

**Arguing With Himself:
Mark Lamos and the Anatomy of Directing Mozart's *La finta giardiniera*
at New York City Opera**

by

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to the memory of my beloved aunt, Dianna M. Holcomb, who generously and lovingly supported me and my educational pursuits all of my life.

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Abstract

Opera has long been the dominion of singers, composers, and conductors. Opera scholarship has been produced largely by music historians, musicologists, and ethnomusicologists. Recently, the trend is changing in opera studies to include those artists chiefly responsible for mounting productions: opera directors. These studies, however, have focused primarily on critical reflections on the director's final production rather than the rehearsal practices and directorial methods employed to foster a production to opening night. As the scope of opera scholarship is expanding to include performance texts, a study detailing the day-by-day, moment-to-moment challenges and triumphs of an opera director in rehearsal shall provide greater clarity and appreciation of the often ineffable craft of directing for the stage.

The resume of director Mark Lamos includes productions on Broadway, the Metropolitan Opera, and a Tony Award for the Hartford Stage under his leadership. His 2003 production of Mozart's *La finta giardiniera* for New York City Opera was an ideal choice for documenting a rehearsal process since Lamos endeavored to reimagine the opera Mozart originally composed.

First, this study provides the relevant historical context in which Mozart wrote *La finta giardiniera* in 1774-75. Second, the rehearsal log captures Lamos

working with the entire production team beginning with the first company meeting through Final Dress Rehearsal. The log is inspired methodologically by ethnographic fieldwork and participant observation reports produced in the social sciences to gather information and make meaning of a cultural event, namely, an opera director at work. The log of nineteen rehearsals is divided into three chapters that include the early rehearsals to stage the production concept, “stumble” and full run-throughs, and technical and dress rehearsals. Each rehearsal day is subdivided into three sections that introduces the rehearsal themes (Exposition), records the real-time proceedings of each rehearsal (Development), and analyzes Lamos’s directorial choices in the context of other directors faced with similar artistic challenges (Recapitulation). Lastly, the Conclusion includes critical reviews of Lamos’s production, an analysis of Lamos’s directing methodology, and considers how my study contributes to a nascent field in opera scholarship.

Chapter 1

Introduction

The singers, understudies, stage managers, the rehearsal pianist, and the associate conductor all wait eagerly for director Mark Lamos to respond to the problem at hand. The rehearsal has come to a standstill, and all realize the import of the moment. The course of the entire production of Mozart's *La finta giardiniera* at New York City Opera might weigh on this one decision facing the director. Knowing he cannot stall any longer, Lamos put his face in his hands and exclaimed, "I feel like I'm fighting with my own brain trying to figure out what I did." Mark Lamos, and many others before him, have tried to "figure out" precisely what directors do. Opera directors, however, have not attracted the same attention as the directors of film and theatre. This is why it is important to capture Lamos "fighting with [his] own brain" as a way to enhance an appreciation of the artistry of directing opera.

The art of directing for the stage is difficult to document. Most practitioners are hard-pressed to define precisely what it is they do or how they achieve satisfying artistic results. One perspective, however, is clear for most directors about their profession: it is the doing of it that most defines it. Directing is instinctive. Directing is experiential. Directing is trial and error. As a result, investigating and analyzing what directors do from day to day in the rehearsal

hall is one approach useful to formulate a clearer picture of the craft.

Performances are the most visible manifestations of what directors do, but performances represent a product more than a process. There have been quite useful efforts to capture this process in the world of spoken drama, but there has been one corner of the directing world that has been all but ignored, and that is opera directing.

Opera has long been viewed as an elevated art form dominated by composers, singers, and conductors. Opera scholarship has been largely ruled by musicologists who do not often discuss productions in their musical analyses unless they can provide helpful historical contextualization. David J. Levin comments on why this trend is ripe for change:

Academic writing on opera has not ignored questions of performance. But for the most part, these questions have been historical...What we do not possess—what musicologists and non-musicologists alike have tended to shy away from—is a sense of how stage performance can shape and even alter our understanding of opera. (6)

Since stage directors have considerable influence upon the interpretation and final outcome of an opera production, their work needs to be considered more closely as a way to “shape and even alter our understanding of opera.” There is, indeed, ample justification to consider the interpreters of the in the search for meaning in opera, but stage directors are equally influential members of the production team.

Still, very few scholars and critics, even those in the arts, know what stage directors of operas do, how they think, or what their specific challenges are. How, exactly, is their job like or unlike directors of spoken drama? Are these distinctions few or many; profound or trivial? And how does one best go about finding the answers to these questions? Since directing opera has largely been left out of most discussions of stage directing, a viable framework must be sought to foster a deeper conversation about the specifics of the craft.

An extremely useful methodology has existed for decades in the social sciences and humanities. When anthropologists, folklorists, dance ethnographers, and ethnomusicologists begin to investigate a new culture and its art forms, they rely heavily upon ethnography to document the daily lives, rituals, ceremonies, and arts of that society. These studies have proved invaluable for future research and scholarship. Because serious inquiry has not been performed extensively before, opera directing can be construed as a “new culture” to be explored in this way. This methodology, using an ethnographic approach, stands to promote deeper understanding and appreciation of opera directing. It offers a viable way to appreciate a day to day, moment to moment artistic process that has yet to be documented in a comprehensive way.

My interest in capturing an opera director in action from first company meeting to the Final Dress Rehearsal is what led me to New York City Opera to observe the production of Mozart’s *La finta giardiniera* directed by Mark Lamos. I attended full company meetings, technical production meetings, and all regular, technical, and dress rehearsals. I cast myself in a role similar to an ethnographer

who observes, captures, assimilates, and analyzes as much information as possible. My aim is to create a more complete picture of an opera director at work.

An Elusive Art

Maria M. Delgado and Paul Heritage write about the challenge of defining directing for the stage in their book of interviews with directors, *In Contact With the Gods?: Directors Talk Theatre*:

The theatre director is both the most visible and invisible of artists. Only recently considered as a separate and distinct artistic role, the director has moved into a pre-eminent, though often disputed, position in contemporary theatre...[Directing] is still a strangely undefined and shifting role with a range of responsibilities that require someone who is artist, philosopher, actor, pedagogue, procurer, coach, linguist, midwife, technician and administrator. (1)

The former director of the Royal National Theatre of Great Britain, Richard Eyre, also speaks about the difficulty of trying to capture the essence of directing when he wrote:

If discussing acting is difficult – “writing on water,” Garrick called it - imagine the folly of trying to describe directing, an activity of which audiences are largely unaware unless it's intrusively self-advertising, and which even its practitioners find hard to define and harder still to describe. It's something you do, like gardening, and, like gardening, you only learn about it by doing it. (138)

If Eyre has difficulty wrestling with defining the art of directing, he is clear about one thing: directing is about doing. It is from the doing of directing that one might understand, learn, and appreciate the complexities of an art form that has existed for several centuries, even if the profession of stage directing was formalized only much more recently in theatre history.

If a comprehensive definition of directing is elusive, there are ways to approach a definition. One way is to observe and document the very “doing” that Eyre describes. If directing is doing rather than describing, it is clear that the best way to understand the doing of it is to witness a director in action to see how the process works as it is happening in real time from moment to moment. Though the application of this methodology is nearly absent from the scholarship on opera directing, the concept itself is not new. As early as 1791, the notion was promoted that the closer one is to a subject, the more truthful and vibrant the study becomes.

An Unlikely Inspiration

James Boswell revolutionized the art of biography with his *Life of Johnson* in 1791. The book was a revelation to those who read it precisely because Boswell wrote about his subject as if in real time, as a way of coming closer to the reality of the man and his life. Nearly a century after the book first appeared, Thomas Carlyle wrote that it was “the best possible resemblance of a Reality; like the very image thereof in a clear mirror” (42). Boswell himself wrote specifically

about his plan to capture the real Johnson in the opening pages of the voluminous work:

Indeed I cannot conceive a more perfect mode of writing any man's life, than not only relating all the most important events of it in their order, but interweaving what he privately wrote, and said, and thought; by which mankind are enabled as it were to see him live, and to "live o'er each scene" with him, as he actually advanced through the several stages of his life...As it is, I will venture to say that he will be seen in this work more completely than any man who has ever yet lived. (22)

Boswell believed, perhaps before anyone else did, that one had to be up close to a human subject in order to capture the artistry, complexity, and mystery of an individual life, especially one as towering as Samuel Johnson's. This is not to say that Boswell's technique is ethnography *per se*, but it is one that can be applied to the art of directing for the stage. It is a technique that, if followed, can come closer to representing the difficult-to-define craft mentioned by Delgado, Heritage, and Eyre. To "live o'er each scene," as Boswell writes, with an opera director as he is working will allow a clearer picture to emerge about opera directing's place in the performing arts. The documentation of an opera director's methodology in rehearsals can provide a more clear-sighted reflection on the art.

A Methodology Emerges

This documentation of life in real time has been a revelation in other academic fields much closer to our own time than Boswell is. Social scientists in cultural anthropology and folklore have been, in effect, using Boswell's approach to capture life as it happens through ethnography since the early twentieth century. In fact, Clifford Geertz sounds much like Richard Eyre when he writes in his seminal work, *The Interpretation of Cultures*, that "If you want to understand what a science is, you should look in the first instance not at its theories or findings, and certainly not what its apologists say about it; you should look at what the practitioners of it do" (5). Cultural anthropologists are ethnographers who painstakingly observe, gather, and analyze data to get at the heart of what it means to be human, and they have done this all over the world. This meaning is elicited and articulated in very specific ways, according to Geertz, who, in the *Interpretation of Cultures*, develops the concept of "thick description" as a guiding principle in ethnographic fieldwork (6).

The term "thick description," borrowed by Geertz from Gilbert Ryle, essentially distinguishes between gathering data about an empirical event (e.g., a boy rapidly contracts his eyelid toward another boy, which is thin description) and providing a more specific context or meaning to that event (e.g., a boy rapidly contracts his eyelid on purpose "as a public code in which so doing counts as a conspiratorial signal;" that is, a wink, which is thick description). Geertz advocates for thick description because he views the entire endeavor of ethnography as sorting "winks from twitches and real winks from mimicked ones" (16).

Moreover, Geertz writes that the way to capture these distinctions and provide rich “thick descriptions” is that one must “trac[e] the curve of a social discourse; fixing it into an inspectable form” (19). The primary way one can “inspect” the social discourse, according to Geertz, is for the ethnographer to capture it as faithfully as possible as a written record:

The ethnographer “inscribes” social discourse; *he writes it down*. In so doing, he turns it from a passing event, which exists only in its own moment of occurrence, into an account, which exists in its inscriptions and can be reconsulted [and] preserved for study. (19)

It is instructive that Geertz uses the words “inscribes” and “inscription” rather than “describes” and “description.” To “inscribe” a social discourse is to write down who said what, what was said, how it was said, and the context in which it was said. To “describe” a social discourse requires only documenting that a conversation happened between one person and another. Inscription is what lends the “thickness” to any description. Inscription is also what distinguishes Boswell’s biographical masterpiece. It is a methodology that the performing arts has more recently applied to documenting directing in film and theatre to get at the more opaque aspects of its practice.

The proximity between observer and observed is another subject that anthropology has tackled, and it is worthy to consider to arrive at a useful methodology for capturing the essence of directing opera. The idea was rejected some time ago that one could conduct anthropological fieldwork as a purely objective observer. For many, objectivity is an illusion, and the promotion of it as

a methodological goal ignores the vast implications and recognition of one's unavoidably subjective view of the world. To challenge the controversial concept of objectivity, social scientists have more recently employed terminology such as "participant observation" to explain more accurately what ethnographers do.

Succinctly and simply put by Kathleen M. and Billie R. DeWalt:

Participant observation is a method in which a researcher takes part in the daily activities, rituals, interactions, and events of a group of people as one of the means of learning the explicit and tacit aspects of their life routines and their culture. (1)

The DeWalts note that "participant observation is accepted almost universally as the central and defining method of research in cultural anthropology" and has "subsume[d] the bulk of what we call field research or, as it is typically referred to in anthropology, fieldwork" (2).

Participant observation offers a way to gain the trust of the subjects and affords the appropriate proximity to gain the perceptions for "thick descriptions." If distance breeds suspicion, one must erase the distance and become an active participant in a group, even if one's primary job is also to observe. One must be close enough to observe and inscribe, to appreciate and comprehend, and to analyze and empathize. The smallest detail might yield the greatest insight.

Clifford Geertz has written that he practiced ethnography intending to capture microscopic details:

The anthropologist characteristically approaches broad interpretations and more abstract analyses from the direction of

exceedingly extended acquaintances with extremely small matters...Small facts speak to large issues. (21-23)

It is this focus on the small details that presupposes a proximity that blurs the line between the observed and the observer. Such closeness challenges any attempt to be purely objective and requires a more nuanced and specific understanding of community and culture. In this light, Geertz outlines how a participant observer with a keen eye for detail can provide information that can shift the binary opposition between “us” and “them”:

The important thing about the anthropologist’s findings is their complex specificness, their circumstantiality. It is with the kind of material produced by long-term...highly participative, and almost obsessively fine-comb field study in confined contexts that...can be given the sort of sensible actuality that makes it possible to think not only realistically and concretely *about* them, but, what is more important, creatively and imaginatively *with* them. (23)

As participant observation brings the observer and subject closer together so that they think “creatively and imaginatively” together, the curious might wonder exactly what they are thinking about. In *The Interpretation of Cultures*, Geertz and his various subjects think about the very nature and meaning of culture itself, which includes the expressive aspects of a community in their arts.

Closer to Home

If Geertz was trying to arrive at a definition and interpretation of culture that had not been put forth before, another topic that anthropologists and folklorists have thought about “creatively and imaginatively,” and which also links the social sciences with the arts, is performance.

A primary debate among those who study performance as a cultural construct is whether the focus is better placed on the play, dance, or story or *the way* in which it is played, danced, or told. In terms of opera, is it the music and production that should be studied and investigated, or the creative process by which the work was made? The best answer is “both.” In opera, there is plenty of literature on operas and performances but a dearth of material on how the production was created.

A performance folklorist who helped to bring about this shift in focus is Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett. She was dissatisfied with the fact that many field studies would explain in detail the plot, themes, and cultural relevance of a story without considering that the context of the performance and the storyteller’s particularistic artistry has much to disclose as well. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett points out that this concern existed as early as 1925 when Bronislaw Malinowski wrote:

The stories live in native life and not on paper, and when a scholar jots them down without being able to evoke the atmosphere in which they flourish, he has given us but a mutilated bit of reality.

