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## MISS BITCHY SPICE, *Soprano*

MISS BITCHY SPICE is one of Britain'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 Dinah the Dining Car in a Royal Command Performance of STARLIGHT EXPRESS. Miss Bitchy made headlines by refusing to curtsy to Her Majesty after the performance. As she explained later, "Me dress was so tight, 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 his time a lesbian myself, but I'll say anything to get a gig!"

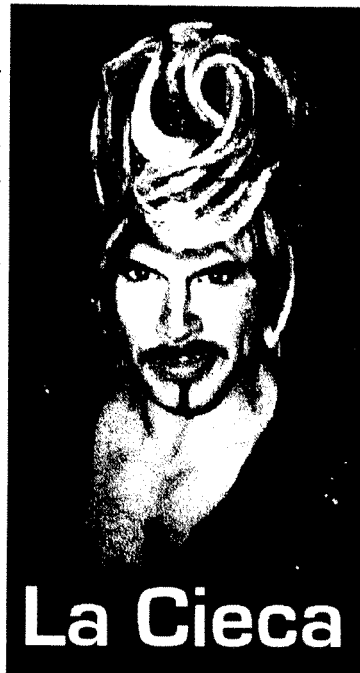
Reluctantly turning her back on Sir Andrew, Miss Spice tried out her pipes as a classical singer as the Seraph in a concert performance of Beethoven's CHRISTUS AM OLBERGE with Andrea Bocelli. This was such a success that she was immediately engaged by the English National Opera for LES MAMELLES DE TIRESIAS where she triumphed in the dual roles of La Droite and La 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 HER 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 Bolshoi debut as the Queen of Shemakhan 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 clanky "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" without anyone noticing. As it happens, "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;



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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 **Ottavia** 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 everyday unconscious gestures. Fascinating, of course, but it didn't add up to anything on stage beyond **Denyce Graves** strutting around in **Josephine Baker** drag and **Jerry Hadley** scratching his nose a lot. The unit set, 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. Now, why did Dr. Miller dress her in that dowdy little 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 guest conductors.

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**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.anaserve.com/~parterre/joneshome.htm>

Dame Gwyneth remains La Cieca's favorite Turandot, of course - especially in 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 vibrancy that La Cieca has not heard from anyone (except La Sweet!) in years. I certainly do not remember Marton's making such moving use of sustained quiet singing in middle voice. "Che nessun mi vida! 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 barn with a massive high A in "So il tuo nome" and an 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 -- each act was one sustained moment with a thousand inflections, all of them 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 -- Gaborlike 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 VERY good thing!). I cannot say I care for the way she produces those high pianissimi -- sounds like the fake place to me, and they lack body -- but otherwise everything works fine. 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 Johannson** 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 vendichera!") wierdly enough 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 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 **Rysanek** dramatically, and occasionally the top notes fly a little sharp, but 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 cameo of the Shepherd was **Dawn Upshaw**, her singing joyous and free, and her tomboyish presence providing 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 snoozefest. **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 creamier 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 am not talking only about the passages when maestro and singer affected an absurdly slow tempo (the Dirge to the Evening Star). Even fleeter passages 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!

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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 have 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 sparking, 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, "interpretitis". 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 Flemingesque gurgles and sighs. Hey, "Di 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 agilit  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 Oktavian, 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 shimmering 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 scales and staccatti. 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.

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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.

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To mark the 20<sup>th</sup> 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 HBP 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 Verdian 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, rubati, and contrast of 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 Enzo and I just ADORED the Academy of Music, which is EXACTLY what an opera house should be, red velvet loges and plaster carvings and gilt and ring balconies -- and, most 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 spinto 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 **Cerquettian** 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 Soverain" is really a little heavy for him right now (especially with the Met orchestra and 200 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 up **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 countertenors in general and this countertenor 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 Toreador Song deserved booing. 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



Conchelli's La Gioconda) and his stu-  
equally uninhibited correspondent



almost as blonde and floofy as La Voigt's.

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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?

