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the queer opera zine



30: Melpomene stessa

ask Dr. Repertoire

Dear Dr. Repertoire: I attended the opening night of the Met's new *Samson et Dalila* and it was very exciting and everything. Denyce was fierce! In the lobby before the opera I heard a couple talking and the man said "I hope this isn't one of those Eurotrash productions." Is there such a thing as Eurotrash any more? You never see those guys with the ponytails and the black turtle necks.

Little Stevie

Dear Stevie: I think there is a distinction to be made here. What we call "Eurotrash" direction is, I think, an almost fanatical reworking of both the appearance and the underlying meaning of the work through methods that call attention to the director's cleverness. Eurotrash direction usually involves harsh lighting, steel scaffolding, trendy violence and nudity, leather trenchcoats, mirrored sunglasses, and consumption (onstage, mostly) of drugs and fast food. By that definition, some of the work of Peter Sellars or Graham Vick could be called "Eurotrash"; others (Sellars' *Giulio Cesare* or Vick's *Ermione*) could not, because these productions work as exciting and vivid theater. At the Met, we see a lot of what I call "Eurotrash Lite", a half-hearted style that mimics the cliches of Eurotrash, but without the conviction: meaningless eyecandy for that crowd who haven't quite noticed that postmodernism is dead.

Dear Dr. Repertoire: Who is the prima donna in *Il trovatore*, Leonora or Azucena?
Second Man in Armor

Dear Man #2: Whoever gets the larger paycheck, which mostly means Dolora Zajick.

Dear Dr. Repertoire: So, what's the deal with Dawn Upshaw?
Baba the Iraqi

Dear Babs: She does seem to rub some people the wrong way, doesn't she? Her stage demeanor is the diametrical opposite of the "exotic/grand" behavior we expect from our operatic artists. Upshaw is quite direct and earnest to a degree that strikes some as being pretentious, even patronizing. She also sends out confusing sexual signals: as a colleague of Dr. Repertoire's once bluntly put, "she looks like a boy and smells like a girl." Her androgyny is not the mix of glamour and swagger we associate with, say, Vesselina Kasarova; rather, Upshaw's personality blends gawky schoolboy and prim virgin. It's unfamiliar, which makes some audiences feel uncomfortable overhearing such direct and unflirtatious communication in her performance. In all fairness, I must add that Upshaw tends to undersing most opera roles, especially at the Met. It's a very lean voice, and she chooses to sing even leaner. Those who like "fat" luscious voices a la Renee Fleming don't find Upshaw's instrument very satisfying. I think Upshaw sings musical theater better than just about anyone: her *Oh, Kay*'s is as close to perfection as I can imagine. (The supporting cast includes with Kurt Ollman, Patrick Cassidy, Adam Arkin and Susan Lucci, conducted by Eric Stern. It's on Elektra 79361-2).

Dr. Repertoire will be glad to answer your questions in this column, provided they're interesting and he isn't stumped. Address your questions to "Ask Dr. Repertoire" c/o parterre box, 174 W. 76th St. #12-G, New York, NY 10023.

Darlings, La Cieca will burst if she doesn't share this: a reliable source reports that **Simone Young**, as a result of her resounding failures at the Met in *Les Contes d'Hoffman* and *Il Trovatore*, has been bought out of next season's *Traviata* starring the **Alagnas**. The performances, scheduled to be telecast, are now rumored to be under the direction of **James Levine**. Ms. Young's Met days seemed numbered from the beginning of the *Hoffman* rehearsals. La Cieca is told that Ms. Young dismissed the singers' requests for minor tempo changes with a sweeping "relax!" Audience members at the final dress rehearsal were shocked to see **Richard Leech** simply quit singing in the middle of "O dieu de quel ivresse" and throw his hands up in the air. Matters apparently reached a head during the broadcast of *Hoffman*: a backstage observer reports he saw **Patricia Racette** (Antonia) storm into her dressing room and slam the door (most uncharacteristic for the even-tempered young soprano); he also noted **Pierre Lefebvre** in tears in the wings. As for the *Trovatore* - well, La Cieca will get to that in good time. What matters now is, Maestro Young looks to be history!

★★★★★

La Cieca hopes and prays that what she heard from **Denyce Graves** at the February 16 the Met's *Samson et Dalila* was the result of fatigue, nerves or some sort of mild indisposition. Her middle voice sounded cloudy and rough, with frequent patches of suspect pitch; what's worse, there apparently was neither top nor bottom to the range. Lowlying phrases like "garde a son retour" in the first act simply disappeared, and the few excursions above the staff (most especially the difficult cry of "Lache!" toward the end of Act Two) emerged as nothing more than hollow screams, like **Marta Modl**'s notorious high G-sharp in the Salzburg *Elektra*. What is perhaps more disturbing than vocal



questo e quello

unsteadiness (which, as La Cieca said, could be temporary) was the inert quality of her musical and dramatic interpretation, a lack of imagination especially in the use of rhythm. The whole score sounded like a series of disconnected whole notes, only rarely bound into phrases. "Mon coeur s'ouvre a ta voix" was pretty much a disaster, with Graves constantly out of synch with the orchestra, running out of breath on several key phrases. Ms. Graves was not, I think, very much "in synch" with her director either: she performed the required strutting, lip-pursing, and arm-vogueing (**Pam Grier** IS Delilah Jones in *Big Trouble in the Valley of Sorek*) but she didn't really seem to mean it. Dalila came off sullen, withdrawn, preoccupied, disengaged. Could this be possibly be the director's intention? *Samson et Dalila* has little enough dramatic action as it is; why, then, would anyone choose to damp down the work's most interesting character?

On the plus side, we did have **Placido Domingo** doing "his" *Samson*, which has always been one of his very best roles. Perhaps Domingo identifies with a sensualist hero who, when everything looks darkest, delivers the goods (and a ringing high B-flat). Certainly he was he saving grace of this production, singing and acting with even more than his customary distinction. I cannot say that I saw any trace of "different" business or intention resulting from the direction of **Elijah Moshinsky** any more than I did when Domingo did his "new" *Otello*, but that's all to the good. What was excitingly different about this performance was Domingo's strong sense of commitment, really electrifying after his somnambulistic Don Jose earlier this season. What an artist this man is; and how are we ever going to get along without him?

La Cieca still cannot grasp the reasoning behind **Sergei Leiferkus'** rank as *baryton du jour* at the Met: the voice is an utter scramble, all noise and rattle, and his French is only occasionally intelligible enough even to be risible. And while I freely admit that the High Priest may well be a big old priss (otherwise, why the **Norma Desmond** drag?), Mr. Leiferkus still needs major speech therapy for that annoying lisp ("Maudite à jamais ssssssoit la rassssssse.") He does, however, make a very fetching skinhead daddy, so he was not a total loss. Frankly, I wish **Alan Held** had taken on the role -- he sang it in Newark in about 1989 opposite **Fiorenza Cossotto**, and he was superb. As it turned out, he make a powerful, richly sung Abimelech, despite injuries from a fall off that litter thing during rehearsal.

Danger to life and limb provided about the only real excitement in Elijah Moshinsky's new production. For reasons that are to La Cieca completely obscure, Moshinsky insisted on moving the action of the opera from Gaza to some unspecified North African location.

The Philistines therefore became an oddly two-tiered civilization of dark-skinned warriors in the service of high yellow soloists. The muscular supers were quite a visual treat, especially at the moments when they lined up at the curtain line and shook their bulked-up booties at the audience. So dazzling an effect suggests to La Cieca that Mr. Moshinsky is either a brilliant visual stylist or a major dinge queen.

Designer **Richard Hudson** seized the opportunity to splash the stage with fauviste pastels. In Act One this really did evoke the proper oasis-at-sundown feeling, with placid food-gathering women slowly going about their chores in silhouette: would that the Met's Aida looked this stylish! This scene introduced the first of three drop-dead chic frocks for Ms. Graves, who looked ready to present a Grammy. A really charming Dance of the Flower Maidens (in which the lithe Ms. Graves took an active role) promised a level of chic and cool sensuality that the rest of the production failed to deliver. Eventually La Cieca could not help noticing that Hudson's unit set is not only ass-ugly and cheap-looking but unworkable as well. It's only a rake with a few set pieces, leaving most of the vast stage quite bare.

Act Two mired down in monotony: it's just an aria and two duets, with little physical or dramatic action, and all Moshinsky could come up with was a LOT of **Tina Turner** stalking and glaring for La Graves, varied with an occasional command to hit the dirt. She had to sing "Mon coeur" sprawled ungracefully across the prone Mr. Domingo's beefy chest. And are we really to suppose that in the whole Valley of Sorek there is not so much as a blanket to lie on?

La Cieca found the Bacchanale energetic (practically cardiovascular) but not particularly erotic. A feature of the choreography was having the dancers dip their hands in white paint and leave handprints on each others' bodies, an effect that put at least one queen in the audience in mind of **Barbara Streisand's** nightgown from *The Owl and the Pussycat*. Not surprisingly, the phallic tower did not so much tumble as detumesce, a spectacularly lame denouement. (What happened to the sensoround earthquake noises and moving stage floor we were promised?)

Leonard Slatkin's conducting emphasized spikily exotic color at the expense of lush sensuality, a twentieth century approach in harmony with Moshinsky's Freudian dramaturgy. Interesting, perhaps, but is it the opera Saint-Saëns wrote?

This production will be revived for the opening night of next season, starring Mr. Domingo. Now, who his leading lady will be remains to be seen, since the tenor and the Met have two different mezzos in mind...

The delight of concert opera in New York is rather

more than the aesthetic pleasure of hearing an unfamiliar score: sufficient patient sniffing may also reveal the presence of that rarest and tastiest of all truffles: a new diva. The archetype for this sort of epiphany is of course **Montserrat Caballe's** breakthrough *Lucrezia Borgia* with the American Opera Society, one of the three or four great opera queen moments of the twentieth century. Earlier this season, New York embraced **Vesselina Kasarova** as a new star after her *Tancredi* with Opera Orchestra of New York. And just a few weeks ago, La Cieca and others in the know felt the buzz when **Sylvie Valayre** blew the place down in Verdi's *Jerusalem*.

It was a particularly dazzling night for Mme. Valayre, because the program's Big Name **Sam Ramey** canceled on only a couple days' notice. But this tall, glamorous French dramatic soprano rose to the occasion with a performance of range, cleanly expressive ornament, depth of color, dramatic thrust, and a fearless assault on written and unwritten high notes all the way off to high D. Valayre's physically engaged performing style is reminiscent of **Dame Gwyneth Jones**, and, as she warmed up, her middle voice took on a warm, **Crespin**-like character, at its most sensuous in the Act 2 prison duet. Her only bobble of the evening was a clumsy "Ave Maria", a cruelly exposed piece only minutes into the opera. From the evidence of this concert, she will be a very important interpreter of the Verdian *donna di forza* roles for years to come, and I would really like to hear what she could do with Norma. She looked striking in long flowing dark hair and a red Grecian-style silk gown -- an outfit I am told she wore to sing Abigaille at Covent Garden when she protested the company's costumes!

