

"In drama, you have to be honest. In comedy, you have to be honest, AND get a laugh".
Steve Martin

ACTING IN OPERA: SOME HUMOROUS AND RANDOM THOUGHTS

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"I know that life is worth living. The audience knows that I know it. " Clark Gable

One great actor (don't say "actress," I learned the hard way), Meryl Streep, described another great actor, Sean Penn, in these words: *"He is brilliant, inventive and compassionate. His choices are unpredictable and true."*

The best opera acting, like Sean Penn's, is often true, even compassionate. It's the unpredictability that's usually missing. Theater needs surprise, inventiveness. It needs the creative act. It needs performers who offer something that can't be found on the CD or video. Professional opera singers very often deliver polished, honest, exciting but ultimately predictable performances. The singer must make discoveries in her repertoire so that the audience gets their surprises. There's a world of details hidden in TRAVIATA that thousands of productions have not revealed, secrets waiting to be uncovered. Familiarity breeds familiarity. Read on.

"Be expressive, not impressive." Sean Penn

One main difference between the speaking actor (hereafter "actor") and the operatic singing actor (hereafter "singer") is that the (professional) actor explores the material physically, emotionally and verbally until interesting, fascinating, boring and stupid ideas appear. Then from these, the actor and director make "choices" that create a world neither (or both) can claim as their own. The opera singer tends to use common sense and experience to forge an intelligent portrayal. The actor will go too far in rehearsals, thus establishing the parameters in which the magic will be spun. The singer will seldom push beyond common sense in rehearsals. This is understandable since the rehearsal period for the singer is more limited than for the spoken stage, and the musical staff (and stave) does not seem to encourage improvisation. Yet the actor is more likely to rivet the audience by having recklessly explored the possibilities, whereas the singer runs the risk of being boring, despite meticulous preparation, by making decisions not based on exploration. Not all techniques for the actor apply to the singer, but many can be of great use. One might argue that actors can create their own interpretation of a line of dialogue, write their own "music," whereas the singer's line - reading has been predetermined by the composer. But this does not excuse the singer from seeking the magical, for the actor and singer share a magic wand: SUBTEXT. More of that later.

Having a voice, personality, rehearsal time and acting skills is not quite enough for a paying audience. The singer can, with just a little extra work, reveal things about Musetta that the previous 63,000 sopranos never discovered. She can enter Musetta's soul and meet herself. "Indicating", that is to say intensively behaving happy, sad or perplexed is not the kind of acting you pay for at the movies or in the theater. When Streep as Sophie is telling of her choice as to which of her children to save from the death camp, she dies not devastate us by acting really, really sad. It's both more complicated and yet simpler than that. The acting we cherish is a string of moments, choices sought for and won after a period of exploration.

The message here is simple. Explore the text and music physically. Practice your blocking until both you and the director can claim it as your/her own. Repeat until you begin to trust your instincts. Play the obvious, play the OPPOSITE, play with it so many different ways that something begins to emerge that you're not smart enough to think of. Playing the opposite (a grief stricken scene merrily, for example) is not done to be artsy, but to find the exact shade of grief. Write your flashes down. Don't be afraid to get it "wrong", be afraid of doing nothing. Don't fear looking like a fool, fear being boring. The eye hears, the ear sees.

But remember the director hears and sees as well.

Where does the director fit into all this anyhow? Most directors don't have that many ideas. They don't direct much as a rule, and fortunately the worst directors have the fewest ideas. Respect and perfect what little she's given you and then, rather than fighting those few ideas, put your energies into the 80% of the character that has NOT been directed. Treating the director with respect and having some fun with her ideas will stretch you and she'll happily approve (not to mention taking credit for!!) your own contributions. If there are conflicts with the director's interpretations, this will provide new insights that will make both the singer and the director happy. If some of the director's demands still stick in your craw, appeal to the Imagination. Remember, when a staging idea does not work, the answer is usually not to eliminate it, but to add another element to it! Use the Imagination to find the missing component. The subconscious will answer if you remember to ask, often before you've finished asking!