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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 dimpled cheeks 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 ONCE to illustrate a phrasing point in "Les Nuits d'Ete". All in all, I think the erstwhile "Trilling Will" deserves a big shiny "A" 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 Brunnhilde in *Die Walkure*. She added that she always knew that this role was a "special event" in her career; she could not wait to return to Sieglinde. She expressed a certain annoyance with herself for turning down so many roles, among them Lady Macbeth (which Bing offered her at the Met) and Isolde. 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 Jordan in an exclusive interview elsewhere in this issue.)

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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-Borszkh (Ira Siff) offers flashbacks to the company's most pungent successes (*Tosca*, *Manon*, *Madama Butterfly* and *Samson et Dalila*) as well as arias and songs illustrating the via dolorosa of the legendary "traumatic soprano". Siff, in fine voice (after an opening night 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 "young American soprano" Kavatina Turner (Kyle Church Cheseborough), Vera slipped into a stream-of-consciousness monologue that is far more in the spirit of Callas 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-

operatic stadium "events". Strong stuff, and the audience responded with a rousing ovation. And then, as Vera initiated Kavatina into the subtleties of "To son l'umile ancella," we saw a gauche girl blossom into a **Leontynesque** Great Lady of the Stage -- a funny but intensely moving representation of the holy act of inspiration.

Mr. Cheseborough is a relatively recent addition to this company, but veterans like **Phil Koch** and **Keith Jurosko** had a few new tricks up their pailletted sleeves. Koch played the good-old-gal mezzo Philene Wannelle as an operatic **Jane Russell**, uncorking a high B in the Samson scene that would shame **Dolora Zajick**. Jurosko's five(!) roles included Last Living Castrato Galupe (with a classic performance of Tosti's "Ideale"), two-faced baritone Fodor Szadan and "America's Most Beloved Retired Diva" Sylvia Bills, who fractured the story of *Madama Butterfly* most delightfully. ("Pinkerton tells Cio-Cio-San that he will return from America at the same time as Robin Byrd with red breasts").

**Patrick Jones** was the sweet-toned and terminally dimwitted tenor Bruno Focaccia, particularly well-cast as a hornier-than-expected Samson. **Todd Sisley** (Maestro Costalotta-Denaro) was indefatigable and ever responsive to Mme. Galupe-Borszkh's very, uh, personal sense of rhythm.

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Open any issue of *Opera News* and note the photos of James Morris and his adorable kids or Greer Grimsley and his handsome wife Loretta Bybee. Or run your eyes over an interview with Renee Fleming in *The New York Times*, where the soprano muses on the difficulties of balancing a career with a family. In fact, if an opera singer in the public eye is married, or has an ongoing relationship with a person of the opposite sex, then that fact is invariably mentioned in all their personal publicity. But there are some operatic artists who seem to lack a private life entirely. They may talk about their home in Santa Fe, or their fascination with professional wrestling or their warm regard for their colleagues, but they apparently have no real human relationships. No relationships they can talk about, anyway. That's because they're gay, and, in opera as in so many other entertainment fields, being gay mostly means being in the closet, invisible.

## APRITE, PRESTO APRITE!

Now, practically everyone agrees that the decision to come out should be left to the individual. That's why during the "heyday" of outing (which was about three weeks in 1988), even the most radical activists realized that this tactic would accomplish nothing more than to alienate friends and to incite fear and loathing among enemies. On the other hand, a celebrity's social life (the public part, anyway) has always been fair game for journalists. A controlled peek at a star's offstage life is the basis of all public relations: even at the turn of the century, artists like Caruso and Farrar built their superstardom on personal publicity as much as on their artistic abilities. Let us consider the (purely hypothetical?) case of a personality like actor George Clooney, who has built his whole career on being "accessible" to the media. If Clooney is seen going to a club with a woman, that's going to be on *Entertainment Tonight*, probably with a suggestion that the couple are lovers. But if he's there with a guy -- well, it's either ignored or else made quite clear that they are college buddies. Even if that guy is Clooney's longtime companion, someone he's planning on spending his life with -- nothing. Even if Clooney's PR people weret to specifically okay covering the relationship, many magazines and television will still not mention it for fear of offending .... *someone*.