(105)

Rarely would one consider an opera performance “a mutilated bit of reality,” but without an awareness of the specific artistic process that created the

performance, one ignores vast aspect of the art form. The way that Kirshenblatt-Gimblett attempts to rectify this in folklore offers a useful model for the study of opera:

This important feature of specialized storytelling events may explain in part why folklorists have treated narratives as set pieces and have stressed their invariant features rather than the performer's creativity in selecting the appropriate tale and in adjusting his rendition of it to each new situation. Thus, in accounts of storytelling, we generally find information about the broad cultural context of the tales and occasionally an indication or general description of the major types of storytelling occasions. Very rarely do we come across accounts of *actual* narrative events. (106-07)

Kirshenblatt-Gimblett emphasizes that the specific and informed choices of the storyteller change the story itself. Nuances that highlight a plot point here instead of there, or layers of meaning inherent in tempo and inflection, make the story a living event instead of a "set piece."

Much can be gained by studying an opera score itself or even a perceptive analysis of a performance, but the stage director's process in making the opera has to be studied as a living event as well. The product that is the opera in performance is undoubtedly important; however, emphasizing the product at the expense of the process provides a limited appreciation of one of the most complex of all the arts. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett closes her essay "A Parable in Context" with a roadmap for exploring opera and live theatre studies:

Consistent with the tenets of ethnoscience and the ethnography of communication, I have given the cognitive processes of the narrator herself a central place in the analysis (what she considers relevant, what various courses of action were open to her and how she chose among them)...The situational analysis and the comparisons reveal that the significance of a parable is not the story itself—the narrative is not an autonomous entity which encapsulates one kernel of wisdom or a single “moral”—but in the particular and variable meaning the participants give it in specific social contexts. (130)

Theatre and film directors have recently been given “a central place in the analysis” of their art forms with studies and casebooks highlighting the way in which they work, while opera directors still occupy an ancillary role in opera scholarship. It is too extreme to say that an adversarial attitude exists between the theatrical arts of spoken drama and opera, but there does remain a schism that might diminish if the process of opera directing were better understood and appreciated.

Building a Bridge

Opera directors have not typically been the subject of major studies of opera. Composers and singers have almost always been the focus since music dominates the art form. Music, however, is only one aspect of the genre. Opera had yet to be expanded conceptually when Richard Wagner wrote extensively

about “the consummate artwork of the future” and the “integrated drama.” If, as Wagner claimed, each opera has the potential to be a “*Gesamtkunstwerk*” or “a total work of art” or “a synthesis of the arts,” then the efforts and aesthetic practice of an opera director cannot be ignored. As Geertz encourages anthropologists to do, one must consider an opera director’s “complex specificness” and “circumstantiality” through “highly participative” and “obsessively fine-comb” fieldwork to improve both the understanding of opera and the craft of directing itself.

Spoken drama has recently embraced the framework of an ethnographic study of directors for the stage. A sampling of works that utilize this approach are Susan Letzler Cole’s *Directors in Rehearsal: A Hidden World*, David Selbourne’s *The Making of “A Midsummer Night’s Dream,”* and David Richard Jones’s *Great Directors at Work*. Cole and Selbourne have spent considerable time in rehearsal observing the directing process of some of the most influential and inspiring directors of the late-twentieth century: Peter Brook, JoAnne Akalaitis, Elizabeth LeCompte, Robert Wilson, Richard Foreman, and Peter Sellars. Jones’s equally valuable book studies the production books of four iconic productions and their directors (Stanislavsky, Brecht, Kazan, and Brook) to capture the rehearsal process of some of the artists most responsible for shaping modern drama in the Western theatrical world.

What these books about stage directors have in common is the dogged pursuit of their authors to define and illuminate the process of directing for the stage. If a unifying definition of directing is still elusive for Richard Erye and

others, the books listed above bring us closer to an understanding of what directors do. The same will be true of opera directing if more time and study is spent on its processes. Documenting opera directing with the same rigor and specificity as suggested by Geertz and practiced by Cole, Selbourne, and Jones will help to bring clarity to scholars and artists in both opera and theatre. In general, theatre scholars have not reached a significant understanding of the uniqueness and complexity of opera; and opera scholars, musicologists, and patrons have not focused much of their energy on the finer points of stage production. An ethnographically-inspired methodology that captures an opera director at work should provide a bridge to foster a deeper appreciation among opera and theatre scholars, artists, and patrons. This is what I hope to offer in this dissertation.

An Opportunity Arises

Mark Lamos has been a Broadway actor and director as well as the Tony Award-winning Artistic Director for seventeen years at one of the most important regional theatres in the country: The Hartford Stage in Connecticut. Lamos has also been at the helm of many operas, including the world premieres of *The Great Gatsby* (1999) at the Metropolitan Opera, *Winter's Tale* (1979) at San Francisco Opera, and *Haroun and the Sea of Stories* (2004) at New York City Opera. Lamos has won a Tony award (1989) for Outstanding Regional Theatre (Hartford Stage) and a primetime Emmy awarded to New York City Opera for a televised production of his *Madame Butterfly* (2008).

With this impressive resume, Lamos was an ideal choice to present my project to document an opera director at work. As a graduate student at the University of Michigan, I had worked closely with Lamos as an actor on plays he wanted to workshop at the university. During these workshops, I was able to experience first-hand Lamos's directing methodology and rehearsal practices. Since the plays were vastly different in period and style, Lamos was required to employ many different directing strategies to serve the plays and his vision of them. This vision was evolving continuously in the workshop setting, and we were always impressed with the way Lamos included all voices in discovering and implementing the playwrights' intentions. Primarily, the workshops revealed that Lamos was a person passionately interested in the directing process, which is why I approached him to discuss my idea of documenting an opera director at work.

Lamos was definitely intrigued, so he invited me to join him at New York City Opera as the setting for my study. Originally, I was slated to observe him in rehearsals for the world premiere of *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*, but this production was moved to the next season for administrative reasons. This did not really matter all that much, Lamos explained, because his process is basically the same for any opera he directs, and I intended that the director should be the focus of my study and not the opera itself. This is why he invited me to observe him in rehearsals for Mozart's early opera, *La finta giardiniera*, the production that was taking the place for the postponed *Haroun and the Sea of Stories*.

Despite the fact that I knew it would not be particularly relevant which opera Lamos directed, this particular Mozart opera did offer fascinating directorial issues to explore. Lamos was planning to reimagine the opera to provide a fresh view of a classic for his audiences. Moreover, *La finta giardiniera* is a relatively unknown Mozart opera, and this fact inspired Lamos to expand his directorial vision and not be hampered by expectations that frequently accompany iconic Mozart works like *The Marriage of Figaro* or *Don Giovanni*.

Lamos arranged for me to be granted access to all rehearsals from the first company meeting through the Final Dress Rehearsal. He mentioned that the only way to truly understand how opera production works would be to attend all rehearsals. Anything less, as he and I agreed, might leave one with magnificent pieces to a puzzle, but the whole picture would still be incomplete. Since I was committed to the idea of an ethnographic approach, this arrangement of attending all rehearsals was ideal for my methodology. The only condition Lamos imposed was that I could, under no circumstances, bring any recording devices into rehearsals. Opera singers' voices are protected by law, so no recordings can be made, even for solely academic purposes. This fact merely strengthened my argument that the only way to capture the work of an opera director is to document, or "inscribe" as Geertz suggests, the moment-by-moment events that trace the struggles, choices, solutions, passions, and epiphanies of the director.

"What about opening night?" I remarked. "Shouldn't I see the production as well to complete the project?" I thought it was noteworthy that Lamos left the

performance out of the discussion. He replied, “My job ends after Final Dress. Besides, I am not in town that night, anyway. On to the next job. I’ll see it later in the run.” I knew that it was customary that a director’s responsibility transfers to the stage manager for performances, but it was still a shock to know that he would not be at the opening to see the fruits of his labor.

This realization caused me to think more deeply about the process versus product discussion that is at the heart of many artistic debates. The performance is what the public and critics see to evaluate the artistic merit of a production, but they often have little insight into what made the production. The process of how an opera is produced is what I thought would be most needed to advance opera scholarship. The performance has relevancy to the success of an artistic vision, but it does not tell much about how the director formulated, refined, compromised, and delivered that vision to the audience. There are thousands of opera reviews throughout the last several centuries, but very few records exist of how any of these operas were brought to production by the stage director.

This Introduction is followed by a chapter on the history and context of the opera itself in Mozart’s time. Since *La finta giardiniera* is not among his best-known works, my Chapter 2 seeks to lay out the circumstance of Mozart’s commission, the performance and patronage traditions in eighteenth-century Germany, the reactions to rehearsals and performances of the opera, and how *La finta giardiniera* came to be considered a “new” opera to be produced in the late-twentieth century. Chapter 3 provides a character list and plot synopsis that is necessary to examine and have accessible for the rehearsal log that follows.

The log of nineteen rehearsals is divided into three chapters that include: Chapter 4, the early blocking rehearsals to stage the production concept; Chapter 5, the “stumble” and full run-throughs; and Chapter 6, the technical and dress rehearsals. Each day in the rehearsal log is organized in three sections: exposition, development, and recapitulation. These musical terms capture the essence of the goals in each section; the exposition will establish the theme, the development will explore the theme in more detail, and the recapitulation will repeat the theme with embellishments and commentary. In the exposition sections, I will provide the background and main directing concepts that Lamos contended with on each rehearsal day. In the development sections, I will present the details, challenges, and triumphs of each rehearsal in a nearly real-time format. In effect, the log is the “field report” as consistent with my methodology of participant observation and inspired by an ethnographic approach. In the recapitulation sections, I will analyze each rehearsal and expand the discussion of opera directing outside the New York City Opera rehearsal hall. Primarily, this expansion will explore how directors from other times and perspectives confronted similar issues to the ones that Lamos endeavored to resolve each day.

The Conclusion, Chapter 7, presents critical reactions to Lamos’s production, an evaluation of Lamos’s directing methodology in light of the debate about a director’s primary responsibility, and a proposal of how this study seeks to bridge the theatrical worlds of opera and spoken drama.

Opera directing deserves to be included in any discussion of the aesthetic challenges facing directors today. The process must be documented to provide viable insights to move the discussion forward. Although a definition of directing might be elusive and the art of directing might be invisible to most, the following record will provide clarity and visibility to a craft that has been largely overlooked until now.

Chapter 2

***La finta giardiniera*: Mozart's First "Flashes of Genius"**

As the letter to his mother below makes perfectly clear, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart could hardly contain his excitement about the reception his opera received after the premiere performance on January 13, 1775:

Praise the Lord! My opera was performed yesterday, the 13th, and it was received so well that I can't possibly describe to Mama all the applause. First of all, the whole theatre was crammed so full that many people had to be turned away. Then, after each Aria, there was a tumultuous storm of applause and shouts of "Viva Maestro"... Today, early in the morning, his princely Highness, the Bishop of Chiemsee, sent me his congratulations saying that the opera was beyond comparison. (Spaethling 51)

The opera that had just premiered was the three-act *dramma giocoso*, *La finta giardiniera* (K. 196).¹ Wolfgang's father, Leopold Mozart, was equally enthusiastic about the reception and reported that the performance was "a complete success." In fact, Leopold must have been confident that the performance would be received well, for he wrote on December 30 about a

¹ This number comes from the Köchel catalogue, the complete chronological listing of compositions by Mozart created by Ludwig von Köchel in 1862.

rehearsal where “the whole orchestra and all who heard the rehearsals say that they have heard no other more beautiful music, where all the arias are beautiful” (Gianturco 157). It seemed to be the pinnacle of Wolfgang’s career, as his father suggested when he wrote, “Up to now it seems that Wolfgang may have written the biggest opera of the year here” (157). It was not, however, to be the pinnacle of his career. Mozart, who had written the most beautiful music Munich had ever heard, was only eighteen years old.

Mozart first received the commission to write music for *La finta giardiniera* sometime in the summer or fall of 1774. He had been a musical phenomenon since the age of five and had written several operas by this time in Milan with modest success. The operas had not been successful enough, however, to garner professional work for the prodigy. Leaving Italy, the Mozarts returned to the city of Wolfgang’s birth, Salzburg. Operas were not terribly popular in Salzburg, for of the two primary theaters there, one was utilized mainly for visiting troupes and the other was a court theater that was forced to close by 1775. Although Mozart longed to compose operas, he did achieve some success in his hometown by composing symphonies, sonatas, string quartets, serenades, and most other extant orchestral forms. Wolfgang’s small salary of 150 florins a year, coupled with Leopold’s modest annual court salary of 250 florins, were not “remotely approaching what [Wolfgang] might have earned elsewhere as a virtuoso performer or free-lance composer” (Solomon 98). Moreover, since Mozart had known first-hand the primary musical centers of Europe as a musical prodigy, he “felt that he had exhausted the opportunities available to him in

Salzburg, in terms of both creative growth and financial reward” (Solomon 106-07). As a result, in December of 1775, the Mozarts went to Munich, where Wolfgang was to fulfill the commission for *La finta giardiniera*.

There is some dispute as to the person who actually provided Mozart with his commission. There are two likely possibilities: one was Mozart’s lifelong patron, the Prince Bishop of Chiemsee, Count Ferdinand Christoph Waldburg-Zeil, and the other was the Count Joseph Anton von Seeau, Controller of Opera for Elector Maximilian III. Rudolf Angermüller, in his authoritative *Mozart’s Operas*, attempts to resolve the debate by conveniently merging the two theories:

It is entirely possible that Count Waldburg-Zeil suggested that the young Salzburg composer write the new opera; the definitive commission would have come from the appropriate authority, in other words, from the theater intendant Seeau himself. (59)

With his commission in hand, Mozart and his father set off for Munich on December 6, 1774, for the Carnival season. Since he had received the commission earlier in the year, he traveled to Munich with parts of the opera already composed, primarily the recitatives. The arias would have to wait until the young Mozart actually met and evaluated the singers who would eventually give voice to his music. After arriving in Munich and meeting the company and His Excellency Count Seeau, Leopold wrote home to his wife in Salzburg that the opera would be rehearsed before Christmas and the first performance given on December 29. On December 28, however, an extraordinary decision was made that epitomized Mozart’s musical precocity. The rehearsal on December 28 was

so well received, Leopold reported, that the premiere performance was postponed:

[The performance] has been postponed until January 5th [1775] in order that the singers may learn their parts more thoroughly and thus, knowing the music perfectly, may act with greater confidence and not spoil the opera...As a musical composition it is indeed amazingly popular. (Anderson 253-54)

Unfortunately for vocal historians, there is only one performer known to be among the first cast, the soprano Rosa Manservisi. Despite the lack of information about the other cast members, the fact that Rosa Manservisi is in the record is fortunate because she is the singer who originated the role of the titular character, Sandrina, the garden-girl. It is known that Manservisi was a member of Count Seeau's *Opera Buffa* company in Munich from 1772 to 1776.²

The reception at the rehearsal on December 28 had been so positively received by all that a behind-the-scenes controversy emerged which seemed to irritate Leopold Mozart for its gossipy quality. The story circulating was that Wolfgang's opera, still in rehearsal, would be potentially so brilliant that it might overshadow the reception of the opera that would follow on the same night, Antonio Tozzi's *opera seria*, *Orfeo ed Euridice*. This rumor was even more to Leopold's displeasure because Tozzi himself had written an *opera buffa* the year before that was so generously lauded that the *opera seria* to follow by Pietro

² One review of her talents is from Charles Burney, a noted English music historian of the time. He was in Germany doing research for his upcoming book, *The Present State of Music in Germany, the Netherlands and United Provinces*, and Burney heard Manservisi sing in the summer of 1772. "Her figure," he wrote, "is pleasant, her voice, although not strong, is melodious, there is nothing common about her manner, she remains in tune, and never offends the ear" (Angermüller 60).