I am not at all suggesting that singers improvise in performance, but rather some ways to dazzle up a game plan to accompany the director's ideas. There must be a plan, and it should be followed in performance. In this way, opera is a different ballgame than spoken theater, as so many talented theater directors have never discovered in their frustrating attempts at opera staging. The best actors are the best listeners, and are inspired by the sparks generated between each other in the moment. This spontaneity is possible in opera but is created not by improvisation, but by the sparks set off when text, music and the "scenic gesture" (to paraphrase Verdi) click. Imaginative inspired, PLANNED blocking and carefully chosen subtext will never lose their freshness. Callas claimed she planned every gesture down to the movement of her eyelash in rehearsal, but then tossed it all away in performance. Yet it just so happened that they turned out almost identical, except that one sent a shiver through the audience. Craft is ancient and noble and necessary, for the greater your inspiration, the task of making each step clear to the audience grows more daunting. The angel is in the details.

"Golf is a game of luck. The more I practice, the luckier I get." Ben Hogan

Most singers consider their work finished when they have the blocking down. But that's where the work BEGINS, if you want to deliver a performance worth the price of a ticket. Practice means repetition. Practice the director's instructions so that in the next rehearsal, probably an act run-through, the director can be assured that you can take direction and can gauge how well it's working. Now you comb through every line of your part and explore physically as described above. Use recordings, possibly a tape of yourself in a coaching, and act it out every which-a-way. It is not necessary to sing along. Actually practicing to a great singer's recording can inspire fresh ideas. Search for SUBTEXT! Act with your imagination, sing with your eyes, and your body will know what to do! (That last sentence can provide a lifetime of experience.) Planning gestures is a surprisingly useful way to figure out what to do with your hands. You'd be amazed at how few are needed, when they're good! You are doing the exploration of an actor, but with one difference. The actor explores in a long rehearsal period, while the singer must compensate for a short rehearsal time by exploring in private practice, bringing the best results to the next rehearsal, filling in where the director has left a space.

If by chance you have a strong director, that is one who has explored your part already and has more details than you'll ever master, learn from her instead of arguing, because it won't happen often! Your next director will let you do all you want. Bear in mind that directors resent the singer arguing over a movement they haven't even bothered to try yet. Don't worry about crazy, concept-obsessed directors. They are so rare you'll probably never meet one. And they generally have visual ideas only and leave the singers to their own devices anyway, so you will be free to discover the humanity of your character. Remember, directors want you to make them look good! Help each other.

How do you know if you've come up with the right choices? First come up with SOME choices, some options to choose from. Select those that fit into the production, that excite you, and you'll be all right. You've made insights into your character, not to mention your "character"!

"When I'm reading and a chill moves up my spine, and the top of my head seems to lift off, then I know I've found Poetry!"
Emily Dickinson, poet

Every line, every scene tells a story of its own. Each detail that you discover adds something new. Think of a mosaic wherein each discovery is one stone. As more stones fall into place, a picture begins to form, a world is revealed. The audience and the performers will be drawn into this world. The number of "stones" is determined simply by the amount of physical preparation, by practicing the role. This phrase calls for a gesture. Of the many possibilities, which movement gives you a thrill more exciting than any psychological exercise can ever be? Don't know how to explore? GUESS! A guess is a wish, engaging both Imagination and instinct. The right question is always answered. It takes preparation to be spontaneous. Play, but take your playing seriously.

But "do not take thyself seriously." So sayeth the 12th commandment. The 11th? "Do not waste the time of others."

"Angels have wings because they take themselves lightly." Robin Williams

Passion is all important, but should not be confused with intensity. Intensity is a false god, said Stanislavsky, akin to "indicating" and "entertaining." It is often confused with "great" acting in the opera world. The great actor is not she who can be the angriest, but tis she who can do "angry" mixed with regret, with amusement, with betrayal. She has a palate of "angries" to choose from. The composer has already supplied the intensity, so relying on force and personality is an indulgence. Passion is that which drives us to enter other worlds, to lead the audience there, and to return with fresh eyes. Passion is love of life, music, colleagues, words, adventure. Don't work up a sweat selling the show. Sweat in rehearsals, so there is something worth selling. Dare to be bad in practice in order to be great in performance. Dare to tell the story.