In other words, *heterosexual* activity is considered fair game for gossip, but *homosexual* activity is ignored. Is it so surprising then, that the "default setting" mentality creates a perception that everyone in the world is straight? That perception is dangerous, of course. It tends to separate and marginalize anyone who is gay, and, by extension,



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

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!"

-- James Jorden

**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 Hollis), 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 Plishka (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 20<sup>th</sup>-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 Obratzsova (Princess Tamara), Kathleen Battle (Little Mary), and Gianna Rolandi (Olga). Conductor: Judith Somogi; Director: Sonja Frisell; Sets and Costumes: Bob Mackie

☞ **Gianni Chitarra** 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 Chiatarra), Ettore Bastianini (Bimbo Ballare) and Luigi Alva (Tacchino). Antonino Votto conducted. A new production of this opera will open La Scala's 1999-2000 season, with Raina Kabaivanska (Vienna), Mariella Devia (Emma Piccola), Jose Cura (Gianni Chiatarra), Michele Pertusi (Bimbo Ballare) and William Matteuzi (Tacchino). Devia will sing the restored scena "Vienna e niente ma una sguadrina 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 Guarrera (Wally Fay), and Jean Madeira (Ida). The opera was conducted by Dmitri Mitropoulos, and staged by Herbert Graf with sets and costumes by Rolf Gerard.

☞ **Grand Hotel**, with music by Francis Poulenc and libretto by Jean Cocteau, premiered at the Paris Opéra in 1959. In the company were Denise Duval (Grusinskaya), Rosanna Carteri (Flaemmchen), Hermann Uhde (Preysing), Peter Pears (Kringelein) 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: Ljuba Welitsch (Anna Holm), Alexander Sved (Torsten Barrington), 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 Moele (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

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# bordello weekend

As part of a whirlwind weekend trip to New York, I witnessed the wild and wacky proceedings at the Licia Albanese-Puccini Foundation Annual Concert. La Cieca and I arrived outside of Alice 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 Licia-thon and rehearsals for Rake's Progress at the Met. Amidst the gathering throngs, we spotted sopranos-of-yore Elinor Ross and Elizabeth Carron, plus notorious "Opera Fanatic" Stefan Zucker.

Ecco Licia! 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 amazingly 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, few of the young singers chosen from the foundation's vocal competition seemed worthy enough to be invested with carrying on the grand tradition. The best was soprano Ji-Yeun Cho Lee who sang "Piangete 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 approval for a wearying parade of barking baritones, strangled tenors and oh-so-grand divettes. I mean, is a black velvet evening gown with voluminous purple train THE most appropriate ensemble for "O mio babbino caro?" I expected nothing less than "Suicidio" in that outrageous drag!

The most annoying offender in the grand gown/no voice category was mezzo-soprano Jane Dutton. She was coached to make big Fiorenza Cossotto gestures but only managed to produce Carlotta Ordassy sounds. Lili Chookasian 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 Lied from Die Tote Stadt. 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 Beniamino Gigli 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 bribed by other basses to convince Ramey to take this award and retire 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," namely "Io son l'umile ancella" from Adriana Lecouvreur. Mamma 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 vocal shape, but the phrasing was long-breathed 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 our mistress-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 Kiepara 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 just ground to a halt. 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, fascination. 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 delivered the song to Licia 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 ever in a purple day dress with matching sequin-covered picture hat a la Maria Jeritza! As the almost 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. Jon Vickers accepted his Lifetime 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 Licia-thon and not sing the praises of our ever-lovely hostess. What a beautiful, classy woman Patrice Munsel is! The afternoon's great moment of camp arrived when Munsel delivered her self-composed "Difesa della Licia" aria, set to the tune of "Hello, Dolly." Albanese looked right proud as her booing exploits at the opening of the Met's 1994 Madama Butterfly were recounted 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. Vickers smiled with a hint of embarrassment and 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. Ghastly -- a generous helping of slovenliness by the world's supposedly greatest opera company. The Met orchestra were on automatic pilot for the night. I am not 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 beginner's aerobics class held on the Barter Town set of Mad Max. I half-expected Tina Turner to take one look at Johansson 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 walk spaces?