Pompeo Sales had been “killed off” and found little favor. Leopold wrote about the potentially embarrassing dilemma:

Now it so happens that Wolfgang’s opera is being performed before Tozzi’s, and when people heard the first rehearsal, they all said that Tozzi was being paid back in his own coin, for Wolfgang’s opera would certainly kill his. I do not like these bickerings. I try as far as possible to suppress such remarks and I keep on protesting.³

(Anderson 255-56)

Perhaps the impending storm was too much for the authorities because the first performance of *La finta giardiniera* was postponed again to January 13. There are other theories as to why another postponement occurred. For instance, Tozzi’s opera, *Orfeo ed Euridice*, was considered the official Carnival opera, and so it may have seemed only appropriate that this opera would be seen first before Mozart’s lighter fare. Another possibility for the postponement was the proposed visit to Munich after January 5 by Salzburg’s ruler, Prince-Archbishop Count Hieronymus Colloredo. Because Mozart was a native of Salzburg, it is probable the Prince-Archbishop would have wanted to attend his subject’s opera as an artistic diversion from matters of state. Moreover, Mozart was still technically in the Prince-Archbishop’s employ as Vice-Kapellmeister and Third Konzertmeister, so it would not be at all surprising that the Prince-Archbishop wanted to see such an important work by one of his Court musicians,

³ Put off by the possible scandal as he might have been, Leopold concluded his letter on an upbeat note by commenting that “all who have heard the rehearsal say that they have never listened to a finer composition...And wherever we go, the same thing is said” (Anderson 256).

especially a work that was garnering universal praise. Whatever the reason, Mozart's *La finta giardiniera* was to have its premiere on January 13.

Before January 13, Mozart's confidence is evident in a letter he wrote to his mother on the January 11:

Thank God, all three of us are quite well. It is impossible for me to write a long letter, as I am off this very moment to a rehearsal of my opera. Tomorrow we are having the dress rehearsal and the performance takes place on Friday, the 13th [in the Salvator Theatre]. Mama must not worry; it will go off quite well. (Anderson 258)

As can be gleaned from this letter, Mozart was involved in rehearsals and worked with the singers, although he would not conduct the performances. After Mozart concluded his letter to his mother and dashed off to the final rehearsal, conditions were ready for the opening performance.

First, a word is necessary about the stage itself. Mozart had not yet commanded the attention and respect he would later enjoy in his career as one of the most brilliant composers in Europe. This is probably why *La finta giardiniera* was not first performed at the Cuvilliés Theatre of the Munich Residenz. This was the official court theatre just outside the royal palace of the Bavarian monarch, Maximilian III. Instead, the premiere of *La finta giardiniera* took place at the Salvator Theatre of Munich. Although not part of the royal palace, this edifice did have the distinction of being the first building in Germany

actually conceived as a theater. The Salvator was modeled on the Teatro Olimpico in Vicenza, Italy.⁴

In its heyday, the Salvator Theatre hosted operas by the most respected composers in Europe and featured scenic designs by such artists as Giuseppe Galli-Bibiena, one of the most important designers of his time. However, when Maximilian III became the Duke of Bavaria in 1745, funding for the Salvator Theatre was cut. This fiscal decision undoubtedly affected its prestige, but by 1775, when *La finta giardiniera* premiered, the Salvator Theatre still made a fitting home for Mozart's opera. Indeed, two years after *La finta giardiniera* premiered at the Salvator, a new Duke of Bavaria, Karl Theodor, came to Munich, whereupon the city experienced a tremendous musical revival, chiefly led by the Mannheim orchestra. This orchestra was considered by many to be the most important and influential symphony orchestra in Europe, and the "Mannheim School" of musicians and composers have been recognized with distinction for two centuries by people all over the world.⁵

After the premiere on Friday, January 13, 1775, Wolfgang's letter of January 14 was unabashedly enthusiastic. He mentioned the "tumultuous storm of applause and shouts of 'Viva Maestro.'" He recalled how "Her Highness, the Electress⁶...called out 'bravo' to me." He also "kissed the hands of the Elector,⁷

⁴ Since the Teatro Olimpico still exists as the oldest surviving enclosed theater in the world, one can gather an image of the Salvator Theatre by visiting the Palladian masterpiece in Vicenza.

⁵ In 1778, many members of the Mannheim orchestra came with Karl Theodor to Munich and were integrated with Munich's *Hofkapalle* ("court orchestra"). This union was extremely beneficial to Mozart, who became acquainted with some members of the Mannheim orchestra on a visit to Mannheim in 1778, when he was invited back to Munich to premiere *Idomeneo* in 1781. It is certain that *Idomeneo* would not have happened at all, however, had *La finta giardiniera* not been a rousing success.

⁶ Electress Maria Anna Sophie, wife of the Elector of Bavaria

⁷ Maximilian III, Joseph, Elector of Bavaria

the Electress, and the other highnesses all of whom were very gracious to me.” And finally, he noted that perhaps the most important figure to attend, the Prince Bishop of Chiemsee,⁸ “sent me his congratulations saying that the opera was beyond comparison” (Spaethling 51).

Leopold’s letter of January 18 focused almost exclusively on the reactions of the nobility to his son’s operatic debut in Munich. He wrote that the opera was “a complete success,” that the nobility had only compliments for the music, and had offered Wolfgang “the most enthusiastic congratulations” (Angermüller 62). Such a single-minded focus on the nobility, on the part of both Mozarts, does not belie an acute sycophancy, given that one of their chief concerns in Munich was to secure favorable employment for the prodigy. For the nobility to laud Wolfgang’s opera so generously should have proved an incredible boon to his future prospects.

It did not, however. There are two probable reasons for this. The first of these had nothing to do with any particular action, but rather the inaction of arguably the most important person in Mozart’s young musical career, Prince-Archbishop Count Hieronymus Colloredo. *La finta giardiniera* was possibly postponed a final time so that Mozart’s current employer could attend. Sadly for the Mozarts, the Prince-Archbishop did not attend the premiere. One can surmise that such an obvious slight meant that Colloredo must not have been too pleased with the Mozarts’ attempts to win favor for their musical talents abroad. Colloredo had already told Leopold of his annoyance at their gallivanting around Europe to display the precociousness of Wolfgang. In fact, this annoyance would

⁸ Count Ferdinand Christoph Waldburg-Zeil, former Dean of the cathedral in Salzburg

lead Colloredo to dismiss Wolfgang, famously saying, "*Ich brauche ihn nicht!*" ("I don't need him!") later in 1777. In Munich, Wolfgang's chances of securing employment undoubtedly diminished when he could not attract His Excellency to attend his new opera. The success reported in their letters notwithstanding, the Mozarts needed another successful performance to erase the embarrassment of the Prince-Archbishop's absence. That it was not to be offers a second reason why Wolfgang's future prospects dwindled.

The second performance of *La finta giardiniera* seemed to be doomed from the start. Wolfgang was, at first, thrilled to report in his letter to his mother about the successful opening night, that "next Friday the opera will be given again." These hopes were quickly dashed when one of the principal sopranos (possibly the *seconda donna* role of Serpetta) was too ill to perform. The opera was postponed indefinitely until the singer would be well enough to perform. Mozart wrote to his wife on January 21 that the singer "had a pain in her stomach and a high fever" (Gianturco 158). He was, however, probably encouraged when it was announced that if she recovered soon enough, the second performance of his opera would take place on his nineteenth birthday, January 27, 1775. Any plan for an extravagant event to celebrate his final teenage year in the opera house was cancelled when the singer's intestinal illness lingered. Mozart's must have felt deflated, especially since the first performance had been such a success. His chance to strike was declining rapidly when the second performance of *La finta giardiniera* took place on February 2, 1775. It proved as complete a failure as the opening was a success.

Even though the soprano did, indeed, perform, she was not completely well. This forced Mozart to cut the opera in order not to tax her. This likely altered the pacing and rhythm of the performance for the worse. There is also no mention of Mozart's having the opportunity to rehearse the opera in its cut form, so it is possible that the entire cast had to make the necessary adjustments during the performance itself. Moreover, the ill singer was barely well enough to perform, and was not only unimpressive but prompted Leopold to complain, "I could write a good deal about this woman: she was dreadful" (Angermüller 63). Though Leopold could have written much more about the unfortunate singer, he promised his wife that he would relate the full catastrophe in person when he returned to Salzburg. Sadly for posterity, his potentially rich commentary on the performance was not recorded.

Wolfgang's troubles for the second performance of *La finta giardiniera* were not limited to the one ill singer. Perhaps the worst aspect of the whole affair was the location of the performance. The second performance, regrettably, did not take place at the Salvator Theatre that had housed the premiere, but at the less desirable space in the Redoutensaal. "Space" is the appropriate term, as opposed to "theater," since the Redoutensaal was more of a grand ballroom without a permanent stage. Performances instead took place on a makeshift stage in the ballroom. Even the performing space, however, was not the primary reason for the Redoutensaal's undesirability. Indeed, it was the timing of the performance that created the greatest havoc for Mozart.

The most damning evidence for the ill-timed event was actually predicted in a letter written by Leopold dated December 14, 1774, more than a month before the second performance. Leopold wrote to his wife just after he and Wolfgang had arrived in Munich that he was concerned that there was no official who could tell him at which theater *La finta giardiniera* would be performed. He hoped the opening would come sooner than later so that the opera would receive a fair hearing before pre-Lenten festivities commenced, as the Carnival would fill the streets and palaces with boisterous crowds.⁹ In short, Leopold knew that the Redoutensaal was a venue where “nothing sensible is ever performed...because no one pays any attention” (Anderson 250). And the noisy Redoutensaal is exactly where Wolfgang found himself for the second performance of his new opera with an abridged score and a sick singer.

In hindsight, there may have been no way for the Mozarts to avoid the delays that placed the second performance at the Redoutensaal. In fact, the first delay that allowed the singers more time with the music was considered a blessing and a compliment to the young composer’s abilities as detailed in Leopold’s letters about the rehearsals. The delay caused by the Tozzi episode that moved the date of Wolfgang’s opera to prevent embarrassment should Mozart’s success “kill off” Tozzi’s opera, as well as the delay imposed to coincide the opening with their patriarch’s arrival in Munich, point to the Mozarts’ powerlessness over scheduling. The final delay owing to the sick soprano could

⁹ Leopold wrote that once Carnival began “only light and short operettas are performed on a small stage, which is rigged up in the [Redoutensaal]. Here people gather in masks, here there are numbers of gambling tables and there is perpetual noise, conversation and gambling” (Anderson 250). One would be hard-pressed to imagine a less conducive environment in which to present an opera, especially one by a composer striving for future commissions.

hardly be helped as well. All in all, the second performance of *La finta giardiniera* unfolded under far-from-ideal circumstances. Still, Wolfgang's opera did receive a third performance and, better still, the work generated enough interest to give the opera future life in another incarnation.

The third performance of *La finta giardiniera* went much better. It took place after the Carnival season was over, and was celebrated by Leopold when he wrote, "God be praised, Carnival is over" (Gianturco 159). His elation was probably prompted by the news that his son's opera would be moved back to the Salvator Theatre. Specifically, the third and final performance of this version of the opera in Wolfgang's lifetime was on March 2, 1775.

There is scant information about this performance other than a record of its happening. The opera was not seen after that, most likely because the Munich Opera worked on a repertory basis and other productions replaced the young Wolfgang's work. Without an opera, and more distressing, without work, the Mozarts reluctantly returned to Salzburg. The trip to Munich had been a failure in one sense since no commissions or music tutoring were offered to either Wolfgang or Leopold. As an artistic venture, the trip was a modest success as confirmed by contemporary poet, Christian Schubart:

...I also heard an *opera buffa* by that wonderful genius Mozart; it is called *La finta giardiniera*. Flashes of genius appear here and there, though there is not yet that quiet altar fire that rises towards heaven in clouds of incense. If Mozart is not a forced hot-house plant, he is

bound to grow into one of the greatest composers of music who ever lived. (Osbourne 93)

These “flashes of genius” are what led the opera to have a life beyond the third performance, but not quite in a form that Mozart originally composed.

Several years later, while Mozart was looking for work outside Salzburg, evidence suggests that the German actor and comic bass, Johann Franz Joseph Stierle, collaborated with Mozart on an opera for the Johann Böhm traveling company. The opera was a German version of *La finta giardiniera*, reconceived as a *Singspiel* (or “song-play”) and titled *Die verstellte Gärtnerin* (“The Disguised Garden-Girl”). Briefly, a *Singspiel* is a genre of opera that alternates between spoken dialogue and musical pieces, similar to operettas and American musicals that developed later. Mozart had to cut, adjust, and adapt his Italian work to fit both the German language and performance style. This *Singspiel* actually became more popular than the original Italian version and was performed numerous times during Mozart’s lifetime. The first performance was likely in Salzburg, and others occurred between March 28 and May 19 in 1780, when Böhm’s company was in Augsburg. Since no playbills have survived, there is not much known about these performances. They must have been at least fairly well received since other performances followed in successive years. The opera was performed under the title *Sandrina oder Die verstellte Gräfin* (“Sandrina, or the Disguised Countess”) in Frankfurt on April 2, 1782, and again in Frankfurt on September 12 with the title *Die edle Gärtnerin* (“The Noble Garden-Girl”). The only other performances recorded in Mozart’s lifetime occurred in 1789, just two

years before his death, one of them in Frankfurt on April 30 and another in Mainz.

All of the performances of *La finta giardiniera* after the initial three in Munich were the German-language *Singspiel* versions originally adapted by Mozart, Johann Böhm, and Johann Stierle. The German version was the only version of the opera to be performed for nearly two hundred years, until a fateful event in 1978 shocked Mozart scholars and opera buffs.

It has been conjectured that during the tour of Germany of the *Singspiel* version, Mozart lost the original Italian setting of act 1 of *La finta giardiniera*. While this is uncertain, what is certain is that the complete and original Italian score of *La finta giardiniera* did not exist when Mozart died in 1791.¹⁰ Soon after his death, several biographies of Mozart were written and publishing houses battled fiercely to produce complete editions of his work. No matter how exhaustively scholars searched for the missing act, these complete editions did not contain the original Italian *La finta giardiniera*. It was not until 1978 that a complete Italian score of *La finta giardiniera* was discovered in a library in Moravia, Czechoslovakia.