"Genius is seeing the obvious." Albert Einstein

True, but playing the opposite can greatly alter what the obvious really looks like. Playing the obvious is not a matter of doing crazy line readings, just to be original. It is a way to explore new colors of interpretation. Too many tragedies are

ruined by intensity, and too many comedies are ruined by twinkly-eyed giddiness. Comedy is serious and tragedy must have a light touch.

"Some call their work finished, when it hasn't even begun yet." William Blake, poet

By this the master means, in part, that mediocrity is the enemy. And yet mediocrity means excellence, professionalism, perfection and quality!! Sounds attractive, no? Yes. But it is not true storytelling. Because the artist knew the outcome from the beginning. She did not enter the cave innocently.

Surprise is the stuff of theater, but in opera, though there are plenty of "shocking" novelties like Mimi shooting heroin, and other intellectually "stimulating" bright ideas, true surprise is rare. Surprise must be logical to work, but logic will not lead you to find surprise. Storytelling is not an intellectual pursuit. The intellect is good for making the execution clear.

An aria, recit or scene is an opera in itself, a story revealed as the gestures of the eye, body, soul and voice fall into place. When the audience witnesses a world of myriad details, they forget it's an opera and they (as well as the singers) get lost in the Story. It's all work in progress, it's a journey. Fall in love with the rehearsal process. Then you'll get ever closer to your goal in performance, blissfully never quite reaching it.

How to search for surprises and moments? First ...well, try! Then just go on trying, studying, simply learning the piece without thinking "what the heck am I going to do here!?" As you practice the director's blocking at home, you are incarnating. There are no secrets to discovering the Secrets, and it doesn't take that much time and effort. Ideas are forming unconsciously if the mind is open, They'll pop in eventually and not always in the most convenient times. Can't sleep? Think about your role. The imagination may be downloading. Get up and write it down.

What we seek are the actual gestures of the character, gestures of the body, voice, eye and soul. While respecting the director's process, don't talk too much about the character until you've worn her skin in performance. [*"Too much chatter..."* Sean Penn] Even a very smart, intellectual description of the person you seek can become a barrier against smelling her breath. And when you've finally worn her skin, you may have even less to say.

"Find a secret about the character you are acting that no one knows but you. Don't tell anyone what it is. This will be your source. Perhaps even you cannot put it into words." Jennifer Jason Lee

(Stephen Sondheim has similarly stated that the true meaning of each of his musical plays has remained a life-giving secret, known only to the author and perhaps the director.)

American actors generally work from the inside out (Brando and his descendants) while English actors generally work from the outside in (see Olivier and his brilliant "effects.") Both are valid, both can be taken too far. The Americans can be self indulgent, the Brits technical, cold and calculating. Americans try to find themselves in their art, the British like to escape themselves and be someone else. The Americans are drained after the show, while the British take their character off with their makeup and are off to the pub. Of course all actors combine the two or fall in between somewhere. Richard Burton (a Brit) certainly always played himself, while Dustin Hoffman (American) is able to "*cast a shadow not his own*", to quote playwright Arthur Miller.

Opera singers need both. To play a scene as you would act in that situation can prove to be a great challenge. To be someone else is a more advanced task. And yet since the composer has already painted the character's portrait in music, the singer can wear someone else's eyes. I believe though that the British model is to be preferred. True spontaneity must be planned. Subtext is the magic wand that fuses it all together.