Come to think of it, Kristjan Johansson's Calaf was pretty "raggedy" at that: arms mechanically extended at climaxes, self-indulgent phrasing, loud and coarse bellowing, 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 piannissimo B-flat in the first act, but her attractive lyric soprano never really took wing as the evening progressed. There is a dark, covered quality to her singing that sounds a tad manufactured, a la Angela Gheorghiu. This is Puccini for the 90's: senza portamenti, senza accenti, senza rubati. Of course, we know now from that esteemed master Roberto Alagna that such effects were the evil

1997

legacy of such "lazy singers" as Beniamino Gigli, Renata Tebaldi, Franco Corelli, etc. But Hong was in fact the class of the cast. She looked exquisite and the audience adored her.

Buzz phrase of the evening: "What is the DEAL with Jane Eaglen?" Folks, let's get real here. I've been reading for weeks now about the second coming of Birgit Nilsson and what I heard was an overparted Fiordiligi. The high C's were inaudible, the voice carefully produced and the phrasing without any shape whatsoever. There was sharpening and flattening galore, plus a number of clumsy, appliqued stunts like the misfired crescendo on her final "Amor!" And this was supposed to be some kind of tonic for the much-maligned Marton, Dimitrova and Jones? COME ON! For all their well-known flaws, these three ladies possess instruments of the size, scope and grandeur necessary for the title role. In addition, they could act and phrase Eaglen into the wings. As the curtain descended, one old-timer exclaimed: "God, even Mary Curtis-Verna gave you more bang for your buck than this woman!" The idea that companies the world over are building productions, planning seasons and resurrecting repertoire around this no-thrills soprano is a sad commentary indeed on the current state of opera.

The evening's most noteworthy event was the technical disaster that kept the first few minutes of the second scene of Act Two in the dark. Isolated lights popped off and on, revealing supers stumbling around in a state of panic. At the most unmusical moment possible, the lighting levels are corrected with the subtlety of an atom bomb explosion, prompting tongue-in-cheek applause from the audience. Suddenly, during the dialogue between Emperor Altoum and Calaf, a large fresnel lighting instrument comes CRASHING ON TO THE STAGE FROM THE FLIES with a loud thud and the breaking of glass. It came within TWO FEET of killing a super playing one of the palace guards. The chorus was understandably terrified and kept staring upward as the performance continued without interruption. As a former stage manager, I find this decision to continue utterly appalling. Is the Met so unconcerned about the safety of its cast that they will allow lives to be placed in jeopardy? I have no doubt that Volpe and his henchpersons got n earful the next day from the union representing the chorus.

That controversial Iphigenie en Tauride at the New York City Opera turned out to be a lot more interesting musically than dramatically. Francesca Zambello's direction had its risible moments, particularly the delighted cackling of the men's chorus as they tied up the captured Oreste and Pylade, right out of some old high-seas pirate flick. And why deprive Diana of her deus-ex-machina? The chaste goddess of the moon was dressed like 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

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highly committed performances from her cast.

Enough ink has been spilled over the production concept and I have very little to add to the debate, except to note that Zambello and company are not alone in exploiting the current fascination with queer culture as trivialized by Hollywood and popular media. Given all the hype and hoopla about "homoerotic imagery," I found it ironic that there was nothing at all romantic, let alone erotic, about the way the mutual devotion of Pylade and Orest was depicted. Of course, we wouldn't be having this debate AT ALL if the "bosom buddies" in question were Adalgisa and Norma, Butterfly and Suzuki, Isolde and Brangaene, etc. Lesbian erotica is seen as harmless source of titillation to a large number of straight males. Gay male erotica, on the other hand, is almost universally viewed as disturbing, threatening and perverted.