Keith Ilika-Purdy's powerful voice made a lot of sense as the Cid-like Gaston, a role far longer and heavier than the equivalent Oronte in *I Lombardi*. (The intercultural romance motif disappears in this revision of the plot.) He is certainly possessed of a mighty high C (or two or three), but his vocal production sounds to me "tight", all one rather steely color. When Mr. Ilika-Purdy learns to relax and let the voice float freely, we will have an important spinto tenor on our hands.

Gary Simpson gallantly subbed for Mr. Ramey; he sang with authority and passable French; **Richard Clement** stood out among the comprimarii for his sweet, unforced tenor and sensitive shaping of his brief phrases. The chorus sounded rich and noble in their important episodes, and **Eve Queler's** broad-stroked conducting made this noble grand opera score sound particularly glamorous.

Glimpsed in the center box joining the ovation were **Renata Scotto**, **Tony Randall**, **Lucine Amara** -- and **Ira Siff**, who related to La Cieca his experience as an

auditor in one of La Scotto's recent master classes: "She's doing my act!" he cried.

A very different French opera brightened a gloomy midwinter evening at Alice Tully Hall with the familiar but always potent combination of Offenbach, **Angelina Réaux** and L'opera Francais de New York. *Barbe-bleu* has to be the most skittish opera ever written: even the ballads skip and hop, and the patter songs border on the manic.

Angelina Réaux excelled in the broad-comedy aspects of *Boulotte*, Bluebeard's hoydenish sixth wife. She is truly the Callas of the pratfall and her timing is Mermanesque in its precision. La Cieca will admit that the diva's vocalism on this evening was a bit effortful, with far more use of open chest voice than Offenbach could have intended. But perhaps La Cieca should keep in mind that this is not Mozart, after all: Réaux put on a great show as this Annie Oakley of the boulevards. Maybe she was "inspired" by the very strong and utterly zany "supporting" cast. **Hughes Saint-Gelais** in the tricky and high-lying title role struck the proper balance between Simoneau and Chevalier, batting out high B-flats while hoofing, and **Michael Sokol** as the alchemist stopped the show with his "eccentric" dance number in the second act. **Joy Hermalin** as the nymphomaniacal Queen (isn't there always one of those in an operetta?) put close to three octaves worth of first-class voice to the service of farce in her one show-stopping number, and **Marc Molomot** expertly camped her doofus consort. **Jeffrey Lentz** and **Lisa Catherine Mandelhorn** were the buff but small-voiced juvenile couple. La Cieca thinks she needs hardly remind you that **Yves Abel** conducts this sort of music with the ease and insouciance of a Sunday-afternoon promenade down the Champs-Élysées. **Christopher Alden's** staging could hardly be called "semi," so busily detailed was it. I still have not quite understood why his work for this company is so invariably pleasing while his efforts elsewhere remain a very mixed bag. On to *La Grande Duchesse*, please!

★★★★★★

We all get older, even Richard Leech. That silky-sweet "peachfuzz" sound of Leech's City Opera years is pretty much rubbed off the voice, but the tradeoff is a sizable instrument with an interestingly muscular middle range. The only time during *Les Contes d'Hoffman* I found him at all out of sorts was in "O dieu de quel ivresse..." which he had to fight with a bit, though the high-lying climax just rang out with a really nice ping. He had voice to spare for a solid high B-flat at the end of the epilogue "Kleinzach" verse, and he coped admirably with that "You'll Never Walk Alone" chorale ending (which at NYCO I seem to remember as a quartet with Stella and Lindorf as well

as the Muse.) He is an enormously sympathetic and even athletic Hoffman -- a good guy caught in a bad situation, instead of a psychological basket case waiting to happen a la Shicoff.

All this "drag-and-drop" musicology (based more or less on that disproved Oeser edition) really must stop: *Hoffman* does not need to be 4 hours long.

My only quibble with **Natalie Dessay's** performance was that she just did a little TOO much physically: the joke is in the music, really, and I felt like a lot of the audience did not completely grasp the difficulty and the wit of her singing, so busy were they guffawing at her acrobatics. But this diva's Zerbinetta earlier this season showed that she will continue to experiment even after the show opens, so maybe she'll edit out a bit of the business. The sustained high G was dazzling, folks.

La Cieca really likes Patricia Racette: so womanly and the voice is placed perfectly. If she does not sing perfectly in tune all the time, that is a minor consideration. Hearing her sing is like seeing a beautiful picture with all the old dirty varnish stripped off. Violetta and Manon, please...

Jennifer Larmore just makes no sense as Giulietta. She's quite pretty, it's true, but just too girlish and clean-cut: in her pink Empire frock she looked like **Shirley Temple** doing Tosca. I felt she oversang most of the time in an attempt to produce a "big" sound. In fact, she sounds almost exactly like **Suzanne Mentzer**, which made the Barcarolle a little, uh, monochrome.

James Morris didn't bother me all that much. *Hoffman* provides perhaps his best acting role (or roles), and most of the music is declamatory enough to sound right in his barky voice. The Diamond Aria, alas, does not -- and he rushed through it as fast as he could. This piece is too low for him these days, except of course for the high note, which is too high.

I still marvel at how tatty the Met orchestra sounds when Young leads. She made no glaring errors, but even at her most competent she seems unable to create poetry or excitement with the greatest opera orchestra in the world. Is it not part of the conductor's duty to instill and encourage a sense of style in the performers? **Dr. Repertoire** reports: "I have some experience at coaching and directing singers. I know tense, frustrated artists when I see them, and that's what I saw in *Hoffman*. Leech's glances into the pit even (momentarily) took on an annoyed quality; at one point in the Trio (the cadenza just before the reprise of the Mother's melody) Racette and Young parted company, and the soprano just **crumpled** for a moment, her body-language suggesting a crestfallen "God knows I've tried." That the entire performance did not completely derail into a trainwreck is a testament to

the singers' musicality; it is not entirely their fault if they had little energy left over for interpretive detail. Yes, for a recording, I would demand closer attention to accurate detail and certainly more nuance. But, then, for a recording, the singers might have the luxury of working with a real conductor."

Deborah Voigt's loyal New York fans savored yet another triumph for their favorite soprano when she starred in an excellent concert performance of Strauss's *Die Aegyptische Helena* presented by the American Symphony Orchestra. For La Cieca, the highlight of Voigt's radiant performance was not so much the "Zweite Brautnacht", which I thought conductor Leon Botstein took a trifle too fast for Voigt's voice to "speak" properly on every phrase, but rather her sumptuous performance of the two iterations of "Bei jener Nacht." Such easy, full-toned, and energized tone! Such crisp and eloquent diction! Such feminine and warm presence! Such golden high notes! And above all, such joy in performance! All I found lacking in the interpretation was some of Helen's sense of ironic fun -- the secret self-contained diva smile that comes from absolute reposeful confidence. But, hey, this is her first try at this glorious part, and it is only fair that she should be allowed a little time to grow into it.

Peter Coleman-Wright's baritone was glamorous and dashing as the barbaric Altair, particularly in the dramatic and rhythmically complex "Bald dir der vertraute", which sounded very high in tessitura as well. (NO problem, though, for Mr. Coleman-Wright.) And **Jennifer Welch** really shone as the First Serving Maid, a long and tricky supporting role. Ms. Welch is a real Strauss lyric soprano, perfect for Sophie, and I look forward to hearing more from this tall, pretty young lady.

Aithra is a very difficult part: as long as Helena and not nearly so grateful. I found **Helen Field's** voice rather nondescript and rattly in this part, though she sang with attack and spirit. She did do very well on the final stratospheric pages of this role, so maybe we should blame her mediocre first act on nerves or



just a cold voice. **Paul Frey** coped reasonably well with Menelas, a role as difficult as Bacchus and twice as long. I don't hold a couple of flubbed high Cs against him. **Wendy Hoffman** sounded appropriately abyssal as the megaphoned Seashell.

I had my doubts about **Leon Botstein** before this performance based on his highfalutin writings, but I am happy to say he is a far better conductor than essayist. Yes, the orchestra was too loud some of the time, but balance with voices is notoriously a problem in Avery Fisher Hall. I liked his vigorous, almost savage way with the exotic rhythms of the second act, and the first was just yummy with rich orchestral tone.

An essay in the program book suggests that **Helena** loses little in concert performance. I have to disagree. To begin with, Helena's personal appearance is a major plot point. I love the moment when she glances in a mirror and exclaims, "Wer totet Helena, wenn er sie ansieht!" ["Who could ever kill Helena if he took a look at her first?"] Further, the "plot" of the opera is mostly internal and therefore conveyed through subtle gesture and eye contact, not so easy to do with scores and music stands. A staged production of *Helena* would have to be the last word in chic and sophistication, both in design and performance, so I don't think we'll see one soon. But this concert performance was certainly satisfying on its own terms.

★★★★★★

The audience for the first night of *Trovatore* at the Met were doing the zen thing -- you know, the sound of one hand clapping. This listless response was just what the show deserved: pure routine, with two exceptions: **Dolora Zajick**, who was in superb vocal form, and **June Anderson**, who was ... uh ... not.

I do like Zajick, but I am not as crazy about her as some. Of course the voice is about the greatest in the world today, and she has a superb technique, excellent musical taste, and a subtle grasp of Verdian style. My only carp is that the whole performance is in the voice, and even *that* sounds a bit, well, studied, not quite directly from the heart. All I miss in her is a sense of that quality so necessary to a true diva -- dementia. Some roles don't need it, but Azucena certainly does. Having said that, I'll join the rest of the Zajick fans in delighting in her strong points, which are (as I noted before) many and wonderful. She is a singer with "enough" and then some. Now, I just want her to take more chances.

Simone Young put together an edition of the opera that included a couple of snippets of the Manrico/Azucena duet that are usually cut (no big loss), and gave Manrico two verses of "Di quella pira" -- which

therefore sounded about 8 times as long, what with Young's plodding tempo and **Richard Margison's** square delivery. For the first time in my life I heard Act 2 end as Verdi wrote it, with Manrico allowing Leonora to sing "Sei tu dal ciel disceso o in cielo son io conte" as a solo. This phrase is meant to bloom like a flower as the soprano voice gradually ascends: unfortunately, Anderson's leaps to high G and B-flat curdled horribly, well below the pitch.

Anderson cultivates an "instrumental" tone -- and that instrument is obviously a theramin. She now has three notes in her voice that have the correct intonation, and all of them are above high C. She is beyond being clueless about Verdi style, and her acting looked sort of like Jeanette MacDonald without balls. And don't forget the trademark June Anderson pink cotton-candy coiffure -- so Spanish, don't you think?