Once the complete score was rediscovered, there was an outcry to publish it as soon as possible. As a result, the *Neue Mozart-Ausgabe* (New Mozart Edition), as the official complete music works of Mozart publication, published in its entirety the Italian *La finta giardiniera* as edited by Mozart

¹⁰ It is well known that Mozart was buried in a common grave and likely had few mourners present for his funeral (both were consistent with Viennese customs of the time). This might tempt some to believe that the lack of an exhaustive search for the missing act 1 was a result of his unremarkable passing and fledgling interest in his work. What the record actually demonstrates is that Mozart's popularity rose exponentially only after his death.

scholars Rudolf Angermüller and Dietrich Berke. In effect, a new Mozart opera was born in the twentieth century. *La finta giardiniera*, in its complete Italian form, is basically a new Mozart opera in terms of the Mozart canon known today, which is a delightful temporal paradox for audiences and critics alike.

Many companies throughout Europe and the United States staged productions of the “new” opera and have continued to do so. In the late 1970s, such companies aimed to enliven tired repertoires. Scholars were intrigued by the notion of producing a fresh Mozart work. As with many rediscovered classics, the question of quality of the work was eschewed in favor of its historical import.¹¹ Most critics are charitable to Mozart and claim that the chief problem with the work is the libretto and not the music.

Hermann Abert, author of the classic work in Mozart scholarship, *W. A. Mozart*, claims that the music in *La finta giardiniera* demonstrates “Mozart’s desire for greater psychological and dramatic depth” but that it “would be wrong to speak of it in the same breath as *Le nozze di Figaro*” (330). Primarily, Abert claims that Mozart’s lack of maturity is more as a dramatist rather than as a musician:

Admittedly, his later mastery shines through at various points...[and] it is impossible to imagine them as the work of another composer, yet this very fact demonstrates that it is possible

¹¹ Imagine how many productions would be produced globally if a new Shakespeare play were discovered, no matter how the work compared to his other masterpieces. Once the novelty wore off, however, and a detailed scrutiny produced an unfavorable critical evaluation, the work might be relegated to a list of “lesser” Shakespeare plays such as *Timon of Athens* or *King John*. This is, in brief, what appears to have happened to *La finta giardiniera*.

to be a gifted and accomplished musician long before one becomes a musical dramatist. (330)

What Abert feels *La finta giardiniera* lacks dramatically that *Le nozze di Figaro*, *Così fan tutte*, and *Don Giovanni* possess in abundance is character development and depth. In *La finta giardiniera*, “Mozart wrote not entire parts but only individual arias” (331) that are not connected to one another dramatically nor with the recitative dialogue, while the latter works present fully integrated and complex character studies that evolve throughout the entire opera. This is why his dramatic gifts in *La finta giardiniera* are seen most clearly in the long act 1 and act 2 finales where the plot moves quickly and the characters can be more easily contrasted. The slow, reflective, and monologue nature of the arias “placed greater demands on his artistic understanding,” (338) and he was not yet “able to grasp the interplay of comic and tragic motives in all their depth and truth” (339). To achieve this synthesis would require a new operatic form as well as maturity he did not possess until later in writing *Don Giovanni*. Still, his prodigious skill was not to be denied, and Abert notes that Mozart’s “wealth of invention and sheer originality” transformed a genre:

In writing [*La finta giardiniera*], Mozart took his first tentative step on a road that was to lead to *Le nozze di Figaro*. He was loath to treat deep-seated emotions as no more than a source of ridicule, and wherever his librettist allowed him to do so, he emphasized these emotions with all the demonic ardor of his soul, breaking down the barriers of Italian *opera buffa*. (339)

For all his praise, Abert does imply a criticism of the libretto Mozart had to work with in the comment, "...whenever his librettist allowed him to do so." More typical is the harsh evaluation of the libretto from Charles Osborne, who writes, "The libretto foisted upon Mozart was by far the poorest he had yet to grapple with" and was "a clumsily-written, confused and confusing pot-boiler" (94). The music, on the other hand, is frequently praised even when it is not compared favorably to his later masterpieces. Most comments seem to agree with the poet Christian Schubart's comment upon seeing the work firsthand that the piece contains "flashes of genius...here and there." A masterpiece, as is generally agreed, it is not, but a masterful musicianship is present that foreshadowed what was to come. Carolyn Gianturco sums up this sentiment by writing:

Wolfgang's subordinate position with regard to eighteenth-century opera may be said to have ended as he is now in possession, at least in embryo, of all the techniques which he will employ in his most mature theatrical efforts...his equipment is complete and needs only adequate opportunity to be put to good use. (166-67)

Since Mozart did not have "adequate opportunity" to develop the opera further with only three performances, current productions by innovative and intelligent directors can bring the work greater clarity and appreciation. Rudolf Angermüller suggests this when he writes:

La finta giardiniera remained a passing attraction [in 1775]. It has been left to present-day productions to reveal Mozart's inventiveness and imaginative power and to recognize the

psychological and dramatic depth of his handling of the subject.

(68)

Angermüller's words could not be more accurate in light of Mark Lamos's directorial vision for *La finta giardiniera* to explore more thoroughly than before "the psychological and dramatic depth" of the opera.

Chapter 3

Synopsis of *La finta giardiniera*¹²

Dramatis personae:

Don Anchise (tenor), *Podestà* (Mayor) of Lagonero, in love with Sandrina.

The Marchesa Violante Onesti (soprano), beloved of Count Belfiore; believed to be dead, she is now working in the service of the Mayor, disguised as a garden-girl under the assumed name of Sandrina.

Count Belfiore (tenor), lover of Arminda, formerly the lover of Violante.

Arminda (soprano), the Mayor's niece, a noblewoman from Milan, formerly in love with Ramiro, but now betrothed to Count Belfiore.

Cavalier Ramiro (mezzo soprano), Arminda's rejected suitor.

Serpetta (soprano), chambermaid of the Mayor, with whom she is in love.

Nardo (bass), in reality Roberto, servant to Violante, now in the service of the Mayor as a gardener; in love with Serpetta.

Preface

In a fit of jealousy, Count Belfiore had stabbed his beloved, the Marchesa Violante Onesti. Believing that he killed her, the Count fled. Violante sets off

¹² The following is slightly modified from Rudolf Angermüller's synopsis of *La finta giardiniera* in his book, *Mozart's Operas* (60-62).

with her servant, Roberto, in search of him. They are both taken on as gardeners by the *Podestà* (Mayor), she under the name of Sandrina, he as Nardo. The *Podestà* soon falls in love with the beautiful garden-girl and neglects his housekeeper Serpetta, who loves him and is soon pursued by Nardo. The knight Ramiro, who is staying with the *Podestà* as a guest, was once in love with Arminda, the *Podestà's* niece. However, she had sent Ramiro packing and became engaged to Count Belfiore.

Act 1

All the characters await the arrival of Arminda, whose betrothal to Count Belfiore is to be celebrated with a great banquet. Each of the characters expresses his or her feelings: Ramiro is tormented by unrequited love, Sandrina broods on her fate, Nardo sees himself spurned by Serpetta, and the *Podestà* declares his love for Sandrina. Sandrina is evasive and tells Nardo that she intends to leave to escape from the *Podestà's* unwanted attentions. Ramiro laments the fidelity of women, Sandrina that of men. Nardo is dismayed by Serpetta's dismissive attitude and hard-heartedness. Arminda then arrives and inquires whether her bridegroom is well-mannered. Belfiore arrives and praises Arminda's beauty. She calmly informs him that, if her husband is unfaithful, she will personally take him to task.

Serpetta refuses to remain in the house a moment longer, since she is being overworked by Arminda. Nardo has overheard Serpetta's complaints and confesses his love for her. She turns him down. Sandrina enters and bewails

her fate. Believing her to be the garden-girl, Arminda tells her that she is going to marry Belfiore. Sandrina is so shocked by this revelation that she faints.

Arminda calls on Belfiore to help, leaving the unconscious Sandrina with him while she goes in search of her smelling-salts. On returning, Arminda encounters her earlier lover, Ramiro, while Sandrina and Belfiore also recognize one another. All express shock and mutual embarrassment.

Belfiore attempts to persuade Sandrina to reveal her true identity as Violante. She begins by denying who she is, but then forgets herself and reproaches him for his infidelity. He falls to her feet in remorse. The rest of the characters rush in and heap Belfiore and Ramiro with reproaches. Belfiore is overcome with embarrassment, not knowing whether to choose Sandrina or Arminda. The act ends in confusion.

Act 2

The second act begins with the fallout of the four lovers reuniting unexpectedly. Ramiro reproaches Arminda for preferring Belfiore for reasons of social prestige. Belfiore enters looking for Sandrina, and he sees Arminda instead and pretends it was she that he was looking for all along. She sees through his deceitful disguise and leaves in anger, though she confesses she still loves him. Serpetta and Nardo enter and he courts her in Italian, French, and English, and she seems to submit to his entreaties, but she is playing along only to mock him later.

The scene moves to a garden where Sandrina and Belfiore enter followed shortly by the *Podestà*, eavesdropping on the lovers. Sandrina privately admits that she still loves him, despite herself, but she showers Belfiore with reproaches. He begs her to recall their former love, but she, surprisingly, denies that she is Violante. Confused by her denial, Belfiore offers a long and tender apology to Sandrina and tries to kiss her hand while she moves away. She arranges it so that Belfiore takes the hand of the eavesdropping *Podestà*, and both react in shock. The *Podestà* again declares his love for Sandrina, and again she is evasive and exits.

Ramiro interrupts and enters with a warrant for the arrest of Belfiore for the murder of Marchesa Violante Onesti. He demands that the *Podestà* launch an inquiry. The *Podestà* announces that the wedding between his niece, Arminda, and Count Belfiore is off, which gives Ramiro renewed hope at winning Arminda for himself. Sandrina enters to defend Belfiore, knowing the only way to accomplish this is to reveal her true identity. She soon declares to everyone that she is the Marchesa Violante and that she was merely wounded by Belfiore and not killed. No one believes that she is Violante, and they leave the couple alone. Belfiore once again confesses his love, but she insists again that she is not Violante and only pretended to be in order to save him. She exits. Belfiore is confused and dismayed.

Serpetta reports that Sandrina has fled, but she tells Nardo that Arminda has had her abducted to the nearby woods in order to prevent her from interrupting Arminda's wedding with Belfiore. The scene changes to a dark,

rocky, and deserted spot. Sandrina is in a state of despair and seeks refuge in a cave. All the other characters enter looking for Sandrina. In the darkness, the *Podestà* stumbles into Arminda, Belfiore into Serpetta. Both men believe they are speaking to Sandrina, but only Nardo recognizes her. Ramiro is determined to tear Belfiore from Arminda's arms. A scene of general recognition and deep embarrassment ensues. There are reproaches on all sides. Sandrina and Belfiore lose their reason, believing themselves to have been turned into mythical beings.

Act 3

Returning to his estate, the *Podestà* dismisses first Serpetta, then Arminda, who insists upon marrying Count Belfiore, and finally Ramiro, who comes to demand Arminda's hand in marriage. In a nearby garden, Belfiore and Sandrina are lying asleep. They awaken, cured of their madness, and recognize each other. Sandrina lends an ear to Belfiore's wooing and both exit to arrange a hasty wedding. While the others are still haggling, Sandrina and Belfiore enter and announce their nuptials. Feeling guilty that she wronged Sandrina, Arminda asks forgiveness and offers her hand to Ramiro. Serpetta finally relents and offers her hand to Nardo. Only the *Podestà* is left behind, determined not to marry until he has found another Sandrina.

Chapter 4

Rehearsal Log: Staging the Concept

First Day: September 2, 2003

Exposition

The first day of rehearsal of Mozart's *La finta giardiniera* directed by Mark Lamos at New York City Opera was a full feast.¹³ Unlike the subsequent days of rehearsal, the day began for Mark Lamos with two preliminaries before moving on to work on the opera itself—a company meeting and a Technical Production meeting. First, Lamos attended the Full Company Meeting led by Associate Artistic Director for NYCO, Robin Thompson. At this meeting, the company gathered for introductions and small talk, a dramaturgical sketch of the opera, and, most significantly for Lamos, the director's presentation where he detailed for the company his directorial vision and concept for the production. The latter was especially significant as the company was eager to hear the thinking behind

¹³ The rehearsals and performances of this production occurred when New York City Opera was located in the Lincoln Center complex at the New York State Theater. Amid overwhelming financial difficulties and poor Board oversight, the company was forced to leave Lincoln Center in 2011 and produce a reduced season of productions at various venues throughout New York City, as is still the case as of this writing. Although the announcement to leave Lincoln Center was a surprise, the financial decline and mismanagement of the company had been evident for years. During the last years of occupancy at the New York State Theater (now the David H. Koch Theater after Mr. Koch's \$100 million pledge for renovations and operational endowment), the company's production schedule was reduced from twenty productions a season to just five. With New York City Opera's heyday long in the past, this rehearsal log of a production in the early twenty-first century has, arguably, even richer historical import.

one of the new productions of the season. The term “new” might be misleading, however.

New York City Opera billed *La finta giardiniera* as a “new” production, but the “new” was relative. This NYCO billing of “new” production is one of the primary differences between theatre and opera companies. Most theatre companies start from scratch every season and present new productions (with the notable exception of touring Broadway hits that travel the country). For instance, even if the Oregon Shakespeare Festival is producing *Romeo and Juliet*, it will likely not be the same *Romeo and Juliet* produced years before. A reconceptualization of a production is virtually compulsory. In fact, this process is what gives directors a welcome challenge. How, for example, does one produce *Romeo and Juliet* with vitality and freshness that does not betray the original or resemble the many previous productions by the same company? Furthermore, this allows the theatre to challenge the best of its artists to create evocative and dynamic productions and avoid the hackneyed, commercialized condition of many Broadway musical productions, for instance.

This is precisely why Lamos wanted a second chance to direct *La finta giardiniera*. Since Lamos had directed *La finta giardiniera* before in a more conventional manner in 1996, he would now be given the opportunity to expand upon more radical ideas he had initiated when he directed the opera at Florida Grand Opera earlier in 2003.¹⁴ He wanted to demonstrate that he had fresh

¹⁴ Both new and repertory productions are usually recast, however, so there is some reason to claim that the audience will not see the “same” production, even if all the production design values are the same. It is a given that a singer has the potential to dramatically affect a production, even while wearing the same costume as a previous singer. This issue of recasting became an issue later in this rehearsal process when

ideas that would breathe new life into an old work and avoid, at all costs, rehashing a work that deserves thoughtful reinvestigation. Essentially, Lamos's production endeavored to fulfill the imperative offered by David J. Levin in his excellent and provocative book, *Unsettling Opera*:

Over the course of the last thirty years...it has become clear that a new production of a work offers more than a neutral or uninflected platform for singers; it can afford an opportunity to explore and revise our musical and dramatic assumptions about a piece. Any production can unsettle opinions that had become settled. This, it seems to me, is a good thing. (xvii)

The only drawback for an opera company producing many reimagined productions is the enormous cost of opera. Opera is simply too expensive for any company to produce a complete season of brand new productions, but NYCO leaves room for the experimentation that is essential to its mission. Therefore, an opera season at NYCO is usually comprised of productions that have been produced before as part of the company repertory with a smattering of “new” productions.¹⁵

Lamos, therefore, had the best of both worlds at NYCO. He was directing for a company that welcomed a healthy measure of new productions each season, and, more importantly, embraced in their mission “imaginative” and

Lamos was called in to observe the staging of *Madame Butterfly* that he had directed several years before with a different singer in the lead role of Cio-Cio San.

