

MUSIC

How to be an Opera Queen

Four easy steps for the uninitiated

BY MARC ACITO

So you'd like to know more about the grand and glorious world of opera? Well, sorry, it's too late for that. With Portland Opera's season starting in just a scant few weeks, you barely have time to pry the shrink wrapping off a CD, let alone listen to it.

But fear not, dear readers, for even if you have no idea what it is you paid \$50 a ticket for, you can certainly look as if you do; after all, that's what really matters, isn't it? So just follow these few, simple steps and you, too, can become that most supreme of opera aficionados, the Opera Queen.

Fun, Easy Step #1: Mind your grammar. The true Opera Queen yells "Bravo" after a man's solo, "Brava" after a woman's solo and "Bravi" when acknowledging the orchestra or chorus. Be sure to give withering, disdainful looks at the uninformed plebeians around you who don't know the difference. Incidentally, the proper time to yell "Bravo" or "Brava" is in that split second of silence that comes just after the music has ended and right before the applause begins. That way everyone in the auditorium can hear how much cleverer you are than anyone else.

Also, be certain to pronounce all foreign words with gusto. For instance: Roll the "r" in composer Guiseppe Verdi's name like an out-board motor. (And do remember that the opera is *Otello*, not *Othello*.) When in doubt about pronunciation, simply try placing the accent where you think it doesn't belong. So in *Otello*, Desdemona is pronounced Des-DAY-mona, Mimi in *La Boheme* is Mi-MEE, and Carmen is Car-MEN. Got IT?

Fun, Easy Step #2: Throw your knowledge around, even if you don't actually have any to throw. For instance, regarding the

orchestra: Choose one instrument arbitrarily and doggedly insist that it is being played out of tune, regardless of the truth. Don't back down. Conversely, wax rhapsodic over the beauty of a trifling bit of arcane detail. ("Did you hear how the strings managed that augmented minor third with the con-stipated fifth? Masterful!")

If someone asks you about your favorite opera, choose the most obscure one in the repertory. This season that's *Dialogues of the Carmelites*, a French opera about nuns during the French Revolution. Just think *The Sound of Music* meets *Les Miserables*. Your favorite character is anyone who dies. Since nearly all the characters die in this opera, you're pretty safe choosing from any number of nuns.

Fun, Easy Step #3: Elevate ridicule to an art form. Dishing the set and costumes is one of the great joys of operagoing. Lately, set designers have shown a fondness for chairs, suspending dozens of them 50 feet above the stage while down below the poor singers have nowhere to sit for three hours. But even if the set is lavishly appointed, do resist the temptation to applaud the set when the curtain rises. It can't hear you.

As for the costumes, speculating who might burst the stays of his or her corset is one way to keep yourself occupied during the dull bits. Most opera companies nowadays try to go for verisimilitude when it comes to casting (which is a nice way of saying they discriminate



against fat people), but the words of legendary soprano Joan Sutherland still hold true—"The bigger the launch pad, the higher the rocket." Big voices tend to come out of big bodies. If you'd rather not watch a consumptive, tubercular Mimi the size of a fullback, you can always put your opera glasses to good use by examin-

ing the breeches of the men's chorus to see who is dressing to the left and who is dressing to the right.

Fun, Easy Step #4: Gush like a little girl. Make no mistake—there's more to being an Opera Queen than acting like a complete bitch. What most people don't understand is the Opera Queen's regal disdain is born out of disappointment, for at the very core, we are hoping that opera will provide us with a transcendent experience, that a sumptuous voice soaring above a roaring orchestral tide will conspire to touch our souls and transport us to a higher level. That is why Opera Queens can always be depended upon to toss bouquets to the stage. Through sheer adrenaline, men who couldn't ever manage to throw a ball to first base suddenly become capable of landing a bouquet on stage from 20 rows back. Managers of opera companies discourage the throwing of flowers onstage, but it's a lovely, picturesque custom that can prove to be highly amusing when a singer accidentally gets beamed in the head with a mixed bouquet traveling at 75 mph.

So remember, my fresh new Opera Princesses, if the operagoing experience touches your soul, don't hold back—weep and gush and cheer. But if it doesn't, then by all means, feel free to bitch like hell. **JA**

The Portland Opera season opens with *CARMEN* Sept. 23 through 30 at Keller (formerly Civic) Auditorium, 222 S.W. Clay St. Call the box office at (503) 241-1802 for ticket information.

Portland writer MARC ACITO was called "Seattle Opera's Bad Boy" by Seattle Weekly and "a master of portrayal" by the Denver Post for his eccentric interpretations of character roles in opera.

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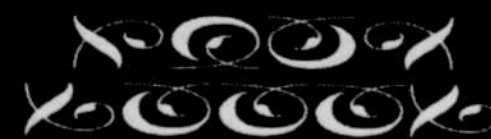
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