Juan Pons has (or had) the right size and weight of voice for di Luna, but tonight he sounded tired and scratchy, fighting to sustain the high notes. Richard Margison sounded fresh, if unattractive of tone -- something about his voice reminds me of **James McCracken**, that sort of boxy sound. Except, of course, McCracken had a big voice, which no one could say about Margison. The high notes (including the C's) were reliable, but, like everything else about Margison, they were boring. His Italian diction would shame any sophomore college voice student.

Under Ms. Young's "leadership", the whole night was an unnerving game of "are you going ahead, or am I waiting for you?" As for me, I got tired of waiting and walked out after the Leonora-Di Luna duet. I realized the only reason I was hanging around was to boo Young and Anderson, and I'm sure there were plenty of others in the audience who took care of that duty for me.

When La Cieca returned to her "bianca cameretta" she found waiting for her an email message that left her stunned and amazed. It seems (so my correspondent claims) that this *Trovatore* revival actually began life as *Norma* -- the long-awaited shared production with Chicago Lyric. Anderson sang the role there last season, to middling response, having already canceled her Met appearances. (She only went through with the Chicago performances at the behest of Ardis Krainik -- granting her last wish, as it were.) According to this account, the Met first tried to replace Anderson, but Vanessa and Eaglen both were "unavailable." So they insisted Anderson honor her contract, dangling Pavarotti's Manrico before her nose to persuade her. And then Luciano changed his mind, with the results you have just seen. (The real artistic tragedy here is the loss of Zajick's first local Adalgisa. As for *Norma*, La Cieca has heard no rumor of a Met revival before 2005 or so.)

"I HATED this performance. It was a mess."

"Well, I LOVED it and I pity you, for you are such an effete snob that you are incapable of enjoying anything."

"And I pity you! All your taste is in your mouth! Last night, Mme. X sang out of tune and Signor Y acted like a stick and, as for Mlle. Z's wig - well, I ain't never seen hair that color in my life!"

"Well, I loved it. *Carmen* is my favorite opera. Go to hell."

"I don't know why they allow mouth-breathers like you at the opera in the first place!"

"I suggest you find a more appropriate venue for your exploration of your abandonment issues."

"Fuck you!"

La Cieca is sure that by now you recognize this conversation: it's the two opera queens the day after. It's really not necessary, girls. Can't we just get along? Well, no, I suppose not. But could we anyway keep in mind that enjoyment and satisfaction are very much functions of expectation. If you went into, say, the Met's recent telecast of *Carmen* expecting world-class demented opera, you were most likely disappointed. But if you expected a professional-quality performance of a wonderful score, you probably got what you were looking for. Frankly, I think the greatest opera house in the world, given the chance to select one of their two or three greatest performances of the season, should be expected to do rather better than this dreary telecast.

I submit that in any field of highly-developed skill there are certain subtle but clearly-defined factors make the difference between the good and the superb. That does not mean that it is impossible to enjoy the "good" (though that is not quite what I would call that *Carmen* telecast), but it does mean that there is a DIFFERENCE that one can in fact recognize with sufficiently developed taste and high enough standards.

"My Funny Valentine" is a great work of art; everyone has sung it, and almost everyone has a success with this number. But that says more about the quality of the song than it does about the singers. Yes, Mamie Glutz's rendition of this song is certainly entertaining, but wouldn't you prefer **Ella Fitzgerald's**? Well, *CARMEN* is like that. It's a very resilient opera that can withstand a routine performance and still deliver a very entertaining evening. But that does not excuse the greatest opera house in the world from casting the work with the best available singers and producing the work with the most talented directors, designers and conductors. This just did not happen for this show.

Blame Mr. Domingo for at least part of that failure. This tenor's entire career has consisted of flashes of brilliance interspersed with swathes of routine that occasionally border on the somnambulistic. As the tenor's voice has begun to succumb to the ravages of time, he takes fewer risks instead of more. Nowadays most of his dramatic performances are inert and lifeless, because he is fixated on that next high note (that is to say, anything from F# on up): will I make it or not? Domingo rarely misses a note, but sometimes you wish he did: so much of the top is just pitched yelling, something to get on and get off as quickly as possible. Frankly, snatching a breath in the middle of the climactic phrase of the Flower Song is rather like catching a bus for part of a 10K run: defeats the purpose.

Angela Gheorghiu sounds a little worse each time I hear her. She already has a hole opening up in the lower-middle voice, and you heard how hard she was working to produce the sound in Act 1. The aria lies higher, and I have to say that her high B was just fucking STUNNING. **Steber** should have sounded so good. I would just about be willing to sit through a whole *Don Carlos* with Gheorghiu to hear that B at the end. If the rest of the voice were that well-placed, that supported, that exciting -- well, we'd have our new Callas, that's all. As it is, most of AG's voice is a scramble. You hear what **Waltraud Meier** sounds like right now? Well, that's what **Angela Gheorghiu** will sound like in about 3 or 4 years.

Sergei Leiferkus makes a superb Rangoni, but he is not well-advised to try to do parts that require actual singing -- by which I mean a role where everyone knows the tune of the big aria. It's an ongoing scandal that Russian singers (especially Gergiev's cronies) can murder languages and work internationally. But let an American flub one mute "e", and he's a barbarian!

One La Cieca accepted the fact that **Waltraud Meier** can't sing any more (that took about an act and a half), she really liked what Meier was doing as *Carmen*. She has good musical taste and imagination; she knows how to move through a line and give it life rhythmically. She looked gorgeous, really glamorous in a **Maureen O'Hara** sort of way, which is certainly one way to do a stylized *Carmen*. I would be so happy if somehow Ms. Meier's voice were restored to, say, the way she sounded about 5 or 6 years ago, because she has everything required to be both a great artist and a great star -- except, of course, voice. I cannot imagine sitting through 5 hours of her *Isolde*; even Ms. Meier's intelligence and fire could not deafen m to the wild, out-of-tune screaming she did at the Levine Gala, and *Isolde* is **all** singing.

The mise-en-scene is yet another proof that no one at the Met knows shit from shinola about the dramatic values in opera, or, for that matter, that anyone

there has even a modicum of visual taste. The sets are huge and empty, dwarfing the performers. The lack of variety of levels means that when the stage fills, it looks cramped and crowded. **Franco Zeffirelli's** credo remains, "when the show gets dull, add 100 supers and a few animals." He long since stopped caring about drama in his productions: his only concern now seems to be to spend as much money as he can wheedle out of the administration, like a greedy whore fleecing her befuddled client. I can't say I hold James Levine in much higher regard. He cut everything that can be cut from the score, opting for the most corrupt musical version. Then he conducted the piece as it were bad Bartok, all flash and bang. I cannot imagine Carmen sounding less elegant or less alive.

"Alive" is **exactly** the word for the London video of **SALOME**, conducted (superbly) by **Christoph von Dohnanyi**, directed (fabulously) by **Luc Bondy**, and starring **Catherine Malfitano**, **Bryn Terfel**, **Anja Silja** and **Kenneth Riegel**, a quartet to rival my "dream cast" of **Claire Danes**, **Keanu Reeves**, **Christine Baranski** and **Harvey Keitel**.

I am delighted to say that Mr. Bondy has created an exciting and different production without breaking a single one of Dr. Rep's Rules. No, I don't agree with every one of Bondy's choices: he makes the Page a girl, which smudges a layer of gay text; more importantly, Mr. Terfel is asked to behave wild and manic, perhaps *too* manic to share a stage with Ms. Malfitano. But in general Bondy's ideas seem firmly based in the text and the music. He has an antimythic, sometimes even comic take on the opera, defining Salome as a willful brat caught between a blustering doofus of a stepfather and a bitter ex-beauty queen of a mother. Jokanaan is madder than Salome, twitching and speaking to himself, not the usual holy man.

The set is apparently a disused wing of some 19th century mansion, a place that has fallen victim to earthquake or really massive neglect. Only a glimpse of the moon is visible through a French window. Costumes are simple and "Star Trek" timeless, with Malfitano in veil-like scarves and finally a black knit T-shirt, Riegel in vaguely Japanese lounging clothes, Silja in a '40s cocktail frock that looks like something **Gale Sondergaard** might wear, and Terfel in what appears to be a stained bedsheet.

The dramatic high point of the opera is the scene where Herod tries to persuade Salome to ask for something besides the head of the prophet: they sit at a kitchen table and squabble while Silja lurches around gulping champagne a la **Joanna Lumley**. Particularly striking is Ms. Malfitano's constant acrobatic movement trailing yards of silken fabric. Her dance (by **Lucinda Childs**) is very much "after" **Martha Graham** and suits both the leading lady and her concept of the character as a knowing and cruel child. (I noted that

Malfitano recycled many of Bondy's ideas in her Met performances of this role a couple of seasons ago.)

The soprano tires about midway through the final scene and her voice loses some of the surprising power and sheen it boasted earlier in the opera. She makes it to the end, though, and her intense dramatic involvement more than makes up for a few wobbly or flat high notes. Terfel tends to oversing (even when he is in the cistern and miked) but the voice sounds huge and thrilling, wonderful for the Strauss style. Riegel's yelling and shrieking is at least consistent throughout the performance (unlike his embarrassing showing at the Met), and the ruins of Silja's voice are perfect raw material for her imaginative portrait of the ghoulishly chic Herodias.

The Royal Opera House orchestra sounds gorgeous, and the supporting singers are all fine-to-passable, though **Ruby Philogene** (the Page) sings far too much of the music in a tasteless belted chest voice.

On the recommendation of the estimable **Enzo Bordello** I obtained the Legato video of *La Fanciulla del West* (#1501) with **Antonietta Stella**, supported by **Limarilli** and **Colzani** et al. I am now in the middle of the second act, just before the poker scene, and, my God, this is one of the three or four greatest operatic performances I have ever seen. Stella is simply magnificent, as great in her own way as Callas or Scotto or Jones at their very best. The voice is amazing, as warm and Italianate as Tebaldi's, but with a distinctive veristic "bite" and an absolutely secure top. The high Bb's, B's and even the Cs are not only perfectly secure but thrillingly ringy. And Stella is an incomparable actress, combining perfect sincerity with authentically presentation operatic style. Now, *La Cieca* will remind you that mise-en-scene is not this videos' strong point. Think '50s Bus and Truck Annie Get your Gun and you're pretty close. The tenor looks eerily like a young Ed Asner, all glowering eyebrows and pattern baldness. Stella does the fringed bolero thing, and adorable little shorty cowgirl boots with cuban heels. The video (a live stage performance from 1963) is in black and white, with approximately the picture quality of an old *Honeymooners* episode, and the sound is excellent broadcast quality.

GALA's new "1965 Paris Norma" turns out to be an odd sort of compilation, just the Callas bits of three of her final performances. As far as I can make out from the not-very-helpful program notes, we have:

May 17: Act One, Scene 2 from Adalgisa's entrance to the end of the Act, with **Giulietta Simonato** and **Gianfranco Ceccele**.