¹⁵ These “new” productions often come from other venues, but have never been produced at New York City Opera. This particular Mark Lamos production of *La finta giardiniera* would be new to NYCO, but not a “world premiere” since the production had been first performed at the Florida Grand Opera in Miami a few months before in 2003.

“adventurous” productions.¹⁶ Despite this favorable environment and ethos, Lamos was still going to have to confront the public and professional critics who, at times, become tetchy when someone attempts to reimagine the work of an iconic composer such as Mozart.

The notion of a director wrestling with the complexities of a classic is quite common, whether in the world of spoken drama or opera. Although Mozart would have his purist defenders, Lamos’s method of reinvention has an impressive array of supporters as well. For instance, English theatre and opera director, Jonathan Miller, believes that it is not only right to reexamine a classic but vital to the performing arts: “Miller denies any notion of an official or canonical production because it is in the nature of reproductive art that it should undergo successive transformations and renewals” (Delgado and Heritage 9). More specifically, as to preparation, Lev Dodin, Artistic Director of the Maly Dramatic Theatre of St. Petersburg, provides an excellent explanation of how a director should approach a classic:

When we deal with masterpieces, if they are perfect, they are closed. To hear the music of that play relevant to your own self, and your own self relevant to the time, makes something that happens to you adequate to that masterpiece. All the same, even if you deal with this masterpiece, you have to create this play anew

¹⁶ The NYCO’s Mission Statement reads, partially, as follows: “Imaginative, adventurous, and accessible, New York City Opera was founded with the purpose of making great opera available to a modern, wide-reaching audience. For more than sixty years, since Mayor Fiorello La Guardia established its reputation as “The People’s Opera,” the company has stayed true to its original promise: introducing generation after generation of young singers who are stars in the making, bringing the public exciting new works and compelling, fresh interpretations of classics, acting as a champion for American composers and performers, and ensuring that today’s opera, and tomorrow’s, can be a part of every New Yorker’s life.” (New York City Opera)

because a living thing can only be created by yourself and is thus quite new. (Delgado and Heritage 76)

During the Director's presentation at the company meeting, Lamos specifically detailed how he was going to be "adequate to that masterpiece." Once he delivered his presentation, the company appeared very intrigued, as they dispersed, to meet up with Lamos later in the day. Lamos had to shift gears quickly as he proceeded from the theoretical world of his presentation to the deeply practical worlds of the technical production meeting and the first rehearsal.

The main practicalities addressed at the technical production meeting related to how many set and lighting effects that were altered or cut in Florida could be revived in New York. The meeting had little to do with implementing the original design elements since they already existed in the Florida production, but Lamos wanted to elaborate and tweak some of the choices because he was in a new venue with new technicians to solve the problems that had arisen in Florida. In the end, it was a bit of a cat-and-mouse game, with the technicians wanting immediate answers and Lamos wanting time and leeway to explore more possibilities in rehearsal.

This desire to explore certainly is a favorite pastime with Lamos, but the first rehearsal, like the technical meeting, focused almost exclusively on practical matters. The singers had had their parts for some time, so Lamos needed to run-through the recitative (or "recit" sections) as early as possible to determine whether cutting would be necessary for both plot and pacing. This would be the

major activity for the first day, although there was some time remaining to begin staging the prologue and overture. On the surface, the music and the blocking for these sections were not complicated, but Lamos was aware that these sections had to be handled with sensitivity because they provided the entire framework for his new vision of the opera since recitatives contain the main plotline and establish character relationships.

Development: Company Meeting/Technical Production Meeting/First Rehearsal

First Company Meeting

The rehearsal hall was buzzing with excitement as all were convening for the first company meeting for the upcoming production of Mozart's *La finta giardiniera*. Lamos was exchanging greetings and hugs in the center of the room where the first company meeting was about to begin. About half of the cast had just worked with Lamos a few months earlier on the same opera for the Florida Grand Opera, so there was an easy familiarity among them. Others would be joining the New York production, but Lamos did not discriminate between the two groups. As the laughter and chatter began to fade, the meeting began with a proclamation from Robin Thompson, Associate Artistic Director for New York City Opera: "Of course, as we all know, opera is really about the hair." Thompson made this facetious remark as he introduced the head of NYCO's wig department, Monserrate Alvarez. Many of the hallways in the labyrinthine paths backstage and underground at NYCO were crammed with huge storage bins for

wigs. The bins seemed to be standing in defiance of every New York City fire code, and people needed to turn sideways and hug the wall in order to let anyone else pass. This became obvious when people tried to find the rehearsal hall before the meeting officially began.

The first person to arrive before the meeting began was the celebrated soprano and NYCO veteran, Lisa Saffer. She introduced herself and said that she was playing “what’s-her-face.” There is no doubt that she was feigning forgetfulness about the name of her character. Even though she had not been in the cast of Lamos’s Florida production, she had played the role before in Lamos’s 1996 production and had been preparing for months for this current production. Her remark more likely came from the modesty of having to admit that she was playing the titular character, Sandrina, the garden-girl (*giardiniera*). Saffer, in her rehearsal demeanor, would time and time again debunk the stereotype of the *prima donna*.

However, this is not to say that Saffer was devoid of external concerns. Her first action upon coming into the rehearsal room was to go and look at the pictures of the production also staged by Lamos recently in Florida. Her immediate concern seemed to be how revealing her costume was to be, to which she replied to herself, “I can handle that.” Saffer, petite as she is, would easily avoid any criticism of her physicality in a new age of body consciousness of opera stars.¹⁷

¹⁷ Body image has become a growing concern in the opera world with the advent of the relatively new medium of video and DVD close-ups. Critics and some audiences do not seem to be as uncritical as they once were about large women playing ingénues or heroines. This issue came to a head (or stomach) when renowned soprano Deborah Voigt was unceremoniously fired from a Covent Garden production of *Ariadne*

As the others arrived, the half hour before the official starting time was filled with the excited meeting, greeting, and reuniting of friends and colleagues. Some were engaged in spirited conversation, and some seemed particularly interested in the same Florida production photographs that had caught Saffer's attention. It was obvious that some of the same people in the photographs were also in the rehearsal room because several of the cast members had followed the production to the "new" staging in New York.

After Thompson made his comment about the interdependence of opera and hair, he went on to discuss the harried nature of the upcoming season. He suggested that there would be "more volume of activity" than in previous seasons. Five operas were currently in rehearsal, and eight would be rehearsing concurrently when *La finta giardiniera* would be in technical rehearsals. The number of people coming and going emphasized the need for heightened security. Everyone would be issued ID cards that they would need to show every time they entered the building. Thompson mentioned that the ID cards were a new feature of the company in response to the 9-11 attacks. A large public edifice like Lincoln Center, he felt, was not immune from being a terrorist target. All nodded soberly at the realization that opera and politics were inextricably linked in New York City.

auf Naxos when she could not fit into "the little black dress" the director wanted for her character. The issue became fodder for internet commentators and the press and was summed up in a mocking tribute to the most famous opera maxim, "It ain't over till the fat lady *slims*." See Robin Pogrebin and Anthony Tommasini, *New York Times*, March 9 and 10, 2004, respectively.

After Thompson concluded discussing the administrative issues, he introduced Cori Ellison, the company dramaturge.¹⁸ Ellison began by giving brief biographical information about Mozart at the time he wrote *La finta giardiniera*. Mozart was eighteen when he composed the work, and Ellison received a few chuckles when she said that while “we were worried about the prom, [Mozart] wrote *La finta giardiniera*.” She mentioned that this work is particularly significant for musicologists because many cite the opera as the time when Mozart turned from child prodigy into a master composer. Other critics have not been as impressed with the work as a whole, but definitely see, as Ellison stated, “square inches of brilliance that foreshadows his later genius.” Ellison agreed that one should accept the opera at face value and resist the temptation to compare it to the masterpiece Mozart/Da Ponte¹⁹ operas (i.e., *Le nozze di Figaro*, *Don Giovanni*, *Così fan tutte*). *La finta giardiniera* loses its significance only in comparison to Mozart’s other mature works, but it would be viewed as a work of the highest achievement if it had been written by a lesser composer. Moreover, the question of maturity is always thorny with Mozart since he did not live long enough to fit the conventional conception of maturity. Mozart’s “mature” works were written in his late twenties and early thirties as compared to, say, the mature works of Verdi written in his sixties and seventies. Still, there is a level of precocity in *La finta giardiniera* that Ellison felt was worth mentioning. The opera

¹⁸ Dramaturgy is a highly contested term within theatrical circles. A widely agreed upon job description has not been forthcoming, especially in the United States where many administrators view the position as superfluous. Be that as it may, Ellison’s job was to inform the company of the historical and musicological significance of *La finta giardiniera* as well as to be in charge of the supertitles that would guide the audience through the libretto to follow the plotline.

¹⁹ Lorenzo Da Ponte was the librettist for the three most well-known Mozart masterpieces. As sublime as Mozart’s music is in these operas, few believe that they would have attained their level of esteem without Da Ponte’s witty, stylish, and dramatically effective libretti.

has, Ellison said, “significant emotional depth” and is “incredibly and fully human.”

Ellison went on to elaborate on why *La finta giardiniera* is a unique gem in contemporary Mozart scholarship. Essentially, Mozart wrote two versions of *La finta giardiniera*, one in Italian and one in German. The original Italian version was commissioned for the Munich Carnival of 1775. Unfortunately, *La finta giardiniera* had only three performances, and the Italian version was never performed again in Mozart’s lifetime. Mozart did, however, write the German *singspiel* version (*Die verstellte Gärtnerin*, better known as *Die Gärtnerin aus Liebe*) in 1779-80. The German version remained the only complete version for nearly two centuries. Act one of the Italian version was lost until the 1970s, when a rediscovered copy was found in Moravia, Czechoslovakia.

Ellison continued to elucidate another enduring mystery of the opera and something of particular interest to musicologists, which is the authorship of the libretto. Originally, the credit for the libretto was given to Raniero de Calzabigi²⁰ and Marco Coltellini, but this was later revised. The leading candidate for the true librettist is Giuseppe Petrosellini, who actually wrote the libretto for another *La finta giardiniera* by another composer, Pasquale Anfossi, a year or so before Mozart began his own work. The main plotline, of a disguised aristocratic woman working as a gardener’s assistant struggling with bouts of madness, is similar to other Petrosellini libretti. It is a plot undoubtedly inspired by the class-conscious and overwhelmingly popular novel *Pamela* by Samuel Richardson that was

²⁰ Raniero de Calzabigi was among the most natural choices of librettist probably because he was a major figure in opera at the time. He most famously collaborated with Gluck in the 1760s and wrote the libretto to Gluck’s groundbreaking *Orfeo ed Euridice*.

sweeping Europe at the time. Ellison concluded by noting another influence associated with the opera, which was the *Sturm und Drang* movement in German literary and music circles in the 1770s. It has been suggested that Mozart wrote some *Sturm und Drang* compositions to capture the extreme emotionalism opposing the extreme rationalism of the Enlightenment.²¹ With this in mind, it is no wonder that Mozart was attracted to a plot saturated with sentimentalism and madness. Apart from the sentimental story, madness was primarily the theme that had inspired Lamos to embark on a second production of the opera.

Lamos was introduced after Ellison made her concluding remarks, and all were anxious for the director to talk about his new vision for the opera. Lamos began by commenting on his first production (performed at Glimmerglass in 1996, as opposed to the more recent Florida production a few months before), which was inspired by “Jane Austen landscapes” and the thematic notion of “sense and sensibility.” Overall, the production was “pretty” and “fairly conventional.” Lamos said he had no interest in directing the opera again unless he would be free to explore other interpretations and possibilities. His new approach for the opera actually came from another Mozart masterpiece, *Don Giovanni*.

Lamos had always been intrigued by *Don Giovanni*'s classification as a *dramma giocoso*, which is, essentially, the mixture of *buffa* (comic) and *seria* (serious or heroic) in one opera. Lamos admitted his attraction to the genre

²¹ Classical compositions of the time associated with *Sturm und Drang* were written in a minor key to reflect challenging or depressing feelings. Mozart scholar A. Peter Brown writes, “The *Sturm und Drang* was also employed effectively in Mozart’s operas, where arias and ensembles in the minor mode underscore the drama. In the early operas, these include passages in...Sandrina’s (No. 21) and Ramiro’s (No. 26) arias in *La finta giardiniera*” (496).

because complexities are already present and do not have to be forced by a meddlesome director. Furthermore, such complexities allow for directors to “explore deliciously endless possibilities.” Of course, *Don Giovanni* is the best known *dramma giocoso* in the Western operatic cannon, but Mozart wrote another one called *La finta giardiniera*.

The primary theme of *La finta giardiniera* which Lamos wanted to investigate was madness. Since madness was a subject that preoccupied Europeans at the time of the opera's creation, Lamos wanted to return to this theme. He sought “a more direct and candid approach to madness” that would anchor the production. Lamos knew he had to start with the music. It was important that he ground his ideas for a new production in Mozart's own work so he did not run the risk forcing his vision on the opera. The production concept was not to be independently derived, for as a trained musician himself, Lamos knew intimately the evocative power and interpretive cues that exist in music. Therefore, while listening to the opera again several times, he had been most captivated by the madness scene in act 2 where both main characters lose their grip on reality. Madness was not employed in this opera as a metaphor in the sense of feeling crazy or acting crazy—people, indeed, go mad. Lamos felt that, “Mozart was grappling with the energy of emotion,” the kind of emotion that progresses from rationality to irrationality to psychosis. It is not surprising that love is the culprit and catalyst for this tremendous release of energy that literally disrupts the characters in the opera.