This was my first encounter with the opera and I was completely overwhelmed by the beauty of Gluck's score. I didn't really take to my only other previous encounter with the Great Reformer's work, the infamous Robert Wilson Alceste at Lyric Opera of Chicago. Ramment? The production where La Norman resembled the Lusitania going under? With Chris Merritt sporting that capello di Jughead, all the while performing robotic Charade party gestures throughout the evening (as if his singing wasn't bad enough)? However, Iphigenie en Tauride was a revelation to me and I look forward to studying the work in depth. The tender restraint and noble dignity of the music are quite sublime.

Christine Goerke covered herself in glory as Iphegenie. 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 Pylade. 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.

La Cieca and I went backstage after the performance to extend our congratulations to La Goerke, who was vivacious and responsive, if a little overwhelmed by sheer numbers of people assembled to greet her. She accepted with pleasure a copy of parterre box brought for her perusal. I wish this gracious prima donna every success in the future.

Back in Hogtown, I took 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 suits 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 variants that took the vocal line down rather than up. He declaimed the recitatives expressively and eloquently. All in all, this was a serious and effective portrayal. Nevertheless, it must be said that the tenor always settles for a generalized sort of excellence, rarely pushing himself to the level of life-or-death intensity associated with a true singing actor like Jon Vickers (who seriously considered adding Idomeneo to his repertoire near the end of his career). Domingo never fails to satisfy yet hardly ever produces the kind of catharsis that would lift his artistry to a different sphere of appreciation.

After all the advance hype and hoopla generated by her recordings, Vesselina Kasarova was something of a disappointment. The voice is a handsome one but the technique seems unformed. The tone is beset by a good deal of flutter and does not sound sufficiently supported in quieter passages. There were some audible register breaks and she is altogether too fond of glottal attack for dramatic effect. She knows how to phrase with purpose and there were many tender and touching details in her interpretation. Still, the voice is a small one and I wonder what if she is really suited for Tancredi or Rinaldo instead of Cherubino.

Cynthia Lawrence sang Elettra like a flunking graduate student from a provincial college music department, with lousy Italian enunciation, colorless voice, applied gestures -- you name it. This role is about DEMENTIA and Lawrence delivered nothing but WASP blandness. The soprano went totally to pieces in "D'Oreste, D'AJace," complete with disintegrating tone and all manner of huffing and puffing. The most exciting part of her performance was watching her dress get caught in the doorway of her first entrance. She pulled and pulled and pulled but the billowing gown would not budge. With only seconds to spare, Lawrence RIPPED the dress loose and flounced on stage. If only

# Touch of Madness

talking with Charles Busch

Actor/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 Siff 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 19<sup>th</sup> century theater, and opera is as close as we can get to Sardou melodrama. I was really 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 mimes Fedora clutching 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 *Boheme*, 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 Katharine

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 Ilia. 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 me regret the omission of Arbace's two arias; Misha Royzen'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 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. Even worse, Elettra 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 cacophany of snoring, wrinkled candy wrappers, roof-rattling hacking, jingled coins, dropped programs and slammed doors!

For the curious: the program listed some very intriguing upcoming 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 unwisely leave the realm of the Three Sopranos Concerts and attempt Amelia in *Un Ballo in Maschera* for Monte Carlo (uggh!) 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**.



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 after. But that's part of the

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.

JJ: But you've cornered the market!

CB: I enjoy the fact that I can play these 19<sup>th</sup> 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...

JJ: 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.

JJ: Maybe you could do *Fedora* sometimes.

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

JJ: 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.

JJ: 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, patriotic speeches and swordfights. We had original music underscoring—melodrama, right? That's about as close to opera as I'm going to get. I thought, wouldn't it be interesting to really PLAY a 19<sup>th</sup> 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.

JJ: 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.

JJ: You really do have a lot of the rewards of being a diva.