May 21: The same music (beginning earlier, with Norma's scene with Clotilde), plus the final scene from Norma's entrance ("E tornera, si...") until the tape runs out early in "Quel cor tradisti". This

performance substitutes **Fiorenza Cossotto** for Simionato.

May 29: The Act One scene above, plus the "Casta Diva" scena, and the opening of Act Two, through "Mira o Norma". Also with Cossotto. The final scene was not given that night, since after the "Mira o Norma", Callas fainted in her dressing room while attempting to change costumes and "could not be revived."

The sound is very rough, with a lot of (pirate) microphone-rattling and almost total distortion when the full orchestra plays fortissimo. There is also a very chatty reine de l'opera only inches from the mike: his squeals of "oh, la, la!" are much louder than the Callas performance.

Callas is in decent voice (for 1965, anyway) for the 17th, with the top relatively secure; on the 19th she's very good indeed, except for the high notes, which are screams; and on the 19th she's in dreadful shape, missing entrances and squawking all over the place. One can, as reported, hear Cossotto (in superb voice) singing Callas into the ground, even taking a high C that Callas omits. Not a nice woman. Even at the last performance, when she is obviously very weak, Callas spins out an occasional soft phrase with that wonderful sense of "rightness" and repose that only the very greatest artists can accomplish. The key word here, though is, "occasional" -- much of Callas's singing is labored and out-of-tune, and you really have to use your imagination to fill in the gaps. If you're curious about Callas's vocal decline, and how variable she could be toward the end, these CDs will interest you. But for a real performance of *Norma*, go to the same label's 1955 La Scala aircheck. (GALA GL 100.551)

★★★★★★★

For those of you who may still be interested, this is what the '98-'99 Met season looks like: **Aida** (Voigt, Pavarotti/O'Neill, Zajick), **Boheme** (Giordani, Michaels-Moore), **Carmen**, **Don Pasquale** (Swenson), **Elektra**, **Fledermaus**, **Giulio Cesare** (Larmore, McNair, Asawa, Daniels), **Katya Kabanova** (Malfitano, Karneus), **Khovanshchina** (Zajick), **Lohengrin**, **Lucia di Lammermoor** (Swenson/Futral, Vargas), **Moses and Aaron** (Langridge, Thomlinson), **Nozze di Figaro** (Terfel, Bartoli/Bonney, Fleming, Croft, Mentzer), **Queen of Spades**, **Rigoletto** (Rost), **Samson et Dalila**, **Simon Boccanegra** (Agache), **Susannah** (Fleming, Ramey), **Tosca** (Millo/Marton/Dessi, Leech/Pavarotti), **Trovatore** (Crider), **Turandot**, **Werther** (Hampson, Su. Graham, Evans) and **La Traviata** (Gheorgiu, Alagna; Levine?).

La Cieca

talking with Ethan Mordden gay sensibility

James Jorden: Are you an opera queen?

Ethan Mordden: I never really understood what that term means. Is that synonymous with "opera buff", because that's what I am. I don't like "opera freak", because that sounds like there's something wrong with you if you like opera. I think there's something wrong with you if you don't! If an opera queen is gay man who loves opera, well, that's me. But if you mean a more or less effeminate man with shrill opinions about his favorites and especially his favorite hates -- no, that's a very small part of the population. I belong to this club were we meet and play tapes of singers and try to stump each other, and no one in that group is an opera queen. There's even one straight guy there -- I know because I overheard him discussing sports scores. "Opera queen" is an aggressive term, like the way some people react to the word "queer" -- they spent their childhood hating that word, and now they can't get used to it as something positive. "Opera queen" I think suggests a sort of unpleasant behavior, bitchiness, so I don't like to use it.

Is there a connection between opera and the gay sensibility?

There must be some connection: gay guys do like opera. Why, I don't know. My friend Ken Mandelbaum says gay guys like musical comedy simply because they're smart. I think what he means is that gays are different from straights: we're not just straight people with different dating habits. In certain totalitarian regimes, they kill everyone with glasses, everyone who went to college, everyone with a middle name, until there's nothing left but stupid workers. If you took all the gays out of society, that's what you'd have left -- droning, boring, dreary jackasses. It must be congenital. Gay people in general have this *élan vital* that you do not find in straights. If you take a gay guy into a cabaret where there's a talented singer doing a Cole Porter song, I don't care if he never heard Cole Porter before, the gay guy will listen, he'll hear something is going on. I've seen straights in the same place, and they'll just talk and they won't hear the music. Not all straights, but a lot of them.

So what we call a "gay sensibility" really overlaps some into straight people.

Of course, a few. Or there's the possibility that a lot more people are bisexual than we think. They're what I call 60-40 bisexuals. They have enough straight in them to run a whole life as a heterosexual, but if the opportunity presented itself, in music, say, they "go gay."

That touches on one of the themes of *The Venice Adriana*. The hero, Mark, is a gay man, or a man who is going to be gay, expressing himself through a connection with the diva Adriana Grafanas -- the Callas character-- and of course with the music, before he really connects with his sexuality.

It was all there at the same time, really. He's young, it's the early sixties, so it's

bold of him to be so aware of his gayness. He's taken away from a sexually sterile environment to a sexually laden one, so laden, in fact, that in the courtyard there is this beautiful boy who is probably not gay, but available. You know Mark is going to go back to America and be the first of the Stonewall generation, he'll help bring it about. There's so much in the book about destiny and free will. Adriana's brother, the psychiatrist, explains that people are "tilted" in a direction, not quite compelled. Adriana makes the same mistakes over and over again, but not quite unthinkingly. We know that once you realize that you are making these accommodations that can be self-destructive, once you recognize that, yes, you can stop doing it. It's hard for people to do. I tried to get this across in the novel by the echoing of certain phrases: "the roots that cling", "repentance is infinite." Finally I just couldn't think of an ending. Of course, Mark gets his tape of *Adriana Lecouvreur*, but that's just the Maltese Falcon, that's really not what it's about. The key is the Professore, who lives a completely tiltless life, the opposite of Adriana. We see that he loves this beautiful boy but he is willing to give him up, and then move on to the next gig. I wanted to show what life is like in the shadow of these great geniuses who create history. And if I could see Callas in perspective, so could my narrator, so he is free to write the book.

It's such a simple, quiet ending, especially after that disturbing, apocalyptic scene on the film set. A real Fellini feel to it.

Well, the character of the director is based on Pasolini, but I see what you mean.

It's very real, and yet it becomes surreal as we watch.

Like the scenes in *La Dolce Vita* when the photographers rush up to the airplane...

Which must be realer than we think, because the newsreel footage of Callas looks exactly the same way. It's hard to imagine an opera singer getting that kind of attention, more even than Marilyn Monroe.

But Marilyn Monroe was not a phallic woman. Callas behaved like a man, sneering at the reporters, "Use your mind a bit!" Phallic women are scary, really disturbing. They're so subversive they threaten to throw the whole world off its pins.

Is that why these women find friends among gay men? Adriana likes Mark...

But she won't accept that he's gay. She's homophobic. She's got "campanilismo": she thinks what she learned as a little girl is all there is to the world. She's surrounded by gay men, who have helped make her what she is, but that doesn't change her thinking at all.

Do you think Callas was that homophobic? She certainly had gay friends.

Remember that Adriana in the novel is not precisely Callas. For example, Adriana's first husband -- the Meneghini character, is dead, and she is with this handsome Greek actor. And it was Meneghini who was always keeping Callas focused on the backstage drama and the rivalry, telling her Gobbi was getting an extra curtain call or Tebaldi was in the audience. Without Meneghini, Callas would have been a very different person. I thought, what

if we changed some details, so we see a new Callas. By running her character through different situations, we get an alternate view of her. The strictly factual Callas stories do not let us see her in love with a beautiful and sexy young man. We don't see her in a romantic rivalry. I wanted to see what she would be like doing these other things, and at the same time, I wanted her to be Callas. Really, there's no one else remotely like her: she speaks English as if she learned it on Mars. By speaking Greek and English as a kid, then Italian because of the music, then learning fluent French. Add to that her strange vocabulary, some of it from 40's America, some she heard from Elsa Maxwell, some of it from the turn of the century. At one point Adriana asks, "Where is my *cache*?" That's a word used by Olive Fremstad!

You caught exactly Callas's voice. Not only could you hear the voice, you could see the face. So serious, so very earnest. Even when she says the most beastly things about other people, you still feel sympathy for her, because she has no sense of irony about herself.

I was very pleased with the first scene of the novel, when the diva returns from a performance. One by one, the Prince, the gossip, the actor come in, then Adriana, complaining about her mother nagging her. She even attacks Mark, calls him a toad. Finally all that's left for her to do is faint. And there you hear a line from *Adriana Lecouvreur*: "Bella tu sei, tu sei gioconda!"

So the title of the novel, *The Venice Adriana*, has more than one meaning...

Good, you noticed that the plot of the novel is taken from *Adriana Lecouvreur*. Some of the plot, anyway. That opera has to have the most complicated, confusing libretto. Everyone complains about *Truatore* or *Gioconda*, but you CAN understand them if you pay attention. By the middle of Act 2 of *Adriana*, you are totally lost.

So, why would you recast the life of Callas as *Adriana Lecouvreur*?

I really don't know. I do know I wanted to write a Callas novel, but not point-for-point based on her life. Were you irritated, for example, that I gave Adriana roles that Callas never sang? I thought, what a great role for the young Callas, one that she never sang: Luisa Miller. She would have had enormous success in that, with her control of the coloratura in the early part, and of course in the more dramatic stuff she would have been superb. I thought, I can give her the chance to sing this part. It's fascinating to think of those "roles that got away.": My favorite "missed" role for Callas was the Marschallin, which I suppose she would have done in Italian.

My favorite is the *Racconti d'Hoffman*, all three roles, which Adriana does sing. In fact, that performance is the first pirate record Mark ever sees. Like the Lisbon *Traviata* -- is that the inspiration for the title *Venice Adriana*?

Of course! For many years collectors spoke of the Covent Garden *Norma*, the Berlin *Lucia*, the Mexico City *Aida* (actually there are two of those), the Lisbon *Traviata*. I thought, since the hero is on this quest for a rare recording, let's call the novel something with that sort of ring. And, of course, there's the play on "Adriana's life happening in Venice" -- like "The Paris Maria," the last years of her life. I love puns anyway. Plus it's the plot of *Adriana Lecouvreur*

reset in Venice, so there are three things going on there. When I was a kid, my family lived in Venice, and I've never had the chance to use that, except in one short story. I got to use that wonderful Venetian dialect, boning up with Goldoni. The house in the novel was our house, the Casa Toscanini. But at first, I just knew that the novel was going to be about Callas. I didn't even know that it wasn't going to be about "Callas." I think of it as *Citizen Kane*, with Maria Callas as William Randolph Hearst. It is Callas, but it isn't Callas. What we didn't need was just a biography of Callas, even as fiction. We have heard that story so many times. There is one more way to tell the story factually. I'd like to write a discography. I know Ardoin's book and I like it, but his thesis is that the later performances found her more subtle, better able to get around a role. He prefers a later *Traviata*, from the late 50s, without really addressing the fact that the voice is breaking up. You hear that the sound was much smaller. But the main thing I would like to do is to address how Callas's performances of, say, Lucia, stood in relation to those before her, like Pagliughi and Capsir, and those after, Sills and Scotto and those singing now.

