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Hate opera?

Then you'll love *The Consul* and *Candide*

BY MARC ACITO

Opera lovers are a predictable breed. Year in and year out they will tirelessly watch the same works drawn from the 50-some odd pieces that make up the "standard repertoire" while consciously avoiding anything new or unfamiliar. Companies that try to program lesser-known pieces often do so at great financial peril.

So it is all the more remarkable that an otherwise conservative regional company such as Portland Opera should resolutely insist on producing a seldom-seen work each and every season. And those operagoers who stay away from this year's offering will be missing a great opportunity indeed.

Gian Carlo Menotti's Pulitzer Prize-winning opera *The Consul* is a powerfully dramatic work of astonishing relevance.

In an unnamed dictatorship, the wife of an exiled freedom fighter struggles with bureaucratic red tape as she pleads for a visa to leave the country and join her husband. The consulate's failure even to acknowledge her, combined with the secret police's increasing harassment, eventually leads to tragedy.

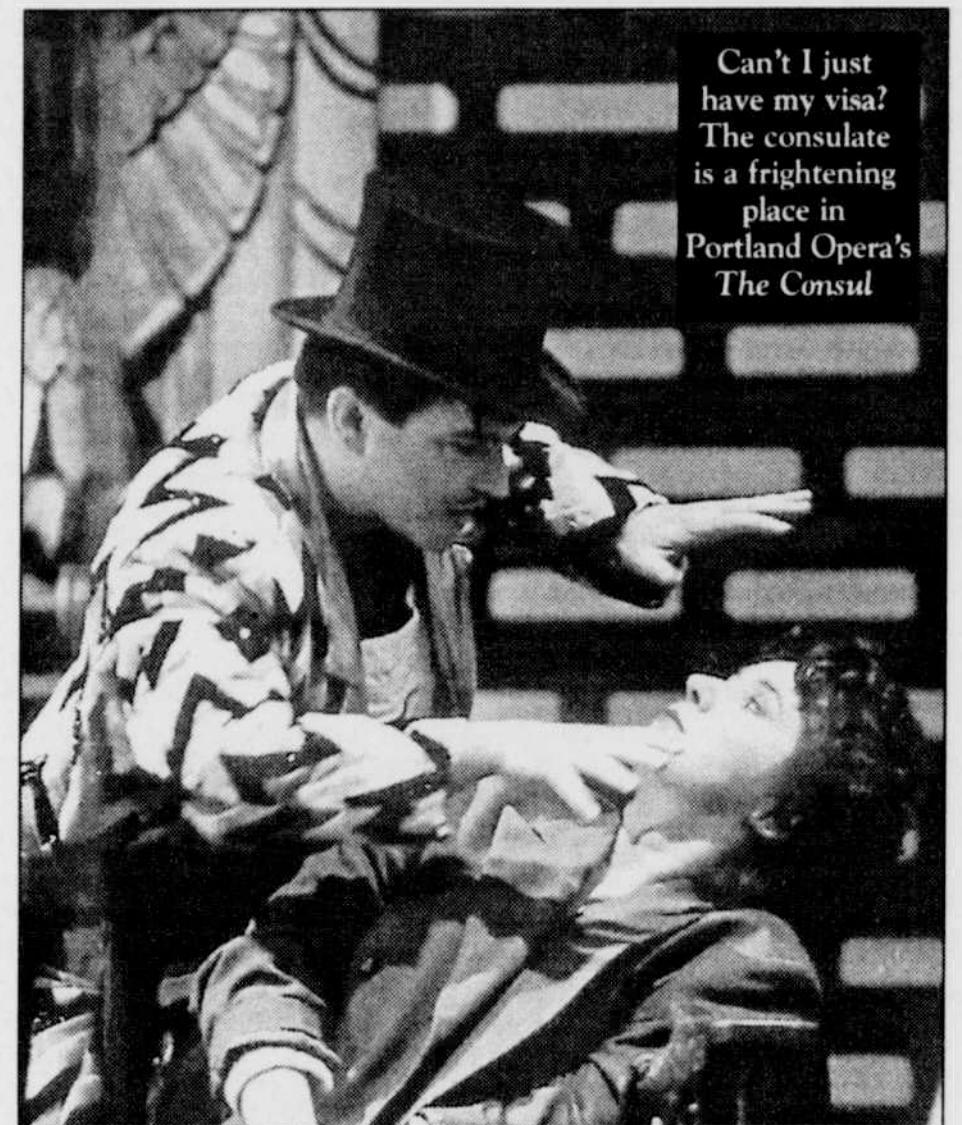
Premiering in 1950 at the height of the Cold War, *The Consul* was conceived as a commentary on Soviet-bloc injustices and the United States' reactionary response, but its themes have proven timeless. On the occasion of a revival in 1999, Menotti said: "I didn't have to change anything—not a word or a note. Everybody at the time said the opera would become dated, but it's a sad thing that nowadays the subject is just as vital as it was then."

These issues were also very much on the mind of playwright Lillian Hellman, a fierce proponent of liberal causes. She approached composer Leonard Bernstein to collaborate on an operetta based on French writer and philosopher Voltaire's revolutionary 18th century novel, *Candide*.

The resulting work, revised and revived a number of times since its premiere in 1957, will be Portland Opera's final presentation of the season. Thematically, it is a fitting companion piece to *The Consul*.

Of its conception, Bernstein later wrote: "The particular evil which impelled Lillian Hellman to choose *Candide* and present it to me for a musical stage work was what we now quaintly and, alas, faintly recall as McCarthyism, an 'ism' so akin to the Spanish Inquisition as to curdle the blood.... That was the time of the Hollywood blacklist, television censorship, lost jobs, suicides, expatriation and the denial of passports to anyone even suspected of having once known a suspected Communist. I can vouch for this. I was denied a passport. By the way, so was Voltaire denied a passport. His answer was satire."

Candide follows the picaresque adventure of



Can't I just have my visa? The consulate is a frightening place in Portland Opera's *The Consul*

the bastard son of a European nobleman as he searches for the meaning of life through war, plague and, yes, the Spanish Inquisition.

The operetta is very much like the complicated composer himself: dizzyingly witty, manic and ribald yet poignantly emotional and insightful. From its spirited overture to its stirring finale, it contains some of Bernstein's most virtuosic and sublime music. Like *The Consul*, it is sung in English and written in the accessible Broadway style of the period.

While neither *The Consul* nor *Candide* is gay-themed, it is not unreasonable to suggest the sexual orientation of both composers influenced their commitment to fighting injustice.

Menotti, who will turn 91 this year, maintained a 30-year relationship with the equally accomplished U.S. composer Samuel Barber. Although they parted before Barber's death, Menotti still intends to be buried next to his longtime partner.

And the classical music world is still full of men, gay and straight, who found themselves on the receiving end of bisexual Bernstein's unsubtle advances. The late composer's passion, so apparent on the podium as a conductor and in his own music, also applied to his sexual appetite.

But the most compelling reason to see these performances is the genius of the works themselves. For you opera queens out there, you won't want to miss the opportunity to see these two seldom-produced gems. And for you opera novices, you won't find a better introduction to the art form than these productions. **JM**

PORTLAND OPERA presents *The Consul* March 30 and April 3 and 6 and *Candide* May 11, 13, 15 and 18. Both performances start 7:30 p.m. at Keller Auditorium, 222 S.W. Third Ave. Tickets are \$26-\$155 from 503-241-1802 or Ticketmaster.

MARC ACITO was known as "Seattle Opera's Bad Boy" for his interpretation of comic roles in opera before giving up singing to become a writer.