Subtext is the intention or thought behind the line, or simply a fancy term for "line reading." Hello? Hello!! Hellooooo....! How many ways can you say it? The Imagination's the limit. But cabaret singers and actors use it much more than opera singers, unfortunately. Let's consider Rodolfo's narrative in LA BOHEME. The poet touches the strange maiden's hand in the dark, takes it and says "what an ice-cold hand!" What subtext could he use? Shock ["My God, she' gonna die!"], fear ["Is this catching?"], love ["I must warm her back to life."], sexual heat [You won't be cold much longer, baby!], etc. [Notice that I use short, spiky, Anglo-Saxon words to describe the subtexts, not the softer, more intellectual Latin-based words ("apprehension, amorousness").] Yet my fellow tenors sing it exactly the same way. Their subtext is beauty, sincerity, feeling, sentiment. In other words: THERE IS NO SUBTEXT! They have not even asked the question, much less discovered an answer. Beauty should be the result of the quest, it is not an emotion or a thought. This is why opera, though beautiful, is so often "lame." Many have not really even tried, they've not yet "begun" as Blake says. What a deal for an audience paying 20, 40 or 95 dollars for a ticket! What is the singer offering that couldn't be found by listening to the C.D. with a nice glass of wine? When an opera singer goes to the movies or to a Broadway musical, she is not satisfied with good taste and artistic "integrity." She wants to be swept away to another world. But how much risk will that singer take for her own stage work? Remember Charlie the Tuna: "Sorry Charlie, we don't want tuna with good taste. We want tuna that tastes good!"

Two great singer/actors of our century were Maria Callas, the Greek-American soprano and Feodor Chaliapin, the great Russian basso. We venerate them for the power and originality of their stage creations, but the waves they made are only lapping gently on the shores of our opera world. Their influence has inspired a rise in the general level of opera acting, but has anyone been inspired to equal them, much less go beyond them? Venerated they should be, even imitated! And yet we have so far to go. Perhaps the potent mixture of song and acting they achieved is actually considered all in a day's work by every bit player in a professional musical. What we consider a miracle in opera is simply the job description in the professional theater. And it is achievable with some imaginary homework.

I know the above word, imitation, is considered a dirty word in acting, but that is a great mistake. The best actors I've known were brilliant (and funny) mimics. If the performer has the spark of originality (and we all do), imitation will not extinguish it. And avoiding imitation definitely does NOT guarantee anything approaching an original interpretation. Originality is achieved by earning the right to play a character, not by simply having a personality of your own. So often I've observed the energy and sparkle a singer exhibits in the green room turn professionally dull onstage, as acting takes over. "Amateurs imitate, while professionals steal," said Stravinsky. This means that imitation is not only a form of flattery, it's a form of humility. It also suggests that the artist who is wise enough to know what to steal, will later find the stolen goods transformed into something quite new. Imagination is the door to Heaven, more real than reality.

But for God's sake (as well as yours), give the Imagination some reality to work with! If you're playing Carmen, visit a Latino community. If you're a gal playing a guy, take your hands off your hips (we never do that) and take a look at your nephew in his natural habitat, the video arcade. But even beyond that, find the individual boy that is your character and all will be clearer. He may even put his hands on his hips, but don't count on it.

But ah, you say, the technical demands of opera are much greater than in theater. Are they? The great musicals were created by performers who sang eight times a week without microphones over open orchestra pits, heavy with brass. Even with the (over-) amplification often used today, musical comedy performers can still equal or surpass opera singers in terms of individuality, stamina, diction, and expressive use of word and phrase, and yes, even in vocal power. Musical comedy IS American opera! PORGY AND BESS rules as our greatest opera because its creator was a Broadway artist. Frank Loesser too was not a lesser artist for bridging this unnecessary gap. Menotti also must not be ignored. THE BALLAD OF BABY DOE and SUSANNAH also benefit from having one foot on the Broadway stage, from the feel of folk music. Menotti's operas "worked" on Broadway. All three were pilloried in the press for daring to write for audiences and themselves instead of for the critics.

