

TO BOB WITH LOVE

*an opera lovers memoir*

by

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In 1980, an out-of-work teacher used his friend's influence to procure a job as a neophyte stage-hand at the Metropolitan Opera. The opportunity was perilous as well as opportunistic. Thrown into a work environment pregnant with strange nomenclature and fifteen hour days, I would, as the opera singers, have to perform at an unforgiving level of perfection non-existent in the outside world. I survived the season, ultimately returning to the classroom. Now retired and still an opera lover, I often muse about the world that was both sublime and ridiculous. Time has assuaged the bad times (like showing-up to find there was no work for me that day), as it has intensified the wonderfully poignant memories from an environment that is experienced by only a very few. A signed record album by Luciano Pavarotti and Katia Ricciarelli adorns my wall and greets me daily as I awake.

*Un Ballo in Maschera* or *Ballo* as we stage-hands called it, was featuring “The King of the High C's” in a new production eagerly awaited by the operatic world. Of course I would see *him*. After all, we are working on the same show. Stars and stage-hands occasionally chat, but it would be unprofessional to beg an autograph. My supervisor in the prop department, who worked with him

countless times-- and called him by his first name, would gladly procure *Lucie's* signature on the album I had given him.

Thirty-three years ago the Met's security was lackadaisical by today's post 911 standards. Stars and stage-hands alike rubbed shoulders, so to speak, as they entered the Met to simply go to work. Birget Nilson, the greatest Wagnerian soprano of our day, casually asked me if I knew where the closest liquor store was located! Inside the hallway adjacent to the stage, not far from the coffee and snack vender, rows of stage-hands sprawled out on the rug like ragamuffin dolls, awaiting their next call, viewed Reneta Scoto, John Vickers, Placido Domingo—the world's operatic royalty passing in daily procession. Only visitors from the world of pop culture caused excitement. Werner Klemperer from the TV comedy *Hogan's Heroes* was signed-up to narrate a new production of Mozart's *Abduction From the Seraglio*. I wanted to tell *Colonel Klink* how much I admired his father, the legendary conductor Otto Klemperer. His son was always in a hurry at the Met; unfortunately, I never got the chance.

One morning, while talking with my Mom from a phone booth adjacent to the stage door, (“Did you see *him* yet? He was just on the *Tonight Show*.”) the living legend, Pavarotti himself, appeared without any entourage, and slowly climbed the short flight of stairs that led up the hallway and to a surrounding cluster of rehearsal rooms. I told Mom he was here, alone and walking right past me. Would I dare to stop him and converse? Yes! I left the booth and in a nervous, dumbfounded stuttering voice, I told him how much I enjoyed his singing. Graciously and thankfully he took the time to listen to my plaudits, and yes, he would sign a record album for *me*. I was on cloud nine.

In rehearsal, the tenor was professional as well as jovial--a pleasure to work with (strangely, he always rehearsed in the same cloths every day). Most of the superstars were amiable people who talked to each other about mundane topics, rarely touching upon musical concerns. They respected their fellow workers. After all, it's *our* house, and they were *invited* to prperform here.

Months before I became employed as a rookie stage-hand., my mentor let me enter backstage to see any opera I wished. *Lucie* was appearing as Nemorino in *L'Elisir d'Amore*, His rotund figure was perfect for this comedy, as it was disconcerting in the superhero role of Ricardo in *Ballo*. After taking innumerable bows and curtain calls, the semi-obese living legend scampered past the set (outdoor picnic tables) that hosted real food and drink. He savagely grabbed an unsuspecting ball of Mozzarella cheese and literally shoved it down his golden throat, leaving a sizable mound of crumbs for a props department stage-hand to clean-up. The greatest tenor since Caruso, the once in a century voice, the personality known to the entire world, gave way to temptation, as millions of over-weight people do every day.

God, how we miss him. He wrote on my album *A Bob molto Complmento, Luciano Pavarotti 80*.