Callas really defines for us what we expect the "diva" to be.

Right! Nobody ever says, "the next Sutherland" or "the next Sills." Tiziana Fabbricini is more like what we think of as "Callas type."

Sylvia Sass, superficially.

Or especially Souliotis, even though she's blonde. She really must have listened to Callas recordings. I heard it in Philadelphia in *Nabucco*.

Yes, you write about that trip in *Demented*.

A forgotten book.

Hardly! That book defined my sensibility, whole generation's sensibility really.

I had no idea. That book is harder to find now than *Maunder Coughing* — which, you know, is not even out of print. The editor of that book hates James McCourt, don't ask me why. He took all the copies and he keeps them in his apartment. You know what else is hard to find? That Ardoin-Fitzgerald book with all the pictures. You can't even find it used. I think copies of that book are willed to friends. What did you think of Wayne Koestenbaum's book?

I liked it okay. It wanders some.... the thing I like about your books--- you communicate the experience intellectually and emotionally, with really exacting detail. When I'm editing *parterre box*, I tell the writers I want that exacting sensuous detail, the color of the seatback and what the first note sounded like.

What are they writing about?

It's called "A Boy and his Diva." About the first overwhelming diva experience. For me, it's Scotto in *Il trittico*. What's yours?

I don't have anything like that. I tend to react to works rather than performers. I once was talking to someone about the Entartete Musik series on Decca, in particular Braunsfels' opera *Die Vogel*, based on Aristophanes' *The Birds*, which is one of the most wonderful discoveries I've made in a

long time, really lovely and interesting, and he said the notion of buying something like that without Kiri or Renata or Renee or Maria in the cast -- what's the point. Now, you see, he's totally singer-oriented. That doesn't mean I ignore singers. There are some singers I care about because I think they were in some ways underrated. Bumbry is one of them. The timbre of the voice is just sheer listening pleasure, and certain performances -- the Bayreuth Venus, and another one, a Tosca I think -- she was just phenomenally good. And I can also remember nights when she was just sort of hanging out. Sure, there are singers I love, like Maria Callas; there are people I don't care about, like -- well, who cares?

So is there a defining operagoing experience, you know, "before" and "after"?

No, sorry! This is how it developed. I came from musical comedy, which was always my great love when I was a kid. Taken when I was too young, then when I went away to school, I lived with a very permissive family that let me go into the city all by myself when I was quite young. The train was just across the street from where we lived, the Glen Cove station -- where William Holden meets Audrey Hepburn in *Sabrina*. So I'd go in on Saturday afternoons and see a show. At some point in high school, I moved over from seeing *Funny Girl* or *Hello, Dolly!* to going to the Met. I had always played the piano, and I started with piano scores of operas. The first one was *Pagliacci*. Then the first opera I saw was at the Baths of Caracalla, in the summer of who knows when, with Mary Curtis-Verna in *Tosca*. Now, no one has an epiphany at the Baths of Caracalla, with all those tourists. It was all so far away, so it wasn't really spectacular. The only thing I remember is I was fascinated by that theme in Act 1 (*he hums the tune of "Arde in Tosca un folle amor"*) So that fall, when I was back in America, I asked my best friend, who was really into opera, about *Tosca* and I suppose he fanned the flames a bit. But, no, there was no triggering event. I just started going to opera, maybe because I ran out of musical comedy. Like many other people, I think I found musical comedy too finite: it's only what's playing at the moment, and maybe recordings of older shows that you can get your hands on. Opera is infinitely expansive -- or was, back then, because you could buy all these incredible old scores. By now I have a very extensive score collection, including many titles I am still waiting to see recorded. Like Casella's *La donna serpente*, which was booted off the stage at its premiere in Rome in the 1930s and apparently never heard from again. I am waiting for someone to find a tape of a RAI performance and release it so I can follow along with the score. That's my background, playing on the piano first, and if I liked it, I would want to see it at the Met. Once you get into opera, you want to "collect" every performance. At the Old Met, an opera like *Boheme* would have a different cast every performance, I mean an ENTIRE different cast -- maybe Parnpignol would stay the same. I remember seeing *Boheme* one season nine times. In one of them Elizabeth Soederstroem sang Musetta, and I remember thinking, maybe she won't come out in that horrible dress, sort of between red and mauve. This woman owns one ugly dress, even though in Act Four we find out she's dating a rich guy. The point is, after all those performances you become an aficionado, you pick up the lore. There was this one super who always led the group that carried off a dead body, and he had them do this maneuver where

they'd make a complete 360 degree circle and then go offstage. It didn't matter who the dead person was, Liu or Siegfried or Valentin, they always made that circle. You fell in love with silly things like that. There's nothing silly at the New Met. Everything is so severe and dedicated, not silly.

Maybe Charles Anthony is the very end of that tradition.

The last keeper of the flame.

So, what do you call a great opera performance?

The two greatest performances of opera I ever saw: one Puccini and one Wagner. The Puccini was announced as a Tebaldi, Morell, Gobbi *Tosca* -- who cares who conducted. I had seen Tebaldi before, but never Gobbi. So out before the curtain comes Rudolf Bing, and the audience began to growl. He said, "Ladies and gentlemen, Miss Tebaldi is quite all right..." The audience is continuing to growl. "And Signor Gobbi is fine. But Barry Morell is ill, so the role of Cavaradossi will be sung by Franco Corelli." And it really was stupendous! People think of Tebaldi as being not all that interesting on stage, but in *Tosca* she knew what she was doing. At the end of Act One, at her exit, she's very distracted by the thought that the tenor has been unfaithful to her. Gobbi offers to kiss her hand, and she jerks her hand away with disgust. Was it great art? Maybe not. But it was great Tebaldi. Or, in Act Two, she picked up this huge pile of papers, both hands full, and carried them around while she looked for the safe-conduct. When she saw the paper in the dead man's hand, she let her hands go, and the papers flew all over the place. Great old-fashioned star opera. I think Puccini would have been very happy with this performance. On the other hand, the other great performance I saw (I've seen some good ones, but no great ones) was the Karajan *Walküre*. Nilsson, Crespín, Ludwig, Vickers, and Stewart. There are no greater Wagner singers in this century, except maybe Olive Fremstad. Wonderful performers doing their damndest in great works of art. And I loved Olivero in *Adriana Lecouvreur* -- talk about tricks! You couldn't take your eyes off her. At the end of the third act, while Mignon Dunn is crushing the violets, Olivero is slowly sinking to the floor, and you're thinking, how can anyone hold that? You expected that when the curtain went up on Act Four, she'd still be there, sinking. So a great opera experience is some combination of great art and great entertainment. You notice that my "great performances" are all a generation ago. We're never going to see another Tito Gobbi or another Renata Tebaldi than we are going to see another Clark Gable.

One event I'm waiting for this year is Catherine Malfitano in *Makropulos Case*. She was incredible in *Salome* at the Met.

That's the production with the black bodybuilder, right? The Met has been doing that lately, sneaking in shirtless hunks. Even *Faust* had a bodybuilder in it. You know, a lot of people are crazy about Malfitano, but for me, the last star was really Olivero. I don't have that "the diva is all" attitude, but neither am I academic. I certainly know a good performance when I see one.

The Venice Adriana by Ethan Mordden. St. Martin's Press, 294 pp. \$23.95.

LOS ANGELES

-- I guess you'd have to say 'the old gray mare ain't what she used to be.' I refer, of course, to *Salome* -- the opera of Richard Strauss, the role beloved of so many Germanic sopranos, and the gorgeous orchestral score mastered by so many distinguished conductors from Krauss to Reiner to Richard Hickox, by golly, who lately conducted a run of six performances for LA Opera at the Dorothy Chandler Pavilion. This will be blunt: Hickox was the best thing about this *Salome*: his musical concept was *The Right Stuff*; in other words he played Strauss like Strauss, with rich energy, insight and dramatic panache, and he did not cover his singers. He is an able, honest musician. Tom Fox as John the Baptist is the other good news! Oy! He was 99.44% nude, he has great legs, a warm dark baritone, over-all trim and muscular form, and when he turned his back on the audience, he was 100% nude, top to bottom. If any strap held his few fig leaves in place, it was entirely lost in his gluteal cleavage. Why don't we hear (or SEE!) more of this guy? He sure picked up West Hollywood's vote that afternoon (it turned out there were quite a few of The Chosen in the crowd after all)! Fox also offered excellent German diction, good pitch (rarity in this cast), and sang the spooky prophet like he meant it. For once, one knew what little Sal was talking about when she sang, "thy body was a column of ivory." Tom The Fox.

Miss Helen Fields had come from Wales to sing the name role in the final performance. (Englishman David Hemmings is managing director of LAO -- and 'they' are very chauvinistic, all hoping for Queen's Honors, one supposes). Fields has a neat, tight little body, and she swirled and swooped nicely through the skeins of silk that her assistants waved about the stage during her entertainment of Herod. When it came time to sing out big, to and about John, she worked hard and pushed and shoved, and made some very loud sounds above the stave. But in those all-important final 20 minutes, she forced unmercifully, as pitch and tonal quality fled. I felt a little bit sorry for her; 'over-parted' is the term.

Dernesch did The Helga Show without voice, but with fab posture and the meanest snarly laugh you've ever heard. I forget who the others were, save for the lissome Kurt Streit as a very light-voiced Narraboth. He had shoulder-length wavy golden hair, a gorgeous floor-length gown, and when he died in a clumsy moment by the cistern, it seemed a shame. Well, you know, I could go on, full of complaints. But I'll make just one: the point of *Salome* is to sing the sweeping big Strauss line over that orchestra, in tune, with power and vocal quality. Nothing else will do. Nothing.

— Flora Bervoise

HOUSTON - Peter Hunter and Richard Breath raced to Houston in their new red Ferrari in order to attend the Francesca Zambello productions of *Billy Budd* and *Madama Butterfly*. This production settled the question once and for all: Francesca Zambello is definitely a woman. We did not see enough homo heat,

not even a teeny gangbang. If we hadn't read the libretto we would never have been aware that Claggart wanted to top Billy in some dank corner. And Captain Vere's longing to give Billy a blowjob passed almost unnoticed. We approved of the swarthy leather master in the black jeans cracking the whip at the cowering sailorboys, but that idea was no more than dramatic foreplay without any followup: in other words, you couldn't smell the semen in this production. In the REAL opera world, Dansker would surely have offered Billy more than just a corner of biscuit.