For inspiring singing, listen to the original cast recording of OKLAHOMA. The details of word pointing, phrasing and dynamics are on a par with Fischer-Dieskau or the Schwartzkopf/Legge lieder recordings. They were coached! Alfred Drake and Joan Rodgers sing like great lieder singers. And they recorded the album on their day off, usually an all night session!

Learn from all kinds of musicians and artists. All types of music have their masterpieces. Do not scorn entertainment. Art can be boring, a conceit to be understood only by other artists or intellectuals. Entertainment can easily carry art within itself and it cannot afford to be boring. Storytelling fuses art and entertainment.

"If you have something to say, coat it with chocolate." Billy Wilder, filmmaker

Actors are judged principally by their ability to communicate, whereas singers are expected to sound good, look good, act good. Communication is considered so obvious that it is expected to take care of itself. It doesn't. Opera must be about something other than opera. Billy Wilder also said that the most difficult part of filmmaking is to produce something that is not boring. A performance of utmost musical polish, visually sumptuous and expertly directed can be very boring. And adding crazy stage direction and design will make it even more boring.

"A gesture is a movement not of the body, but of the soul." Chaliapin

Chaliapin's performances were the inspiration for Stanislavsky, spiritual father of the American actor, though many claim he meant something very different than what is taught in his name. There's a mystery manufactured and compounded by generations of acting teachers, who so often confuse realism with believability, memory with Imagination, and their own personal taste with the truth, that has caused many actors, not to mention the more susceptible opera singers, to give up in advance. On the other hand, the teachers are rightly discouraged by student actors being more interested in career goals than in process.

"The one thing I cannot teach singers is curiosity." Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau

I do not mean to diminish the importance of acting teachers, but from the greatest (Strasberg, Hagen, Adler) on down, they tend to diminish the students, damage their confidence in their own efforts, in their right to find their own way, to make those all-important mistakes. A good teacher works his way out of a job. Read Arthur Miller and Laurence Olivier, watch "Inside the Actor's Studio" on the Bravo network for plenty of evidence. The greatest "method" actors all finally took

what was useful and found their own way. And singers must bear in mind that many acting teachers and theater directors do not know the territory in Operaland, where most of the answers are found in the words and music themselves. Follow the heart, do a little imaginative work, and no effort will be in vain. Take as much as possible from your teachers, but do not doubt your own instincts. Yet the teachers are right in one thing: there must be a process and choices must be made. Learning the blocking is not enough.

Not that all singers learn the blocking. Or the words. Or the music. Interestingly, the least prepared singers often have the most ideas for improving the stage direction. Even if the ideas are brilliant, this is disruptive. Learn from the director before you ask her to learn from you.

A Russian singer and actor, Stanislavsky directed the premieres of many of Chekhov's plays, sang the first Koko in THE MIKADO in Russia, and wrote the great books on acting in this century. Stanislavsky also directed opera. Many times he would exclaim in despair: "What is it with you singers? The music tells you everything, but you still don't do it!" The most obvious meaning here is that the music supplies as much or more subtext than the words (that's another article), which we singers too often turn into a generic, and unfortunately quite professional "acting with feeling" (see Great Acting above). We depend on the brain and heart to guide us but only by also invoking the Imagination itself, that same source the great composers drew on, can we incarnate the music, and become the "priests of beauty" as Stanislavsky hoped we would.

"The talent is in the choices." Stanislavsky

Creative choices can evoke onstage worlds of seemingly unlimited possibilities and suspended time. Comic opera can be actually funny! The audience and singers may all know the story of TOSCA, but if the magic and surprising moments are there, the ending will come as a total surprise. Who knows? Tosca may just fly away after she jumps! The audience certainly will.

