with confidence and commitment. Sergei Leiferkuss's strange voice had only about three good (tor) notes, but he and his lady cut loose with loud, lusty vocalism. When you hear the radio replay, you'll swear this is a great performance, even if you do wonder what all the laughter is about.

Having survived the evening, Malfitano was elated, almost manic during the curtain calls, as if she was telling us, "I've been a superstar for years and it's about time I had some fun. Besides, this is Houston, not Vienna or New York, so who will ever know what happened? You can bet PBS is not going to tape this show."

-- Peter and Richard

Refreshing attempts at candor in program bio:

⇒ Giuseppe Culo, who has sucked hundreds of important mouths internationally, returns to our stage as Turridu ...
⇒ Known as Europe's most monomanical conductor, Harvey von Carrion has fired many opera superstars who would not follow his neo-Nazi temp...
⇒ Despite her lesbian inclinations, Oswalda Mannlecher saw her career take off when she resigned herself to fucking like a bunny throughout Eastern Europe...
⇒ Mezzo-soprano Faye te Komplee overcome poverty, ignorance and a police record as long as her arm to become one of the world's most mediocre bel canto stylists...
⇒ Veteran soprano Perle Fisher not only knows where the bodies are buried, she designed most of the shrubs....
⇒ Jacques Strappe's career has included over a decade of superstar status, followed by 20 years of singing comprimario roles in the provinces...