True, Billy did spend lot of time scampering up that big phallic pole, but that sort of symbolism is just too subtle. The set was an abstracted deck that opened up like a crocodile's mouth to reveal the below-deck. For some reason, the edges of this platform were trimmed in purple neon, producing a definite Key West effect. Billy in the brig looked like he was zoned out on Ecstasy waiting for valet parking to show up. Danish sperm machine Bo Skovhus tried out his Billy on Houston and the reaction was mostly positive: nice teeth, nice hair, buff bare chest. The sailor pants could have been tighter. Bo was in fabulous voice: "Billy in the Darbies" was just ravishing. And he was heartbreaking in the (onstage) hanging scene. Jeffrey Wells roared menacingly as Claggart, and Joseph Evans saved the show with his last-minute appearance as Vere.

When Puccini's librettists offered him an act of *Butterfly* set in the Consulate, the composer rejected the idea out of hand. So, does anyone care to guess what was Zambello's big concept in her production? Right — most of the opera takes place in Sharpless's office. One wondered, of course, who was taking care of the kid in the anteroom all that time. Or why poor Suzuki had to shlep the tea service and everything all the way to the Consulate. What we saw of *Butterfly*'s house turned out to be a giant blond wooden floor with a few strips of fabric that occasionally dropped in to suggest walls. A veritable monsoon of red and pink flower petals fluttered down during the Flower Duet, and when *Butterfly* stabbed herself, a (mistimed) red dropcloth swooped down. Finally, all the pointless tinkering with the libretto led Peter to sigh, "Remember that wonderful Ken Russell *Butterfly*? The one with the atomic bomb at the end?"

The most interesting character in this opera turned out to be the blond kid playing Dolore, a real bundle of energy who jumped and ran around like (for once) a real child. This little troupier got the biggest ovation during curtain calls. Lyuba Kazanovskaya, advertised at the star for over a year, abruptly canceled with no explanation given, to be replaced by Paula Deligatti. Lyuba is announced as next year's Senta, so we shall see.

The BIG news is next season's star-studded new production of *A Little Night Music*, starring Frederica von Stade as Desiree and Evelyn Lear as her mom. Sondheim has promised some new tunes for Flicka. HGO has also informed us that they have Ramey signed for the next three seasons in *Mefistofele*, *Nabucco* and *Don Carlos*. You can bet the boys will be putting plenty of miles on that Ferrari between now and 2002.

— Peter and Richard

TOKYO and PARIS -- Staatsoper Berlin came to Japan to do *Die Walkure*, *Wozzeck*, *Die Zauberflöte* and a concert performance of *Parsifal* in November.

The best was definitely *Die Walkure* (NHK Hall, November 9). What I noticed immediately is what good theater Kupfer's production is. The subtle glances between Sieglinde and Siegmund, the way they touched each other — all so telling. The Todesverkuendigung was very moving, unlike the uninspired traffic-cop Met production. Even if singing had been mediocre, I would still have enjoyed this production. Fortunately, singing was generally quite good. By far the best was Waltraud Meier's Sieglinde. I had only seen her live as Carmen at the Met, so I looked forward to seeing her in a German repertoire. What a difference! She was not only an excellent actress, but vocally quite exciting as well, with great vocal shadings and thrilling beautiful top notes. A complete performance. Poul Elming's voice sounded finer-grained than it did in the Bayreuth Ring LD, but he sounded underpowered in a few crucial moments in Act 1. Perhaps he was saving his voice, because he sounded heroic and passionate in Act 2. (By the way, never had I seen the Nothung made more explicitly phallic than this Kupfer production. Now, I am not saying that it looked like a dildo but it seemed misnamed: "Not Hung" indeed!)

Polaski, who when last heard from was still a fundamentalist Christian, certainly looked dykey as Bruennhilde! She delivered the goods all right, but not with much individuality. It's a loudish non-descript bland voice, not as feminine as Ligendza's, not as ugly as Zschau's, not as loud as Jones's, not as noble as Eaglen's—sadly, Polaski's voice can only be defined in terms of what it is not, rather than what it is. Struckmann and (La Cieca's favorite) Pape were very competent if not charismatic. Barenboim conducted the orchestra transparently. His Walkuerenritt was almost Karajanesque. However, most soloists had great difficulties synchronizing with his tempi, suggesting a lack of rehearsals.

It may sound hard to believe, but there was not until recently a single real opera house in Japan. Sure, we have Tokyo Bunka Kaikan and NHK Hall, but th are multipurpose halls like L.A.'s Dorothy Chandler Pavilion. The very first opera house, funded by tax money, opened in Shinjuku (appropriately only two subway stations away from Tokyo's gay district Shinjuku 2-chome) on October 10th, with a horrible Japanese opera entitled *Takeru*, which normally shy Japanese audiences booed heavily, in the presence of the so-called emperor and empress of Japan. Lohengrin, directed by Wolfgang Wagner, was the second opera to be performed there. I saw it on November 30. Peter Seiffert was originally slated, but Japanese tenor Narita Katsumi, his cover, sang the title role. Frances Ginzer, Hans-Joachim Ketelsen, and Linda Finnie respectively sang Elsa, Telramund and Ortrud.

I was told that both Wolfgang Wagner and conductor Wakasugi Hiroshi were booed on the opening night. I generally like Wakasugi's conducting, and his conducting on November 30 was quite fine. Wolfgang Wagner's direction is a totally different matter and fully merits booing. If he had appeared for a solo bow for the performance I saw, I might have booed him big time, from my easily recognizable fourth row seat, at the risk of my being banned in Bayreuth! Lame, lame, lame! Uninspired, cheap sets. The contrast between him and such geniuses as Harry Kupfer and Patrice Chereau, whose productions of *Die Walkure* and *Wozzeck* have just been seen and enthusiastically received by many opera fans in Japan, including yours truly, is startling. It's a scandal that

the New National Theater performed two duds in a row (i.e., *Takeru* and *Lohengrin*). Just because your name is Wagner doesn't mean that you are talented!

The first time I saw Narita was in an unpolished performance of Wagner's *Das Liebesverbot*, in which he sang Luzio. The only good thing I can say about Narita's Lohenrin is that he is very tall for a Japanese (187 cm), so he didn't look like a munchkin in a mostly international cast. He was all over the place musically, and was roundly booed during the curtain calls, but he was a good sport about that. Linda Finnie's Ortrud was fiery and exciting, but her voice started to take a very unpleasant edge as the opera progressed. Frances Ginzer was a fine if a bit nondescript jugendlich-dramatisch soprano. What she lacked was an individual tone. I also liked Hans-Joachim Ketelsen's Telramund a lot. He possesses a lean, compact, and kind of sexy voice. Overall, a rather disappointing performance, due to the uninspired direction of Wolfgang Wagner.

The next opera performed at the New National Theater Tokyo was *Aida*, newly directed by Zeffirelli. I went to see it on January 15. It was the most satisfactory of the three. However, this run of *Aida* was not problem-free, either. First, Zeffirelli fired some ten Japanese supers because they were too short. But a far bigger scandal was the firing of the originally scheduled conductor Daniel Oren. Apparently, he and Jose Cura were not getting along in rehearsals. Cura told the management of the New National Theater Tokyo that he wouldn't sing under him. So, the management suggested to Oren that he conduct the second half of the *Aida* run in which Cura does not sing Radames, while another conductor conduct the first run. Oren rejected this proposal. Meanwhile, Oren had said something rather critical about Cura, which was recorded. Zeffirelli heard the tape and protested Oren, apparently because Zeffirelli will not hear a word spoken against the very muscular Cura.

Garcia Navarro, who replaced Oren as a conductor, was out of synch with singers so often that it was often maddening. At first, I thought that Jose Cura was one of those singers who couldn't count, but it turned out that everyone else had trouble following Navarro's beat. Despite all that, Cura's Japanese debut, and it was a resounding success. He has a fairly large voice with a dark baritone timbre that can go up easily. In the recitative that precedes "Celeste Aida," he sounded so robust and dramatic and LOUD that I was wondering if he might lose his voice before the end of the performance, but he turned out to have plenty of stamina. He was, furthermore, not made up simply of forte and fortissimo, and could sing softly. (I was hoping that he would finish "Celeste Aida" with a piano, but of course he had to take it forte--after all, this was his Japanese debut, and ending it with a forte was a sure way to get bravos.) He sort of hammed it up in the beginning, but fortunately, his acting improved considerably as the opera progressed. Of course la Zeffirelli arranged to have Cura bare his chest while suiting up for the war. Nice bod!

I had seen Guleghina sing *Aida* before, at Costa Mesa, paired with that godawful ham of a tenor Lando Bartolini, who ruined the performance. Opposite a far more sympathetic singer, Guleghina was a fiery *Aida*, and I really liked her in Acts 1 and 2. However, she has such a huge voice that she easily drowned out

Radames and Amneris, so Guleghina's *Aida* sounds more commanding than either, which I am not so sure is appropriate. Guleghina's soft singing is rather threadbare and precarious, so her "O patria mia" was not very successful. Nina Terentieva's Amneris is just so-so. She was trying to be very dramatic at the sacrifice of accuracy and beauty, I thought. Among other soloists, Gregg Baker's Amonasro stood out. And what a hunk he is! Sometimes he resorted to parlando rather than legato singing, but he was a sexy, dangerous, strong daddy all right!

This brand-new production of *Aida* was Zeffirelli's first in 35 years. The sets are hallmark Zeffirelli: elaborate, extravagant, naturalistic (representational) and grossly expensive-looking. There were a few original touches here and there, but most of what we saw was a very traditional *Aida*.

I went to Paris on university business in late January. Fortunately, I was able to see *Tosca* at the Opera Bastille on January 27 and *Così fan tutte* at the Palais Garnier a few days later. When I arrived at the Opera Bastille by Metro about 5 p.m. on January 28, I saw posts that said "Sold Out". However, there were three scalpers who instantly recognized that I was in desperate need of a ticket. I ended up paying 290 F for a 145 F ticket (premier balcon, rang 10, place 22). No sooner had I finished my transactions with a scalper than I noticed a number of people standing in line at a different part of the Bastille. I thought that they might be queuing for returned tickets, but I didn't ask because I didn't want to know the truth, having just paid the double price for a ticket. My seat turned out to be in one of those "places d'ou le surtitrage n'est pas visible," but who needs supertitles in *Tosca* anyway?

The first thing I had to find out on entering the Bastille was of course the location of the men's rooms. I was shocked when I entered and saw that the urinals were little more than troughs. Basically, one stands shoulder to shoulder and pees against white ceramic wall. Now I know an opera queen (who shall be nameless, as he might be a *parterre box* reader) who actually cruises the tea rooms at the Met. For him, the Opera Bastille may be ideal, but I want a little privacy when I pee! Apart from the urinals, the Bastille looked efficient and modern, though I still don't understand why they created a new theater with limited visibility. The upper part of the stage is invisible to whole sections of the house.