Sometime later, the Met decided to open with with Verdi's *Othello*. An opulent Franco Zeffirelli production would be presented on nationwide TV no less. My friend, Nathen Licthwar, an assistant electrician at the time, and now a world-famous author, managed the arsenal of lights over the proscenium. Together we were working on publishing a small magazine about motorcycle racing. So while the show was unfolding right below the lighting bridge, we actually did past-ups and wrote the text. Between the few moments of silence on the stage below, and astute listener could hear the clicking of his typewriter!

Later, now employed as a real stage-hand, on my first day of work, I given the task of manning the follow-spot in the final dress rehearsal. The experienced electrician who was to tackle this tricky task was stuck in traffic. Following the evil Iago as he meandered between the crowds of reveling choristers proved a bit much. I messed up! Sorry. My next job was to gradually open the now dim spot light as the diva, Katia Ricciarelli appeared on stage. My mentor nodded with approval as my beam banished the shadows, highlighting a beautiful young woman, clad in a gorgeous low cut golden Renaissance gown, featuring a myriad of jewels bathed in gossamer lace. I eagerly awaited the love duet with John Vickers playing the Moor of Venice. A light lyric soprano, as delicate and poignant as the summer wind caressed my sweating brow, while Vickers' golden tenor mated with her melodies in perfect harmony. A rousing applause thanked the couple. I was thunderstruck as the physical beauty of the women finally struck home: skin white as a sculptor's marble, and a sensuous visage reminiscent of Aphrodite. I fell in love. Production duties (the senior stagehand, ironically named Joe Green, finally arrived), prevented me from enjoying more of her performance. At 12 AM I start my journey home; exhausted, but touched by an angel.

Months past, as my amateur veneer partially wore off, revealing a confinement worker who could manage props, lighting, and carpenter work. *Othello* was presented many times, with other fine singers accepting the daunting task. At the season's final production of the show, fate answered my prayers. I was manning off-stage lights adjacent to the dressing rooms from which the cast entered the stage. Clad in the same golden dress, Katia passed me so closely I could hear the ruffle of her petticoats, the diva nervously awaited her cue. Her eyes met mine and she spoke in broken English, "You know, I'd rather be dancing at a disco. I don't want to do this." She shakes her lithe body as the massive cocoon struggled in vain to keep-up with her girlish

gyrations.” I answered. “You must sing. God gave you a wonderful gift and you have the responsibility to use it now.” She nodded in response as her pallid lips curled down while closing her gorgeous eyes-- as if overcome by a tender trance. What was she thinking? Suddenly, she shook-off the stupor, and appeared transformed, ready to play her part, the tragic Desdemona. The same Desdemona who would sing the Willow Song, as she, nightgown clad, awaits her husband's forbidding entry into the bedroom. The same Desdemona who, on her back, strangled, sings her farewell to life, professing innocence from her last breath. And then Verdi, the towering genius finishes the tragedy, composing a final duet unparalleled in the realm of western music. The dying lovers musically recall their first encounter presented in the first act. These gifted artists, surrounded by an astute production, visually as well as musically, can transform the opera house into an icy tomb, as the depths of this most horrific tragedy shakes to the bone. Finally the spell is broken. Applause! Thank god they're not really dead. The barefoot diva accepts the rose bouquet. She embraces her tenor and leaves the stage, only to be recalled again and again. Hopefully, she has the energy to go dancing. I join the throng in the IRT, feeling superior to the opera fanatics sharing my ride. I was fortunate enough to see the vulnerable side of two great singers: Pavarotti with his cheese and Katia's tender confession. We are *all* human after all, and maybe *this* fact alone brings us closer to their greatness.

Happily, KR is still alive and active in the arts. She even starred in an Italian TV comedy. She's about the same age as me—middle sixties, and I bet still a hot number! Yes, I am still in love. I also am in love with Kiri, Renee, Renata, and every other diva who can move me to tears. And yes, mother Met, I love you too. Too demanding a mistress for me, I rejected thee to rejoin the audience. But I possess wonderful memories of that time and place. I hope my descendants cherish my autographed record as I do now.

Katia signed , *To Bob with love, Ricciaelli 80.*

The End