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. Lypsinka, whose image is being this faux-fashion model, has done runway modeling for Thierry Mugler. And I was invited as this parody 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 take you at face value. I did this AIDS benefit called Gypsy 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!

JJ: 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?"

JJ: You're very out.

CB: Yes.

JJ: 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 gatekeeper 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. But 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 any more: "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 mavens. But tongue-twisters Solveig Kringelborn, Angelika Kirchschlager, Bryn 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 foppish garb, but he turned out sexy as always in a light-brown ponytail, a true barihunk. Yes, the voice is on the small side, and there was no coloratura at the end of the Count's aria, but his sexual byplay with Susanna was downright arousing. Peter can't wait for his Billy Budd in Houston. Kirchschlager is a worthy successor to von Tade as Cherubino: young, charming, sprightly. Kringelborn sounded low-powered as the Countess; McNair stole the spotlight in their scenes together.

*Der Fliegende Hollander* was a test of endurance. Pierre Strosser "designed" a minimalist black and white room with no hint of ship, sea, portrait, spinning wheels or cliff. The only color was a garish red light symbolizing the ghost ship. The girls mended sails around a giant pot-bellied stove, and Act 3 took place on a rundown resort boardwalk. 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 Charbonnet can't help it if she is no Rysanek, but she might at least understand that interpretation means more than "middle 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 cabaletta queen like you!" So the boys entered the War 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

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" and "modern retelling" we knew we were in for it. Aida on the moon? Masetto's dream? No, just *Macbeth* in a '60s 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 slut suits and black Uma Thurman wigs screened a grainy 8mm film called "Il futuro," reviving Macbeth with a primitive defibrillator. The murderers donned OJ ski masks and stalked Banquo amid a forest of upended picnic tables.

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 butch leather dykes put one in mind of Women of Cellblock E. We were almost disappointed that the Fifth Serving Maid was not broomhandled a la 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 Leonie!" 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*.

fact, he once disrupted an NYCO *Pearl Fishery* with shouts of "RAISE THE SCRIM!", which tends to confirm Operagoing Rule #4: "Staggering into the auditorium immediately after guzzling a bottle and half of champagne can be disorienting." But this time, the scrim made sense. Then there was the glory of von Stade's perfect diction. No surtitles necessary: anyone with with basic Tyler, Texas High School French could catch her every word. Our lesson: maybe operais about more than cabalettas - it might sometimes be about toned word sounds. Pelleas was Simon Keenlyside, a handsome vigorous young man. Even when Melisande unspooled her yards of blonde tresses into Pelleas's fondling grasp, not a giggle 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 the history of the world to exclaim "Hi-yo, Silver" during the overture. If revivals of this 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 now is (maybe) Altoun. Jean-Phillipe Lafont 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, Ms. 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 shooting of the apple off Jemmy's head.

Malfitano, a ringer for Juliet Prowse in a red pixie cut, sang her first cabaletta standing on a metal folding chair. She greeted her husband by wrapping her legs around his waist, a bit of staging that drew hoots of derision from most of the audience, and loud cheering from a solitary fan. "La luce langue" offered her a moment of rest, reclining on an orange naugahyde sofa, but she climbed up on a metal folding table for the brindisi, later riding around on the shoulders of two ballet boys, something one sees often at Café 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 hers (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 (tnor) 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 bios:

- ⇒ **Giuseppe Culo**, who has fucked hundreds of important mouths internationally, returns to our stage as Turridu ...
- ⇒ Known as Europe's most monomaniacal conductor, **Harvey von Carrion** has fired many operatic superstars who would not follow his neo-Nazi tempi...
- ⇒ Despite her lesbian inclinations, **Oswalda Mannlicher** saw her career take off when she resigned herself to fucking like a bunny throughout Eastern Europe...
- ⇒ Mezzo-soprano **Faye te Komplee** overcame 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 shrouds....
- ⇒ **Jacques Strappe**'s career has included over a decade of superstar status, followed by 20 years of singing comprimario roles in the provinces...