Now, back to *Tosca*. To tell the truth, I was too tired and jet-lagged to stay awake during the performance. I had seen Maria Guleghina sing *Tosca* twice in different venues last year, so it wasn't anything unexpected, even if she sang well. Fabio Armiliato's Cavaradossi was nothing to write home about. I was just curious if he would get really shot again. (He didn't.) Jean-Philippe Lafont's Scarpia was wobbly and quite unsexy. Lackluster and somniferous.

I arrived at the Palais Garnier about 5 p.m. on March 31. Of course tickets were completely sold out. When I went toward the Box Office behind the small gift shop, I saw about twenty people waiting in line. This time, I asked one of them what they were waiting for. It turned out that the Box Office would sell returned tickets 45 minutes before the performance, i.e., at 6:45 p.m., so I decided to join the line. I just waited and waited, doing nothing except for a few chitchats with fellow "waiters" till 6:45. I was able to get a ticket at a *1er loge de face* at 320 F.

It was a box seat, (almost?) dead center, which is comparable to a parterre box at the Met. I had no idea how I could reach my seat, so I helplessly told one of the ushers that I had no idea where my seat was. Looking at my ticket, he took me to a small box numbered 39, opened a door with a key and showed my chair. It was a strange feeling to be in a tiny box, sharing it with five strangers. Because my seat was in the third row, I sometimes could see parts of the action well, so I simply stood up when I wanted a full view of the stage, which was no problem. Perhaps standing up was not customary at the Palais Garnier boxes, because, as soon as the act was over, the man in front of me started telling me apologetically that he tried to lean over so that I could have a good view.

As for the performance, it was quite delightful. Melanie Diener, who I had never heard of, sang Fiordiligi well. Warm, rich voice, if not individual. Angelika Kirchschrager's Dorabella was particularly attractive, both vocally and visually. Clean, and yet sensuous sounds, supported by firm technique. I wasn't too impressed by Russell Braun's Guglielmo or Bruce Ford's Ferrando, but, when it comes to opera, I am interested only in women — particularly sopranos — so I am always a bit too indifferent to male singers anyway. William Shimell was an unusually young-looking Alfonso, and Anna-Maria Panzarella's Despina was nothing special. What I loved most was the gaudily fabulous theater itself. This auditorium is so fabulously carved and velveted and chandliered and gilded that it looks almost as glamorous as the postcards! "Un Coca" costs 20F, but it was worth the experience, I guess. The restrooms were not much better than those at the Bastille. I guess urination is just not a priority for the French.

I missed the Deutsche Oper *Fliegende Hollaender* with Voigt, Weikl, and Salminen, but I managed to see *Tannhaeuser*, given at the NHK Hall in Shibuya, Tokyo on February 8. Rene Kollo sang the title role far better this time than when he sang it last year in Kupfer's production. He was less wobbly, and his intonation was more or less secure, and he still had ringing tones. Of course he didn't sound like Kollo when he recorded the role for Solti, but I am happy that his "operatic farewell in Japan" was such a success. Notorious canceller Gabriela Benackova actually showed up and sang for a change. She sounded rather hard in "Dich, teure Halle," so I thought, "Uh huh, she is way past her prime!" However, she sounded like a different singer in Act 3 "Allmaecht'ge Jungfrau"—pliant, limpid, and quite beautiful. Bernd Weikl, who I tend to write off as passé, acquitted himself quite honorably. The only fly in the ointment was the Venus of Karan Armstrong (Frau Goetz Friedrich): I honestly can't say she sang better than Livia Budai, who sang Venus in the Kupfer production in Tokyo last year. The production looked well-rehearsed and creative; I only wish the regisseur didn't indulge in nepotism!

BTW, I heard from a reliable source that Rene Kollo was mugged by several juvenile delinquents in the Harajuku area of Tokyo, very popular among teenagers and very close to the NHK Hall. The teenagers robbed Kollo of his wallet and passport, threatening him with a knife. Fortunately, Kollo wasn't injured, and I'm sure that the Tokyo fee will compensate him quite sufficiently!

— Akira

ROME -- I had to use all my personal charm to get a ticket to the June Anderson Extravaganza, because the Teatro Ghione was completely sold out. I was amazed, since I can very well remember the HALF EMPTY concert halls that Rome shamelessly had offered to Margaret Price, Jessye Norman and Edita Gruberova. Well, I have to say that the little teatro Ghione is far smaller than the Auditorio di Santa Cecilia, so it's not that difficult to get a sold out there, provided that there is reason for it: June Anderson proved to be a good one...

This Ghione theatre, very close to St Peter, is run by the old bag Ileana Ghione, daughter of a very famous Italian actor, and hosts the most tacky and poor Pirandello, Shaw and Shakespeare productions that you could ever dream, as well as various musical "events" (I remember a most funny Gilbert & Sullivan "Patience", performed by a group of delightful old English "has been" actors and singers). The management being very fond of the goldies-oldies, many interesting concerts are scheduled this year: Gwyneth Jones, Caballe, Berganza, Marilyn Horne. One could then ask, why in the hell have they invited La Anderson? First she's no real diva, and she's not even old yet! But she sounds quite old though, that's the answer... The concert -- begun with a 45 minute delay!! -- was a "Goldies Oldies" programme: Cesti, Scarlatti, Paisello, Rossini (Soirees musicales etc.), Donizetti (*La fille du regiment*) The second half was Donizetti songs and "Havvi un dio" from *Maria di Rohan*.

Up came the curtain and there was La Anderson, looking like female impersonator - no bosom at all - dressed in a dreadful snakeskin printed grey silk gown, some faux fin-de-siecle jewels and a tiara. If this woman has gay friends, they must be very nasty ones! As soon as she started singing I realized how much her voice has lost of her original beauty and possibilities. She is quite uncertain in the "attacchi" and some "pianissimi" sounded really phony. And in recital we realize just how much she reminds us of Gloria Swanson: gazing in space and waving her arms as if in a heroin-induced delirium. When she tries to be funny she's even scarier. The "Fioraia fiorentina" was decently sung but with this "Ru Paul meets Elton John" acting style, jumping and stomping, laughing hysterically and pulling faces. "Il faut partir" wasn't bad, and the *Maria di Rohan* aria was quite decent, even if she made some strange Leyla Gencer chest and throat sounds. By the end she was tired and started coughing, but she had to prove that she is still a big diva, offering us some of the belcanto we had paid for. *Linda di Chamonix* showed off a very glittering top register, full high notes and the full Lucia Mad-scene temperament. By now Anderson was dripping with sweat and coughing nonstop, but the public begged for more (who cares if she dies?) so she launched into "Bel raggio lusinghier," carefully avoiding the (non-existent) low notes with some unfamiliar Galli-Curci ornaments. Some queers from the theatre staff threw flowers from the gallery but they remained on the floor unnoticed. She thanked us and dedicated to the audience "The last rose of summer," heavily ornamented. I fantasized being at Joan Sutherland's farewell, and at last I was really moved.

Dame Gwyneth Jones returned to Rome after 12 years to sing a very demanding program: Wagner's Wesendonk Lieder, Five Sibelius lieder, four of the most famous songs by Duparc (including "L'invitation au Voyage") and five Strauss lieder. La Jones was clad in pale rose lace, very flattering to her slender figure,

and sported a beautiful necklace and a pair of pearl earrings that once belonged to Adelina Patti. The diva told us she recently bought Craig-y-Nos, the castle in Wales where Mme. Patti spent the end of her life. She plans to restore it, and since there is a small theatre inside the building she would like to transform in a sort of second Glyndebourne.

As we all know, La Jones has still an imposing stage personality, and the Wesendonk lieder allowed her to show what is left of the unbelievable power of her voice, but that could not prevent her from shouting "In Treibhaus" or "Traume" with constant pitch problems. Since the best remaining feature in her voice is sheer volume, an orchestral programme based on some heavy Wagner, Puccini, and Strauss arias would have been much more successful. If she really had to sing lieder, Schoenberg and Berg would have definitely been much more appropriate – and that is not meant as an insult to those two composers.

Anyway we were just at the beginning of the real show. All the friends of La Cieca who have visited Rome will know that there is a strange little bearded man that attend all the operas and vocal concerts. His name is Francesco, he is in late thirties and usually wears a red sweater. There is a rumour that says that the doormen of the theatres always let this nutter in for free, because he brings good luck to the show. Someone from the theatre has always to keep an eye on him backstage. Two years ago at the Accademia di S. Cecilia Francesco escaped from his keeper and scared to death poor Teresa Berganza, kissing and embracing her as if she were his mother. Dame Gwyneth was very kind to him, she let him kiss her and even pretended to remember that they had met twelve years before. Then, once again Francesco escaped from the usher's grip and made a grab for the diva's snow-white hair. She was of course very frightened, but she managed to smile at the poor little man, who was hustled out of the theater still muttering, "your hair is so beautiful!"

I have to say that when I went to the Auditorium of Santa Cecilia to attend a Cheryl Studer Liederabend (November 7), I was not expecting good singing. Since 1995 Italian audiences have experienced a long series of Studer off nights. Her (coerced?) decision to cancel *Ariadne* in Florence last spring (not to mention such unbelievably insane repertoire choices as *Attila* and *Vesperi Siciliani*) convinced us all that her bright star was quickly and shamefully setting. You can easily guess my surprise when I found out that La Studer was in very good form. Her very mainstream diva programme included nine of the most beautiful Schubert lieder and three Brahms masterpieces (*Die Mainacht*, *Liebestreu*, *Vergebliches Standchen*), ending with three Mahler lieder from *das Knaben Wunderhorn* (including *Lob des hohen Verstandes*). The program closed with five of Strauss's greatest hits, including *Morgen*, of course. She looked fresh, with a radiant smile, slimmer than a few years ago. She was sporting one of those ridiculous red dresses that she wears for her DG album covers, with beehive hairdo, silk stole and all, but she really seemed at ease in this outfit, a sort of chubby Lucille Ball. The Schubert songs were quite good, but you could immediately feel that she could hardly sing piano, so *Fruhlingsglaube* and *Auf dem wasser zu singen* were sung a bit as they were Wagner's *Wesendonk lieder*. She was more at ease in the dramatic songs, as *Ganymed* or *Nur wer die Sensucht kennt* (remember Rossano Brazzi singing it to Jo in V. Minnelli's top

queer movie *Little Women*?). Her voice is still beautiful and quite firm, though she tends to sing top notes are only *forte* or *fortissimo*, and sometimes she screams a bit.