Lamos mentioned the wealth of scientific information coming out of the Enlightenment that suggested that love could be located in the body as an actual, physiological entity. Therefore, if a part of one's anatomy could be located where love was wreaking havoc, then it stood to reason that giving medical attention to the "diseased" region could heal this physical ailment. This medicinal remedy for madness is what gave Lamos the framework for his restaging of the opera.²² The production would treat madness with a seriousness not explored in most productions that use the theme primarily for its comic possibilities. This focus on madness would be the vital "starting point" referred to by Argentinian director Jorge Lavelli:

There is always a starting point which I think is of paramount importance and which sets the meaning of the performance, what it is in itself. A *mise en scène* means not just reciting a text, but presenting a view of what is written: it is another writing, or a re-writing of what is written. This is important if the meaning...is to be understood; it will give meaning to [the] performance. (Delgado and Heritage 114)

Lamos then revealed to the company his grand scheme that would provide the meaning for "another writing" of the opera. The opera was to be set in an asylum or exclusive spa where people come to recover from the ravages of love. Lamos was deliberately non-specific in terms of location, and wanted the

²² This focus on the intersection of science and art demonstrates, perhaps, a kinship between Lamos and the physician and opera director, Jonathan Miller, who is known for "...providing vibrant, observant productions which have paid a sharp, scientific attention to the mechanisms of human behavior whilst exploring the work through the social and cultural context that generated it" (Delgado and Heritage 159).

audience to wonder “are we in an asylum or a sanitarium or a spa?” His research indicated that the purposes of these locations had often overlapped, so he was happy with being non-committal and letting the audience decide for themselves. To convey visually the therapeutic framework, the set would contain such paraphernalia as hydrotherapy tubs, hospital gurneys, and a chaise lounge for “talk” therapy. This “spa” would be under the supervision of the Head of the Spa, complete with a lab coat and clipboard charts. The Head of Spa would be a silent role played by an actor. His silence, however, would not limit his ability to manipulate and comfort the “patients.” The “patients” were to be delusional enough to believe that they are people other than themselves, namely the characters from Mozart’s opera. For instance, the *Podestà* (Mayor) is a resident of the spa who is under the delusion that he is a Mayor who should be treated with respect worthy of his superior position. The Marchesa Violante has, in reality, been stabbed by her lover and has come to the spa to recover, chiefly through means of floral-arrangement therapy: hence the garden-girl of the title. She now goes under the name of Sandrina to protect her identity and scandalous past.

For the purpose of clarity, Lamos had written a prologue to introduce the characters, which would be projected on the supertitles before and during the overture. Furthermore, during the prologue the characters would act out the “pre-story” of who loves whom and who spurned whom. This prologue was the most effective way to establish the metatheatrical device of the City Opera singers playing characters at the spa who would be playing the characters as

described in the *dramatis personae* of *La finta giardiniera*. Lamos then read the prologue for the company. The text of the prologue caused much laughter and all seemed to enjoy especially the self-referential use of the supertitle box (“see here for further information”). By the end of the prologue and the vibrant opening piece, the characters would be suitably frenzied. To remedy the situation, Lamos said that the Doctor, who is Head of the Spa, would instruct orderlies to administer medication to soothe and anesthetize the patients. Amid the laughter, Thompson closed the first company meeting with the question, “If happy pills are going to be handed out, can the artistic staff have some?” Lamos promptly replied, “Certainly!”

Technical Production Meeting

The main purpose of the first technical meeting was to clarify all artistic decisions that would affect the technical aspects of the production. The technical staff of NYCO was present along with both assistant directors, but the costume designer was the only designer present. The set and lighting designers had completed most of their work as a result of the Florida production, so their participation would be primarily during technical rehearsals. The costume designer was present because this would be the one design aspect that would be altered the most from the Florida production. Lamos wanted to explore further options with the costumes, and it was presumed that costumes were the most practical design aspect to revamp. The main discussion during the meeting,

however, was the possibility of including in the New York production technical enhancements that were cut from the Florida production.

A major technical feature that Lamos wanted to include was photo projections that would be illuminated on an upstage wall during a crucial aria. Sandrina, the garden-girl, has a nightmare, and the text suggests that monsters and other phantasmagoric beasts haunt her to the point of distraction. Lamos wanted to project a series of horrific pictures to manifest her inner demons visually to convey an expressionistic nightmare. Unfortunately, in Florida the projector “made too much noise, and the audience couldn’t see the projections.” As a result, the projections had had to be cut, but Lamos said, “I’d like to try it here [in New York].” Lamos was then told that the technical staff did not know about the projections. He was surprised until he was informed that the people in Florida sent only those items to New York that were actually used in the final Florida production. In other words, if any aspect of production had been cut in Florida, it had not been sent to New York. Lamos seemed undaunted and instructed his First Assistant Director, Sam Helfrich, to try to track down the pictures “that should be on a disc or something” from the staff in Florida. The New York technical director mentioned that projections are tricky, but they were all in favor of trying to execute the effect.

Still, the technical staff seemed a bit apprehensive during the meeting. They were completely professional and willing to help Lamos wherever possible, but they appeared slightly uncomfortable with the experimental nature of the production. This had nothing to do with artistic choices or ideological differences,

but rather with the physical aspects of production. The NYCO technical staff often feels a tremendous amount of pressure because they have to organize, build, mount, tear down, and remount enormous and cumbersome sets for eight operas on a repertory schedule. With this in mind, it is no wonder that they were uneasy. The more experimental the production, the more clarification would be necessary for all to do their jobs well. Many technical decisions are made before the first rehearsal begins, so the negotiation often becomes about how much freedom a director will have to invent once the technical staff begins their work simultaneously with the actual rehearsals. There was no unwarranted tension in the room, but there was a bit of a cat-and-mouse game. The technical director pushed gently for definitive decisions as Lamos skillfully avoided premature commitments. A characteristic remark from Lamos was that they “shouldn’t answer these questions too severely.”

At the end of the meeting, both Lamos and the technical staff seemed to have achieved their larger goals once a few compromises were established. One such compromise was that Sunday would be kept open for rehearsals to work out changes that occurred during each week. Lamos replied in an obviously lighthearted tone, “I know we only have four-and-a-half minutes to rehearse this fucking thing, but do we want to give up our Sundays?” All laughed as the meeting adjourned with Lamos’s question left unanswered.

First Company Rehearsal

After a short greeting, Lamos announced to the cast that there were two main objectives for the first rehearsal. First, he wanted to play all the recitatives and “decide what was in and what was out,” and second, he wanted to begin staging the overture. Similar to the many advance decisions in the technical department, the shaping of the text was not to be an ongoing process. Textual decisions had to be made on the first day.²³ Lamos had already cut the opera for the Florida production, but he wanted to go over the cuts with the current cast to see if there were any problems or suggestions. As is common in opera, the cast had already learned their parts before the rehearsal process began, so they had time to consider what worked and what was problematic.

Unlike spoken drama, in opera there is simply no time for a singer to learn her part during the scheduled rehearsal period. This can be both a blessing and a curse. On the one hand, there is no fumbling for lines or carrying of scripts, which invariably impedes progress in play rehearsals. Furthermore, since the language in a typical opera repertoire is mostly non-English, native-English speakers cannot spend rehearsal time learning correct pronunciation and diction. On the other hand, if a singer has learned the part so well that it becomes set before the rehearsal process begins, then the director has to deal with

²³ This is a stark reality in opera as opposed to spoken drama, especially for directors who have a longer resume in the theatre. Actors and directors can discuss, experiment, and implement changes and cuts in, for instance, a Shakespeare play until just before technical rehearsals. The integrity of the plot, character development, and pacing all influence textual alterations in the theatre and decisions to cut and then restore and then cut again can be made with minimal consequences. Plot, character, and pacing are all, indeed, essential to an opera as well, yet cutting a recitative section, for instance, can have tremendous implications. Since music is primary in opera, a cut in text also involves a cut in music. The music will have to then be spliced to accommodate the cut, but what if the keys are different? What if different instruments are required at the beginning of the cut than at the end? A decision to cut in opera will affect the conductor, the musicians, vocal coaches, who must rely on a set score as soon as possible as they are all rehearsing simultaneously to the staging rehearsals. This is why Lamos had to stipulate that the decisions to cut had to be made only on this first day and was a primary goal to be accomplished before anything else would be done.

preconceived notions that may conflict with the freedom to explore. Still, it is hard to argue with the virtue of preparedness, and French-Canadian director, Robert Lepage, extols this blessing, which was apparent at Lamos's first rehearsal:

There is a notion of discipline that is very different in opera than in theatre. It changes the whole tempo of writing, performing and rehearsing...So the first day of rehearsal you're sitting in a room and just listening to [the singers] going through all this music technically, and the room is filled with emotion. In theatre people read on the first day and it takes weeks and weeks to get a sense of emotion. You have to discuss and decide what it is, and then go fishing for it. In opera what's extraordinary is that however technical the performers are, the emotional subtext is indicated by the music. The music is supposed to be the guideline of the emotion. It's amazing how in opera you start at plus five, you don't start at minus ten like we do in theatre. (Delgado and Heritage 140)

With a few exceptions, there were no objections to the cuts in the libretto. The process for the singers for most of the rehearsal was to sing through the recits and Lamos would ask, "Questions?" after the scene was finished. If there was a question, Lamos would discuss the cut and see whether the singer had a convincing argument for restoring the section. For instance, after one particular recit, Saffer wanted to talk about leaving a section in. Lamos was completely open and heard Saffer's justification. She felt that the cut removed something

unique about her character that would be hard to establish in the existing text. Saffer was prepared to sing it through, which she did with little difficulty. This meant that she had already thought about this moment or that her skill was so impressive that she could pick up an unfamiliar score, sight-read her part, and sing as if she had rehearsed it for days. In the end, Lamos was convinced and the section was restored. To assure Lamos that the impetus to restore the cut had nothing to do with wanting more to sing, Saffer explained the section was “textually interesting, but musically scary.” In other words, Saffer was admitting that she was more concerned about defining her character than about wrestling with musically challenging material.

Lamos returned to going through the rest of the recitatives. At one point, he stopped and talked about the difficulty of some of the recitatives. In *La finta giardiniera*, information is often repeated several times. Lamos was frustrated about what to do with the repeated information. “Why are we hearing this again?” he offered rhetorically. Once he was sure that the integrity of the plot was sound, Lamos suggested to “err on the side of cutting.”²⁴ He reached a final compromise with the cast when they wanted to add to the text by saying, half seriously, that “Anything you add, you have to take something else out.” The cast smiled at the notion that their editorial services would be required for any future tinkering with the score. Saffer summed up this mood when she replied

²⁴ Cutting was an arduous process for this production. Lamos became part playwright and part producer when he went about shaping the text. The playwright in him thought dramaturgically and noted that the purpose of the recits was to keep only “what was absolutely essential” in order to “save time and move the story forward.” In this case, the “story” was a much more complicated prospect than the traditional presentation of the opera. The producer in him thought about the unconditional three-hour time limit at NYCO. Most operas are three hours or less. If a performance exceeds this time limit, then the company has to pay musicians overtime and deal with other administrative concerns. Therefore, Lamos was considering many things at once while he edited the opera.

sarcastically to Lamos, "You can take out my first aria!" Amid laughter, the decision was made to leave the aria in with Saffer's facetious objection noted.

Another moment that highlighted the uniqueness of this production came when Saffer raised a question about a particular cut. She was not quite sure about what to do with the moment when Lamos reassured her that the moment would play well by saying, "In *this* production, it works." This response emphasized the fact that a reimagined production concept invariably influences musical or textual decisions. Some purists prefer that an opera or a play not bear the weight of a director's personal vision. English playwright Arnold Wesker addressed this in a lecture on this topic, which he called "the Führer complex":

It is a madness which has elevated the role of the director above the role of the writer. The stage has become shrill with the sounds of the director's vanity; it has become cluttered with his tricks and his visual effects. No play is safe from his often hysterical manipulations. (Delgado and Heritage 8)

Interestingly, Wesker called his lecture "Interpretation: To Impose or Explain," which seems to broach the idea that a director can provide a clear explanation for a play rather than a more self-serving imposition.

Lamos, in particular, had a vision for the opera that, he hoped, would illuminate Mozart's genius. Most of his decisions would be justified by referring to the score and not made to satisfy Lamos's need to impose upon Mozart. Of course, Lamos would often elicit the help of the conductor, the conductor's assistant, the rehearsal pianist, his own assistant directors, and every member of

the cast. Lamos never wanted anyone to think that he had a monopoly on good ideas. He was expert at making everyone feel that he was leading this production with strength and conviction while at the same time creating an environment that made everyone feel comfortable offering suggestions. Lamos established this collaborative approach on the first day, and Lisa Saffer was the first one to avail herself of it when she expressed concerns about her character.

The primary question discussed between Lamos and Saffer was about the maturity and intelligence, or lack thereof, of Sandrina, the garden-girl. Saffer explained that a conventional thought about Sandrina is that she “doesn’t know the hearts of men.” She resisted this notion and felt that Sandrina was not so innocent and was more aware of her plight. On the surface, the character does have typical ingénue qualities, but Saffer would not be satisfied with any surface interpretation. Lamos agreed and replied that her innocence stems not from a lack of understanding, but rather, “It is from her being damaged that makes her seem lost.” This comment referred to the fact that Sandrina had been stabbed by her lover and left for dead. This is why she chose to disguise herself as the garden-girl to avoid scandal and trauma. In this guise, she would have the time to recover from the physical and emotional scars she received from Count Belfiore, the former lover who stabbed her in a jealous rage. Lamos assured Saffer that he believed her character’s fragility did not derive from Hamlet’s “Frailty, thy name is woman” cliché. He wanted to pursue the more psychologically complicated issue of facing demons brought on by the abusive action taken against her. This line of thinking buoyed Saffer. She went on to

explain that she felt Sandrina's abuse "contributes to her dark humor and occasional sarcasm." Lamos enthusiastically agreed.

After this exchange, he continued discussing recitative cuts in the score. The constant struggle was how to keep the pace smooth and the character development intact despite the cutting. Another challenge was adjusting the score whenever a decision was made to restore what was previously cut. In spoken drama, this process is relatively easy. A cut is made or restored, and an actor memorizes the new text, or omits the parts of it that have been removed. In opera, changes can affect the pitch or key. For instance, if there is a certain key at the beginning of a cut and another one at the end, then the key must be adjusted for a smooth transition. This can prove difficult for both the singer and the musical staff. At one point, the associate conductor, Neal Goren, was finessing one difficult key change, but it was taking more time than expected. Lamos said, "I don't care about the keys!" in a way that made it clear that he did care but could not resist the fun of giving Goren a hard time.

This proved to be the hallmark of Lamos's style. He could always be counted on to make a comment that would lighten the mood, create laughter, and remind all who were present that serious work was not always synonymous with a serious atmosphere. His most obvious and characteristic remark of the day came just before a mandatory break. Lamos made it known from the start that he agreed with the musicologists and opera reviewers who had criticized the quality of the libretto. Lamos believed that it offered fascinating material to explore, but that the libretto was not a literary masterpiece. This subject would

come up often as he and the singers finished analyzing the recitative sections. Lamos jokingly summed up his feeling about the recitatives by saying, "With recits like this, who needs arias?!"

After the company returned from their break, they gathered on stage to begin the staging of the overture. The overture would be crucial to establishing Lamos's directorial concept of the production. During the overture, the prologue text was to be projected on the supertitles box explaining the "spa" setting and the metatheatrical device of the cast playing wounded characters in turn playing psychodramatic roles (Sandrina, Count Belfiore, Count Ramiro, et al.) as written in the opera itself. Therefore, the utmost clarity would be required in the staging that would show the concept in action.

