

HUMOR

A night at the opera

Where are the gay opera singers?

Five years ago I walked away from a promising career in opera. My career was promising to be lousy, so I walked away.

I wouldn't say I was bad. In fact, most of my performances earned mixed reviews: I thought I was terrific, and the critics didn't.

So it was with great shock and awe that I received, out of the wild blue sky, an offer to sing with the Portland Opera. (Actually, since it's Portland, it was the wild gray sky.)

It wasn't much—three minutes of singing as the Emperor of China in Puccini's *Turandot*—but I'm used to secondary roles. Since I possessed more ambition than talent, I had scratched my way to the middle portraying various hunchbacks, mad scientists, drunks and simpletons.

More importantly, taking the gig gave me a chance to work with my friend Cynthia Haymon, who is one of my favorite singers and, also, one of my favorite people.

Cynthia is African American but, unlike a number of black sopranos, she eschews the grand manners that make divas sound like they are native speakers of Hungarian.

No, Cynthia keeps it real.

"We weren't just poor," she says of her upbringing as a preacher's daughter in the Deep South. "We were poor. We couldn't afford the extra o or the r."

Now, opera is a surprisingly conservative business. While there are a number of high-profile black women, audiences rarely see black men romancing white women onstage. And while gay directors, designers and secondary singers abound, there are still very few gay leading tenors. (That being said, I have known a few gay niners; that is, if their AOL profiles are to be believed.)

So, as marginalized minorities, Cynthia and I stick together, amusing ourselves during long

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO MARC
by Marc Acito



rehearsals by pretending we're victims of a vast operatic conspiracy.

For instance, I made my entrance atop a 20-foot-tall platform. My costume was actually built into the throne, giving me 6-foot shoulders, like Carol Burnett as Scarlett O'Hara with the curtain rod in her dress.

For safety reasons I had to be strapped in. When Cynthia saw this, she sidled up to me and whispered, "Y'know, that's just another way they keep a brother down."

"It's a conspiracy," I concurred.

"I'm callin' Al Sharpton," she replied.

Cynthia actually does have something to complain about, having suffered real slights and indignities through the years—like the time she showed up at an opening night party in Texas and was mistaken for the help.

As for me, I get into trouble just for being my own outrageous self.

In this production, which ran last month, my first vocal entrance was sung unaccompanied, so during the tech rehearsal I took advantage of the silence by looking down at the cho-

rus, spreading my arms wide and singing, "Don't cry for me, Argentina..."

I think of it as boosting morale.

And I once made three dozen pieces of toast so that when the chorus of *Die Fledermaus* sang "A toast! A toast! A tooooooast!" instead of champagne flutes they all raised slices of marbled rye.

Luckily, the stage managers at Portland Opera have a

sense of humor, as witnessed when they would call me to the stage to get strapped in by saying: "Mr. Acito to stage left to get loaded. Mr. Acito, stage left to get loaded."

(Note to self: Tell stage management that Mr. Acito prefers Absolut.)

The Emperor is quite old, with a large cactus-shaped head-dress that made me look like the dog in *How the Grinch Stole Christmas*. I decided to play him as a cross between the pope and Katharine Hepburn in *On Golden Pond*, complete with tremulous voice and shaking head. At the dress rehearsal, however, the director told me to lose the shake. With all the light shimmering off my

crowns, he said, it's like my own private disco up there.

This is not the first time I've had to be reined in. When I played one of the gypsy smugglers in *Carmen* the director said to me, "Marc, may I remind you, the opera is called *Carmen*, not *Remendado, Prince of Smugglers*."

Another director once told me I had to tone down my performance because I didn't seem to be in the same opera as everyone else.

I looked around at the lackluster production and suggested that perhaps

everyone else would be happier in mine.

Now you understand why I don't do this very often.

Maybe that's why there are so few gay leading men: We can't fit our outrageous selves into someone else's opera.

It's a conspiracy, I tell you. I'm callin' Howard Dean.

And that, my friends, is *The Gospel According to Marc*. [E]

MARC ACITO's first novel, *How I Paid for College*, will be published in September 2004. Write him at marc@marcacito.com.



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