Studer proved to be a convincing interpreter of dramatic and comic characters in song, with a magnificent rendering of the Mahler's desperate *Das irdische leben*, and on the other hand a very amusing sketch of the little courting scene of Brahms *Vergebliches Standchen*. She also played a sort of Shirley Temple character as the little girl waiting for her mommy in Strauss's *Schlechtes wetter*. She deserved to be cheered after her interpretation of Strauss's *Muttertandelei*, that she ended gently tweaking the nose of her imaginary child. She showed a perfect command in the agility passages and – as always – really idiomatic German! *Morgen* was one of the few low spots of the concert, since you really need a constant command of *piano*, which Studer couldn't contrive. Her contrived parlato reminded one of Mrs. Walter Legge, though of course without the artfully faded Viennese charm. As encores she offered the audience a moving interpretation of Strauss *Zeignung*, but then decided to give us all – dumb ignorant Italians – what we were supposed to be waiting for since the beginning of the Liederabend, a real aria: "*Io son l'umile ancella*." Wrong choice!! It was awful, with an unpleasant vibrato that La Studer seems to consider absolutely necessary when she sings Italian opera. The final top A-flat resembled a seagull's scream, nearly spoiling the whole evening's atmosphere. Fortunately, she cleared the palate with "*Dich teure Halle*", was sung in a healthy full voice. Her creamy high B won her very big applause. Up close La Studer is quite a beautiful woman, very kind, almost ready to bake an apple pie for all the worshipping fans. While signing and handing me a very funny picture of herself disguised in Madonna's "Like a Virgin" XVIIIth century outfit (is Edita Gruberova her stylist?) she told me that she hopes to come back soon to Italy with *Rosenkavalier*: we will be there!!

Andrea Penna

AMSTERDAM -- Yesterday I saw *Dialogues des Carmelites*, performed by De Nederlandse Opera. It's probably the most beautiful stagework I have heard to date. The staging by Robert Carsen was kept to a minimum, and that worked out very well. All attention was fixed on the people on stage, as it should be in works this intimate. There were three vast grey walls, and that was it. Of course there was furniture when there had to be furniture, but these too were kept simple and there were very few. The sets were by Michael Levine.

The highest praise of the evening undoubtedly belongs to Yves Abel, a young Canadian conductor. This series of performances is the first time he conducts *Dialogues*, and he did a superb job. He gave an awe-inspiring reading of the score, never letting the tension flag, always drawing forth beautiful sound, keeping the drama moving. Especially the finale was beautifully conducted. I think Abel is someone to be watched very closely: he's in for great things! I could see/hear him doing Wagner or Strauss. I'm certainly very interested in his future engagements.

All the singers except Rita Gorr were making role debuts. I was most interested in hearing La Gorr as Madame de Croissy, because she's just about a living

opera legend. She didn't disappoint me: at seventy and after nearly fifty years of singing on stage, her voice is still pretty well preserved. Of course it doesn't have the beauty it once had, but it's still a voice to be reckoned with. She did have the tendency to "crack" in the lower register, but that was not out of character, in my opinion: after all, La Prieure IS sick. And what she may have lacked in vocal qualities, she more than compensated with the intensity and commitment of her performance. She displayed such raw emotion that you tended to forget she was singing. She got the biggest ovation at the curtain calls.

Joan Rodgers sang Blanche, and did so very well, although some critics here in the Netherlands were less pleased with her performance. She sang some breathtaking pianissimi, and she had the right looks too, to suggest the innocence that Blanche has. Some people laughed during the scene in her father's house when she's the maid there and the lets the food burn. Curious how people can interpret things differently. The best voice of the evening was without a doubt Claron McFadden, an American-Dutch soprano who sang the role of Constance. She has the clearest, sweetest tone I have heard in a long time. She was absolutely ideal for the part. I think she will do extremely well in the lyrical repertoire (Mimi, Gilda etc.). American mezzo Jane Henschel, who sang Mere Marie, has a steel-shattering voice, but she sang the more quiet passages very beautifully too. She sings a lot of Wagner, and I don't think that's surprising! Sheri Greenawald didn't have a particularly strong voice (in the prison scene, you could hardly hear her) but she certainly sang with devotion and love. Laurence Dale, the British tenor who sang Chevalier de la Force, was excellent as well. The sister/brother confrontation was powerful stuff.

The last scene, the Salve Regina, was horrifying. The nuns stood scattered about the stage in pure white gowns, dancing slowly and gracefully, and each time you heard the guillotine, one of them stopped singing and slowly fell to the ground, and then assumed the crucifixion position. Absolutely brilliant!

Benjamin Rous

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

Once upon a time, when I was first discovering this thing called opera, I would tell anyone silly enough to ask that my favorite singers were Joan Sutherland, Elisabeth Schwarzkopf and Leonie Rysanek.. I'm surprised that I left Renata Scotto out of the primal triumvirate, for Scotto was always there (although she'd be more there later on): that first *Boheme* telecast suggested that opera might be a good place to turn now that I'd run out of Gilbert & Sullivans to memorize, and perhaps my first staggeringly vivid memory of a diva in action is of Renata, garbed in what looked like Miss Ellen's portieres, putting out her candles during the second act of *Adriana Lecouvreur*. But even if I'd answered Sutherland, Schwarzkopf, Rysanek and Scotto, I'd still have left out the name of the prima donna who inspired the greatest love in my very gay and very lonely heart.

I spent my tortured adolescence in Beverly Hills, but, from time to time, my mother and I would pop off to New York for a week of culture and dysfunction, leaving my father alone for a few days of quiet he no doubt appreciated. On one of these trips I heard Dame Joan live for the first time in *Don Giovanni* (I think I'd rather have heard her in a role with notes above high C). As my mother and I inched our way out of the orchestra at intermission, I was making little secret of the fact that I disapproved of the casting of Huguette Tourangeau as Zerlina (could you blame me?). This earned much angry and loud shushing from my mother, who came perilously close to saying that she didn't like the idea of her son, still clad in his three-piece bar mitzvah suit, carrying on like, well, like the little opera queen he was.

The same week I first gave vent to an opinion in the foyer of the Met and saw Renata's Adriana, I also had my first contact with the standing room line, since I simply had to see Leonie Rysanek as the Kaiserin, and the performances were extremely sold out. Although my mother insisted on meeting me after the final curtain (she complained that I stayed and clapped too much), she couldn't protect me that Friday morning from most-of-you-probably-know-who with the tape recorder and Maria's *Aida* E-flat and nearly two hundred Leonie queens, some of whom would play major roles in a life which was then very much yet to come. I had also heard Varady, Bacquier, Carreras, Cossotto, Verrett, Milnes, King and Berry. How would I ever readjust to Southern California and a world in which people didn't talk about who held the final high C longest in the *Böhm Frau* recording?

a boy and his diva

Although it wasn't easy, at least I had Anneliese Rothenberger.

Worshipful though I was of Rysanek and Scotto, of Sutherland and Schwarzkopf (I'm the only person I know who likes her Giulietta), there was something a little too public about such established *monstres sacrées*, particularly for a young man whose life took place almost entirely within the confines of his own head. I needed a diva I could call my own, and, since there was no one around who might have explained the relative importance of Rothenberger and Rysanek, I let my judgment be guided by the record bins at Tower. As they had a lot of Electrola imports, I soon found my way to (in the words of her EMI bio) "the most charming of all prima donnas."

One of the advantages of the LP format was the big album cover photos which gave one an idea of how a singer looked. EMI always made an effort to show Rothenberger in costume, albeit in the kinds of costumes which looked as though they would fall apart with more than ten minutes' wear. But whereas her partners usually looked fairly goofy (except for Gedda, who looked extremely goofy, and Adolf Dallapozza, who looked kinda cute to me as Offenbach's Orpheus), Rothenberger exuded a friendly glamour and a visible belief in what she was wearing. Without seeing her on stage, or even in motion, I felt I knew just how she would look as Konstanze, Lady Harriet or Hanna Glawari.

Why was I so smitten with a singer whose hairstyles matched those of a few of my older female relatives (Viennese taste apparently not having changed since my family fled to America in the late thirties) and whose glamour gowns looked as though she might have sewn them herself? Being (or having been - it was years before I realized what I'd been listening to was actually late Rothenberger) a coloratura soprano certainly helped. I love coloratura sopranos. So did the appeal of the voice itself. I like a nice healthy vibrato. And how could one resist the personal charm which had made friends of such formidable operatic dragons as Lisa Della Casa (Rothenberger was her favorite Zdenka) and Lotte Lehmann (who dubbed her "the best Sophie singing today")?

I am sure I also responded to the way her singing always seemed such a natural and plausible response to the world around her. For someone who could stand at the top of a flight of cement stairs, survey the kids in the schoolyard, and begin his descent singing Lisa's Entrance from *Das Land des Lachelns* this aspect of the Rothenberger vocal persona suggested that I had found a kindred spirit. I could imagine Anneliese coming down her own stairs just that way, even if it was only to breakfast with her husband (Gerd W. Dieberitz, whose presence in non-singing roles in a few of his wife's recordings seemed like an in-joke for the Rothenberger "club" I'd imagined. If there were Leonie queens, why not Anneliese queens?)

None of this explains the magic which kept me plunking down big bucks for imports of Offenbach in the wrong language (that's a huge act of devotion for a student at a Lycée Français). When

Rothenberger began singing Lisa's entrance, I felt the presence of someone in the process of lighting up a room. Maybe today I'd say this was a result of her unique combination of real divahood with a highly developed popular touch, but as a teenager, I just delighted in the experience of a singer who communicated, who could (despite my then patchy German) make me laugh out loud (her kvetching about Jean Styx in *Orphee*) or feel a real lump in my throat (as when Lisa says "aber Gustl, diese Schmerz..."). Note that these are moments in which she speaks: thanks to the dialogue in her operetta recordings, I got to know Rothenberger's speaking voice better than that of maybe any other singer. That made for a unique intimacy with my private diva of choice.

I'm sure the concept of opera as escape from the trials of gym class and being called an "espèce de pédé" by boys who might have done well to look to themselves is familiar to plenty of gay men. (Although the ones reading this were more likely called "faggot") But opera can bring a turmoil of its own, what with Renata dying all the time, Leonie screaming as golden fountains appear and disappear, the schöne Elisabeth relinquishing Christa, and the Joan's high E-flats doing a number on my respiratory system. While I desperately needed catharsis (and helped myself to it generously), I also needed to feel safe, and Rothenberger is the diva who came closest to doing that for me. Even before playing *Wiener Blut*, I knew that Rothenberger's Gräfin Zedlau would pick up where her Lisa had left off and share with me a few moments of sunny happiness. I needed sunny happiness a lot in those days.

I probably still need it, which is why the recent CD re-releases of the Rothenberger/Gedda operetta series have provided a series of extremely Proustian experiences. There are plenty of other records which were staples of my adolescent musical diet, but, somehow, Rothenberger's evoke a special nostalgia for my lost (not that I miss them) teenage years: they allow me to remember my younger self in some uncharacteristic moments.

-- MDG

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