The first difficulty to overcome was the tempo of the overture. The conductor is the person ultimately responsible for setting the tempo, but he was not present at this rehearsal. Goren gave his best estimate of what the tempo would be and Lamos was satisfied enough to continue. This issue may appear trivial on the surface. Perhaps a slight change in tempo would not alter the staging that much, but Lamos wanted as much clarity from the musical staff as he expected from himself in justifying his unconventional concept. As became more and more clear, Lamos's blocking would be heavily influenced by the music. Lamos would regularly time entrances, gestures, and blocking to the precise rhythm of the music. Thus, the simple question of tempo made for an important discussion.

The next issue that required clarification concerned the invented character of the Doctor or Head of Spa. Since this character was the only one not in the original opera, Lamos took the time to explain his thoughts to the actor, Nick Wyman. Since Lamos had invented the character, he felt more at liberty to provide answers and guidelines that he might have resisted with the other established characters. He never wanted to impinge on the singers' right to define their characters, but the Doctor needed to have an initial framework.

Lamos explained that the Doctor was primarily interested in furthering science. He would use the "patients" as needed, but his manipulation of them was never to be malicious. On the contrary, the Doctor was to be the principal source of compassion and comfort for the patients.²⁵ Lamos told Wyman that one of his main concerns was to "ease the patients' pain." This could be accomplished by either physical or emotional treatment. Perhaps hydrotherapy would be appropriate for one, whereas another might need to vent frustrations verbally from the chaise lounge. The Doctor was to walk the fine line of gaining the necessary information to further his scientific inquiry while not being too manipulative of the patients to achieve preconceived goals. Lamos realized that he was providing Wyman with a wealth of information, but he did not want him to

²⁵ This point was extraordinarily poignant for Lamos to make in light of the evolution in the views of madness by society. Lamos demonstrated his sensitivity to this topic by having the Doctor represent a view of the insane as worthy of empathy and kindness. During Mozart's time, the insane were treated much more severely. As a reflection of the Age of Reason, the mad "were gathered up and incarcerated in precisely the same way as lepers had been in an earlier time" (McClary 82). This action was, in part, "motivated by the modern state's obsession with surveillance" and "its need to define and control behavior" (McClary 83). These "freaks" were sometimes put on display "to exhibit those whom [the state] defined as deviant...to protect individuals from their own potentially fatal excesses (McClary 83). Lamos's inventing the character of the Doctor as the epitome of compassion puts in sharp relief our radically altered views of how to perceive and treat the mentally disabled.

feel pressured to play everything discussed in the first scene. To clarify this, he cautioned Wyman not to “reveal the character all at once.”

Once the initial concerns over tempo and the Doctor were addressed, the blocking of the overture went smoothly. The singers who were in the Florida production helped remind Lamos of the previous blocking so they would not have to start from scratch. On the other hand, Lamos did not merely want to reproduce what was done in Florida. He repeated several times that the Florida production would be used as a “schematic” or “matrix” from which to work and then changes could be explored from there. This was crucial because it demonstrated that Lamos was sensitive to the needs of the performers. The members of the Florida cast would be able to explore and refine what they had done before, and the new cast would feel an ownership of the production because the weight of the previous production would not be imposed upon them. The arrangement seemed to exploit the best of both worlds. All performers in opera and spoken drama know that the most tedious rehearsals are blocking rehearsals, but this tedium was essentially removed as a result of the “schematic” of the Florida production. There would be no slavish devotion to what came before, so all the performers would have the freedom to explore.

As the overture staging continued to the end of the rehearsal, Lamos, at times, demonstrated what he wanted from the performers in terms of where to go and what to do. The purpose of his demonstrations seemed to be as much for himself as any of the singers. It was as if Lamos needed to physicalize his own direction so that he could determine whether or not the movement made sense.

Perhaps it was Lamos's training as an actor that fostered his need to put the blocking in his own body to test its viability for other performers. To be sure, this display was not required for every movement. Lamos would only leave his seat when there was confusion or when he wanted to experience the influence of the music on the blocking himself. It is not an exaggeration to say that Mozart controlled the movement as much as Mark Lamos did.

Recapitulation

Director Michael Bloom has crystallized the primary task of Mark Lamos, on the first day of rehearsal, by writing:

A director is a medium—between actors and text, between the text and the physical elements, and of course between the producer and the production...Ultimately, the director is a creator of communities—someone who can recognize talent and inspire the very best from other artists, lead them but welcome their contributions, and make everyone feel they are important partners.

(5)

Fresh from the challenge of the Florida production, Lamos knew he had to immediately create a healthy community of artists if he expected them to be as devoted as he was to his unconventional vision. From the company meeting to the technical review to the first staging rehearsal, everyone involved seemed to have a mixture of excitement and concern about the uncharted road ahead. Lamos was careful to prepare well for his initial presentation, for he needed to

establish that his ideas were substantial and well grounded instead of, as Arnold Wesker rails, “hysterical manipulations” to puff up a “director’s vanity.”

Lamos’s presentation revealed that this production would be a serious exploration of Mozart’s themes and fulfill Mozart scholar Rudolf Angermüller’s declaration that it is up to present-day productions to “recognize the psychological and dramatic depth” of the opera (68). Lamos wanted to demonstrate the flexibility of the opera without breaking the opera into pieces. He realized that, in line with the view stated by Harold Clurman, “The theatre is not a museum, a treasure house to commemorate ancient wonders; it is a vehicle for the manifestation of the joys and travail of our existence...But it always begins with the *now*” (165).

Opera company artistic directors realized some time ago that hiring directors from the theatre world helped facilitate the “now-ness” and provide a thorough dusting off of long standing repertoires. John Higgins wrote presciently of this more than thirty-five years ago when Royal Shakespeare Company founder Peter Hall was brought to Glyndebourne to direct *Don Giovanni*:

Opera has to be kept up to date and open to the latest influences of the non-lyric theatre. The days of the roughly blocked-out productions with the star arriving at the last moment to give his or her regular interpretation are numbered. Opera is in danger of appealing to a small specialist audience and should go out and attempt to attract the theatre public. (47)

Lamos, whose previous work had been primarily from the “non-lyric” theatre, was not shy about having a point of view as to what *La finta giardiniera* had to say about the complexities of love and madness and how the two can be inextricably linked. Michael Bloom articulates the position of having such a strong point of view:

The director artist must have something to say. It need not be a social or political statement, and it should not replace or subordinate what *the play* has to say. It simply means a passion for communicating with a unique point of view. Having something to say is having a reason to tell a story, a reason to direct. (11)

In the end, Lamos needed to demonstrate to both actors and producers that he would be an able and thoughtful medium between them and the production.

Lamos revealed two surprising choices on this first day that might have saved him and others from unwanted stress in future rehearsals. Both choices related to Lamos's adding complexities and layers of reality to an already complex and fanciful libretto. The first choice was to dispense with using the dramaturge in rehearsal. Cori Ellison revealed in her presentation a firm grounding in Mozart scholarship and offered useful information to better contextualize the original opera. Lamos surely would have benefited immensely by having another set of eyes and ears to foster his new vision for the opera, especially a person, presumably, with an expertise in history, musicology, production history, and libretto structure.

For example, had Ellison been included in a more substantive way in these early rehearsals, she might have provided Lamos with more extensive information and scholarship on the complex subject of madness in opera, the topic he wanted to explore more than any other. There is such a wealth of material on madness in opera that it is curious that Lamos did not have Ellison broach the subject with the cast.²⁶ This might have led to fascinating and clarifying discussions for the cast and provided an academic foundation to draw from when they felt particularly confused, which was often.

Though it was not in Ellison's job description to attend daily rehearsals, Lamos might have arranged for her to observe now and then and to provide relevant scholarship on Mozart, specifically.²⁷ As Ellison was part of the NYCO staff and had to write supertitles and program notes for eight operas in a repertory schedule, Lamos probably would have found a challenge in working

²⁶ Scholars Shoshana Felman and Susan McClary have written on madness within feminist critical theory and musicology, respectively. Felman's essay, "Women and Madness: The Critical Phallacy" (1975), reminds her readers that the word "hysteria" is derived etymologically from the Greek word "uterus" and was perceived as an exclusively female complaint. She then cites both historical and literary examples of how madness was constructed psychologically and linguistically by men and concludes that women need to reinvent language to "establish a discourse the status of which would no longer be defined by the phallacy of masculine meaning" (20). McClary's chapter, "Excess and Frame: The Musical Representation of Madwomen" (2002), is more specific to opera and its historical conception of the madwoman. McClary traces how three madwomen in three operas from three different centuries "are offered up as spectacles within the musical discourse itself" and that "their dementia is delineated musically through repetitive, ornamental, or chromatic excess" (81). The music surrounding them, McClary observes, is more "normative" and represents reason to protect the others from "contagion" (81). A theatrically curious performer such as Lisa Saffer would have found such scholarship useful and fascinating in relation to Sandrina's mental breakdown in the act 2 finale and subsequent recovery in act 3.

²⁷ For example, in his definitive biography *W.A. Mozart*, Hermann Abert writes, "Mad characters are by no means unusual with the composers of *opera buffe*, but they are invariably comic figures that librettists, too, tended to use to parody *opera seria*" (333). Abert then explains that Mozart "betrays a sense of parody" in *La finta giardiniera* by often disrupting the "emphatically tragic note" of a scene as "the orchestra again teems with all manner of motifs familiar to Mozart's listeners from the *opera buffe* of the period" (333). Briefly, Abert provides a musicological justification for Lamos's notion that the madness in *La finta giardiniera* is not to be ridiculed or understood as the stuff of parody, but rather was built into the structure of the music by Mozart himself. The cast, conductors, and vocal coaches might have explored with Lamos just how this could have been manifested more clearly on the stage.

with her schedule, but many problems might have been avoided had she attended some early rehearsals.

The second unexpected choice was that the first rehearsal centered on cutting the recitatives and establishing initial staging, rather than on a more detailed discussion of the opera, the characters, and the director's concept. This discussion seemed all the more crucial since the singers had been working on their parts for quite some time and surely had already developed some thoughts about their characters. In opera, the singers must come to the first rehearsal with most, if not all, their music thoroughly prepared. During this preparation, first (and probably second) impressions of their characters are assuredly developed. Given that Lamos added another layer of ontological confusion to each character, it is strange that he did not elaborate on his earlier presentation during a "table talk" session with the cast that is so common in spoken drama's first rehearsals.

The recitatives did need to be cut, but Lamos's favoring the practical over the theoretical meant that rehearsals would begin with a lingering uncertainty among the cast about their characters and the undefined world they inhabited. In the end, rehearsals should prioritize practical issues, but the uniqueness of this production warranted a more detailed sketch from Lamos about his theories. And "sketch" is the appropriate word, for Lamos certainly did not have a completed canvas at this point to initiate a discussion. Peter Hall preferred this approach when he prepared for *Don Giovanni*:

I go into a production with a set of points I want to put across rather than a total solution. Almost certainly some of them will be dropped...I still have no idea at all how I will stage certain parts of the opera, including the Act I finale. But for the moment there is nothing more to be said until we all assemble on stage on the first day and share out responses. (Higgins 78)

As he did so well later in the process, Lamos might have discussed his sketch immediately and then elicited the cast to “share out responses.” This would have brought everyone closer together on the first day, as Michael Bloom suggests, to “make everyone feel they are important partners.”



Second Day: September 3, 2003

Exposition

The second day of rehearsal began by continuing the staging of the first ensemble (“*Que lieto giorno*” [“What a lovely day”]).²⁸ Sam Helfrich, the First Assistant Director, took charge and laid out the movements from the Florida “schematic.” Helfrich regarded this approach as unconventional and a slightly “weird way of working.” Productions that are revived usually employ an assistant director who was attached to the original production to facilitate the restaging. The assistant works from the official production book in an effort to create a production as faithful as possible to the original. Obviously, new productions

²⁸ This and all subsequent English translations of the Italian libretto are by Gery Bramall from the booklet produced for a full recording of *La finta giardiniera* in 1992 by Teldec Classics International.

employ a director and an assistant (or more than one) who create the production book for future usage that contains the pertinent staging and production notes.

La finta giardiniera was a production that conflated these two methods. Helfrich did, indeed, work from the Florida production book (and the archived video) to block the movement, but Lamos was also present to add or subtract liberally so that it had the markings of a new production being created specifically for New York City Opera which many would expect to be innovative and surprising.

The audience was always on Lamos's mind, as for most directors, but was especially the focus for these early rehearsals as the production concept was being first laid out for the cast. Lamos's attempting such a radical departure from the eighteenth-century conception of the opera showed that he anticipated that the audience would be particularly sophisticated and intelligent. Lamos would undoubtedly share the opinion of opera director Robert Lepage about current opera and theatre patrons:

They have gymnastic minds now and a gymnastic understanding of things. People have a lot of references that we don't think they have, because we say, "They're not educated." They have to live in this world and understand all these abbreviations, codes, symbols, and colors. So they want to use these muscles that they have.

And we tend to pretend that they're idiots. (Delgado and Heritage 148)

Lamos respected the "gymnastic" minds and understanding of the audience so much that he was willing to turn the opera on its head to share with them the

depth and resiliency of Mozart's early work. Moreover, he knew he had to accomplish this by a thoughtful and detailed production concept rather than by cheap theatrics and thin ideas.

The last thing that Lamos wanted was for his production to be considered gimmicky. Many directors have had inspired ideas about a new way to see an old masterpiece, but few such productions have been consistently regarded as artistic successes. Most criticisms have been that such productions have "cute" or even inventive ideas but fail to add anything inspirational to the original. Lamos worked in a way that was often whimsical, but he was very serious about testing the limits of artistic interpretation and fulfilling the mission of NYCO, celebrated for its adventurous programming and innovative production style. If his production of *La finta giardiniera* were to fail, it was going to fail by earnestly interrogating a work of art by an iconic composer and not by relying on a hollow and superficial stunt.

Lamos was wise to focus almost exclusively during this rehearsal on making the production concept as comprehensible as possible for the audience, but he also had to develop that concept with the cast with equal clarity. This task became a constant source of both joy and worry for Lamos. The second rehearsal was to move along smoothly and productively through the staging of the prologue and overture, but the rehearsal would both begin and end with the cast needing clarification about the nature of their reality in the world of the spa. They asked many pertinent questions that Lamos was prepared to entertain but was not able, in the time allowed, to provide answers that satisfied the cast

completely. Despite this, he was encouraged that the cast was so motivated to have the discussion in the first place. It was, apparently, not a discussion typical in an opera rehearsal. The content was more consistent with actors discussing a play rather than singers working on an opera.