APPENDIX

HOW TO DEAL WITH BAD DIRECTORS

Ross Halper

- 1) Don't ask their opinion unless absolutely necessary. It's almost certain that they haven't even considered the issue and they'll give a wrong or "no" answer just to act authoritative, and you and/or the person you're double cast with will be stuck. Don't count on the director to forget it afterwards, because you started it and they might not.
- 2) If the blocking is poor, try to fix it without any discussion. Again, don't put an unprepared director on the line unless it's crucial (like knowing where the forge is, etc.) He probably won't remember the blocking esp. if two people double cast do it differently. If he does remember and corrects you, act stupid and do it his way. He'll forget plenty later on. This is easier if your double cast mate is respected or feared by the director and is allowed freedom.
- 3) Don't correct and remind the director that you're better prepared than he is unless absolutely necessary like "that scene is in the FIRST act" or "Oh yes, Medea kills her children" (I'm not making these up!). Just quietly fix the problem. In other words, don't point out the mistake, fix it.
- 4) If double cast, the staging of both should be the same when they relate to other characters, so the colleagues don't get confused and complain to the director that you're changing the blocking. It's also courteous to your colleagues.
- 5) Be careful of blocking the scene with the other actors while the director is around. Wait for a break or meet outside the rehearsal. It's rubbing it in the director's face and you'll pay. The more you help them save face, the more freedom you'll have to get the show up.
- 6) If the director screws up too much, threaten to quit, but only to his face and in private. Don't humiliate him in front of the company (unless absolutely necessary). But be prepared for him to call your bluff. Time is all we have in this world, and those who waste it must be told eventually, like when they ask you to perform again or do a favor.
- 7) Once in awhile, screw up on purpose, so the director can step in and fix it. It makes them feel useful.
- 8) A bad director is one who has few or no ideas, is unprepared and wastes time. A director with "bad" ideas has at least developed something, and you can work with him or her.

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ROSS HALPER BIO - 2006

Having recently made his debut with Los Angeles Opera as Kromov in THE MERRY WIDOW, versatile tenor/actor Ross Halper has been called "Opera's mad genius" by conductor Kent Nagano, "Opera's man for all seasons" by famed heldentenor Jess Thomas and "Our modern Schikaneder" by the great lyric tenor Leopold Simoneau. With a repertoire of 200 roles, he has sung under solo contracts with San Francisco Opera, San Francisco Symphony, San Jose Symphony, Long Beach Opera, San Jose Opera, Carmel Bach Festival, Eugene Opera, Festival Opera, Sacramento Opera, Berkeley Symphony and many, many others. Among his favorite roles are both the RHEINGOLD and SIEGFRIED Mime, Mr. Owen in POSTCARD FROM MOROCCO, the Witch in HANSEL, Vasek in BARTERED BRIDE, Albert Herring, Szupan in GYPSY BARON, Herod in SALOME, Basilio, Jacquino in FIDELIO, the Steersman in FLYING DUTCHMAN and the Magician in THE CONSUL. Having sung virtually all the standard character roles and many unusual ones, he has summed up these experiences in a unique staged recital, GODS AND GOBLINS, presented by Columbia Artists' Community Concerts. Ross' comic acting creations in television commercials have been seen internationally. He headlined in Las Vegas and toured the world in PHANTOM OF THE OPERA, as the funny tenor, naturally. His many opera translations have been conducted by the likes of Kent Nagano (a frequent collaborator) and Nicholas McGegan, while his English MAGIC FLUTE has been sung around the nation. Ross' first opera libretto, THE HOT IRON, based upon a play by the historical minnesinger Hans Sachs, was premiered at Cinnabar Opera, with music by Michael Kimbell. Besides serving 15 years as director in residence at North Bay Opera in Fairfield CA, he has served as stage director with Eugene Opera, Opera Idaho and just returned from directing DON GIOVANNI at Pacific Repertoire Opera in San Luis Obispo. Ross has also trained singers at UC Berkeley, at San Francisco's BASOTI summer opera program and at Mannes College of Music in New York. 2006 includes directing HANSEL and DIDO in San Luis Obispo, translating Mozart's ABDUCTION (Lyric Opera Cleveland) and Oscar Straus' MERRY NIBELUNGS (Dicapo Opera, NY) plus singing in Candace Forest's lovely CONCHA, ROSE OF THE PRESIDIO in May. rsers.california.com/~rhalper