Lamos was heartened that the distinction between these two approaches was blurred in this rehearsal because it can often be sharp. One of the best examples of articulating the distinction between actors and singers is provided by the English director Declan Donnellan. Donnellan has directed many operas, and he has discussed working with singers who do not share an actor's approach to a role:

I was just giving notes today to the singers and they were being very accommodating and writing them all down. But it was very interesting because they clearly saw each of the notes as one more thing to remember as opposed to being part of an organic whole of their stage life. Actors, on the whole, want notes and they want to know about their performances. They come up and talk to you about it because they know that all this is a rich stew. But it's very funny talking to singers because their emotional commitment is often to the music as if it were different; it shouldn't be separate but unfortunately it very often is....For singers [notes] are simply "changes," whereas for an actor they become part of a performance, and they're not "changes"—it's work....So it's very strange saying to a singer "I wonder if you might try X, Y, Z on

certain lines,” and they say either, “Yes, I can do that,” or “No, I can’t do that.” That’s the sort of relationship and it’s very excluding, rather than “Let’s work on it,” which would be very much an actor’s approach. (Delgado and Heritage 88)

Development: Staging

Sam Helfrich staged the first ensemble with no complaints from the cast in terms of movement, but Lamos had to clarify character questions with the performers who were still not used to the new production concept. Saffer was particularly concerned about the context. She asked, “Do we know each other?,” referring to whether or not the inmates in the spa had any history together because their characters as written in the libretto certainly do. Saffer said that she “needed to know where to start” so that she could map out the journey of her role. Lamos balked and responded with, “I hate saying this, but let’s not worry about that today. I need to finish the prologue with the supers tomorrow, then re-think this. I don’t want to give a pat answer and then regret it later.” Lamos knew he was giving an unsatisfactory answer, and was acutely aware of the acting process being an actor himself, but other pressures, such as the supernumeraries’ (or “supers”) inflexible schedules, sometimes needed to be addressed first.²⁹

²⁹ Lamos was preoccupied with the supers because they were not as freely available as the rest of the cast. In fact, their schedules were quite restrictive. At NYCO, several core supers are involved with virtually every production in the season. This means that the same group is concurrently rehearsing and performing as many as eight operas at once. This scheduling problem is what Lamos was thinking about when he put Saffer’s question on hold. He wanted to make sure that the blocking was finished in order to work in the supers the following day. Moreover, Lamos knew that the answer to Saffer’s question might affect many crucial decisions to be made in other scenes.

Once the blocking was sketched out, it was apparent that the scene had less to do with the text and more to do with establishing Lamos's concept. This was vital because if the audience could not follow the prologue and first vocal ensemble, then the entire production might be in jeopardy. Lamos was certain that he wanted to set a strong foundation for the concept immediately rather than lull the audience into the world of the spa gradually. The audience would, therefore, have the first ten minutes or so to weather the shock of this "deconstruction" of Mozart and then be free to experience Lamos's commentary on the opera more open-mindedly. Lamos trusted his audience, especially the savvy opera crowd who attend City Opera performances regularly.

Similar to his staging of the overture, Lamos demonstrated during the blocking that he was interested in showing how physical actions express character.³⁰ One typical example was his demonstration for Matthew Chellis playing the *Podestà* (Mayor). Lamos felt that Chellis had an early opportunity to perform a movement to establish his character, specifically a movement to convey his love/lust for Sandrina, the garden-girl. On the line "sweet Sandrina will be mine" ("*Sandrina amabile pur mia sarà*"), Lamos danced what could be described as a gyrating "boogie" all the while holding a floral bouquet to his crotch to represent a phallus. This action was directed toward Sandrina to display the *Podestà's* lustful intent. Such an extroverted display of lust helped to convey his mental instability, which, in turn, helped to establish the asylum

³⁰ Despite his intellectual and theoretical approach to the opera in pre-production, Lamos knew that his ideas would not mean anything unless they could be brought to fruition on the stage and not in the program notes.

setting. The company relished Lamos's dance of the "floral phallus boogie," and his performing it with such gusto.

More subtle demonstrations followed when Lamos staged the Doctor's movements. He was particularly attentive to making those movements very specific and controlled because he was the only mute character on stage. Nick Wyman, as the Doctor, would never have the benefit of a text to motivate his movement, so he had to limit his movements to those that could be easily read by the audience. Lamos also wanted specificity from the Doctor because he knew that this character was the fulcrum of his reinterpretation. For instance, instead of just watching or reacting blithely to the *Podestà's* libidinous dance, Lamos instructed Wyman to observe the behavior in terms of its relevance to his scientific project. Lamos knew that the "audience would find [the dance] funny, but we need to see your real concern. You are terribly worried about him." If the Doctor's business onstage could not be immediately understood by the audience as conveying unconditional sympathy for his patients, then the production concept would hang from a very loose thread. Therefore, whether it was the exaggerated lust of the *Podestà* or the scientific experiment of the Doctor, Lamos continuously relied on physical movement as a primary tool for character development.

Another question of character arose shortly after staging the *Podestà's* licentious advances toward Sandrina. Saffer, playing Sandrina, was concerned as to how she would react to the offensive gestures, especially since her textual response is, "You are too gracious, you are too kind" ("*Son troppe grazie, troppa*

bontà”). Sandrina’s cordial response in the libretto, Lamos explained, was exemplary of conduct books of the eighteenth century.³¹ Lamos said that her words “were typical of a maidservant accepting the affection of her social superior with grace and modesty, despite her internal struggle.” Since Lamos’s production was about internal struggles rather than class struggles, he told Saffer that she did “not need to acknowledge the class difference, so she does not need to be polite.” The class distinction only existed as part of the delusion of the *Podestà* and not in the true relationship between the two patients in the spa. Therefore, Lamos did not have to be entirely faithful to genre requirements. Instead, he preferred to be faithful and as consistent as possible to his production concept. Still, he needed to solve the problem of Sandrina’s polite response in the text even though Saffer’s own physical impulse to the *Podestà*’s immodesty was one of disgust.

To resolve the issue, Lamos placed the Doctor near Sandrina so that he could comfort her. This staging solution motivated her to direct her line about kindness to him and have the secondary benefit of continuing to display the compassion of the Doctor. To accommodate the production concept, Lamos would often employ this technique of using the text to clarify the new world he was creating. He never changed the text, *per se*, but used it as a tool for his thematic ideas. One of the more effective uses of the text occurred at the end of the opening ensemble.

³¹ “Conduct books prescribed female behavior, limited female action, and warned of disgrace for women who overstepped the accepted boundaries” (Hager 69). Sandrina, in her servant disguise, could not demonstrate any revulsion toward the *Podestà*’s actions, no matter how abhorrent, for this would be overstepping the boundary of both her servant class and feminine behavior as dictated by the conduct books.

The text for this choral ensemble communicates the contentment and luxurious splendor of a bright summer morning in the Italian countryside (“*Che lieto giorno*” [“What a lovely day”]). The inmates of the asylum have been administered “happy pills” so that they can revel in the bucolic joy revealed in the text. Each character then privately tells about his or her romantic woe, which also tells the audience who loves whom. By the end of the ensemble, the drugs have worn off and the inmates are frustrated and cranky.³² Lamos had the inmates play out their irritation with physical activity that highlighted their instability: one shakes her hands violently, one knocks the heel of his palm repeatedly against his forehead, one jumps up and down in an infantile tantrum, etc. All the while, they were singing about contentment and joy. Lamos wanted the singers to exploit the naiveté of the text and sing with bitter sarcasm. In this production, the sentimentality and romantic resolutions inherent to a “*buffa*” (comic) overture would not come easily. Moreover, the directorial irony allowed the inmates to give free rein to their rage, which led to the introduction of the orderlies who were another vital aspect of the production. As the inmates were thrashing around the stage, four supers, as orderlies, entered and physically restrained them. The Doctor orders sedatives for all. The sedatives were administered in a perfectly timed choreography to the closing chords (chord, take cup; chord, swallow medicine; chord, throw cup overhead). The inmates

³² Mozart conveys this sense of frustration in the music even as the text repeats the lines about contentment. Fernand Leclercq explains that the first ensemble begins in the “clear and joyful key of D major” but that Ramiro’s “melancholy key of B minor,” the *Podestà*’s “carnal” G major, Sandrina’s “tortured” E minor, Nardo’s “continual variation between major and minor,” and Serpetta’s staccato music all demonstrate that “the return to D major [of] the choral ensemble give the impression of a complete lie” (13).

immediately felt the effects of the drug, and all let out a relieved sigh just after the crash of the final chord.

After the company ran through Lamos's first ensemble staging a few times, he was pleased enough to move on. He knew that he had solved many issues for the audience in the first several minutes of the opera, with the help of added supertitles. The staging of the first ensemble clarified the relationships and personalities of the inmates through broad physical business and clever adjustments to the context of some of the lines delivered. With the asylum/spa framework firmly in place, Lamos was now ready to tackle the plot itself and investigate how the overriding theme of madness could be teased out of it. Unfortunately, not all were as keen to move on, for the singers needed further guidance about the world Lamos was creating.

It was too late in the day to stage an entire scene, so the rest of the rehearsal was spent in discussion. Most of the cast were intrigued to work within the framework of the asylum/spa, but they wanted to ask some clarifying questions before getting too far into the blocking. Without their intending to, the cast asked questions that led to the first of many discussions about the nature of reality. Many in the cast were eager to engage in the discussion. Lisa Saffer set the tone by asking, "What is real for my character, and what is not real?" Julianne Borg, playing the sassy maid Serpetta, followed with the questions, "Do we know where we are? Do we realize it is an asylum?" Other questions concerned the delusions of the inmates, especially about what is real and what is delusional. What does one character believe about another's delusion? For

instance, do the others really believe that the *Podestà* is a Mayor, or do they know that this is his fantasy? These were the very questions that exemplified the difficulty of adding another layer of reality to an already fictional theatrical world. When all the characters are potentially schizophrenic, then as many as six new versions of reality enter the picture. These alternate realities must somehow be reconciled for the production concept to work.

Lamos was eager to intellectualize and entertain thought experiments, so he was happy to engage these ontological questions. In the interest of time, he gave a blanket answer and then assured the cast that the specifics would be forthcoming during the rest of the rehearsal process. He stressed that the inmates are more often that not in their delusional world and not conscious of their split personalities. He was emphatic that “every relationship has to have an utter reality. No one is playacting here.”

This lack of “playacting” stressed the need for the performers to play their objectives with the same commitment and desperation as if they were in an *opera seria* (“serious” opera). The characters are very fragile, especially so considering the asylum setting. Lamos intended to shape every moment with the understanding that each character was perilously close to a complete breakdown. This was the way in which he would be able to explore his large themes of ontological crisis and the madness of unstable romantic relationships. Every character’s motivation and stage picture would attempt to explicate these two themes. It helped Lamos that the cast, for the most part, was willing to go on

his deconstructive journey and approach their work with the requisite seriousness, which is not a given for all opera singers.

Lisa Saffer explained that there “are two breeds of opera singers.” She implied that one favored approaching a role as an actor would in a play by exploring motivation, working off fellow players, developing an “arc” for the character, etc. The other kind of singer, she said, was more like a recital singer (i.e., “show me where to stand,” “park and bark”). For the latter, the quality of sound always takes precedence over character portrayal. Saffer knew that this production, especially with Lamos’s concept, would be served better by an actor’s approach. She felt that this was true despite the fact that the recent, more “actor-ish” discussion had not resolved many practical issues. The process was what counted, and she said the discussion remained “very interesting and liberating.” She felt fortunate “to have the luxury to invent, and some singers do not even want to invent.” It never ceased to amaze her how some opera singers could be so “theatrically incurious.”

Recapitulation

The provocative American theatre and opera director Peter Sellars is no stranger to criticisms about his frequent reexaminations of established works. His defense of much of his work makes a case that Mark Lamos would agree with:

I’m stunned when people are extremely upset and feel that crucial things are missing and how could I do something that was so

aggressive against the material...that question of going against the material, “against the grain,” is very, very, very important in order to recognize the grain...This is what going “against the grain” does. It tests the material, gives the sense that it is not yet finished, that we have to keep on talking about this. (Shevtsova and Innes 213-4)

“Testing the material” was Lamos’s primary concern for the second day of rehearsal. It was important that Lamos bring the cast onboard early in the process. If the concept puzzled or alienated them now, he would have to work harder later. This is one reason why he spent so much time joining them in the performing space instead of remaining at the director’s table. This came naturally to Lamos as a former actor, yet his close proximity to them was especially useful here to demonstrate his willingness to wrestle with the concept. It was a gesture that communicated that he and the singers were on this journey together.

Many directors employ this device of connecting with the performers in the playing space, especially early in the rehearsal process. One of the most important and legendary directors of the twentieth century, Giorgio Strehler, has been emphatic and eloquent about the importance of acting with the performers one directs:

Only through the final test of the stage, only by “playing” the part or parts himself, whether for real or potentially, can the director discover that truth for which he is searching. Mere knowledge,

whether poetic or literary or plastic or phonic, is not enough.

(Delgado and Heritage 265)

Directing a generation or so after Strehler, German director Peter Stein emphasizes that it is more useful to indicate what he wants physically early so that the actors can slowly take over more and more of the movement around the stage as the rehearsals progress. When the show is ready to be performed, “The audience should have the impression that it was all invented by the actors, even the text...It’s fantastic if you can create this illusion” (Delgado and Heritage 253). In the beginning, however, Stein, like Lamos, feels it is essential to work in tandem with the performers:

As a director, you must go into these actors. You must feel as they feel. You must copy their movements. You must copy their manner of speaking...It’s what I do. I take on the movements of the actor I am watching on the stage and I follow him indicating to him how he should do it. I take his acting design and put something on it....You get in there and help him to look at what he is doing.

(Delgado and Heritage 253-54)

Lamos was quite effective using the directing technique that Strehler and Stein articulate. This was especially apparent when he demonstrated the ribald dance for Mathew Chellis as the *Podestà*. He achieved two goals at once. One result was to establish for the cast the potentially limitless expression for the production when it was in its full farcical mode. This meant that the cast would, ideally, feel free to explore their character’s physicality at will with few inhibitions.

The second more practical result of Lamos's demonstration was that the humor in the dance would both amuse the audience and help ground it in the world of the concept. The dance seemed to "go against the grain" of what might be expected from a conventional Mozartian tenor. At the same time, the action revealed the "grain" of madness in the opera that the *Podestà* would not express if he were not in the setting of the asylum and therefore not subjugated by the *Podestà*'s eighteenth-century decorum.

As effective as Lamos was with his physical demonstrations, he again had trouble explaining to the cast the intellectual foundation of his production. They did not want to move on with the blocking until they had established some ground rules for their characters in the world they were collectively creating. He added more difficulty for the cast when he chose to generalize rather than provide specifics. His defense that he could not entertain all their questions because he felt extreme pressure to be ready for the supers had been received tepidly.

As scary and frustrating as it can be for performers, this method of working is not unorthodox. Colin Blakely, who played Creon in Peter Brook's *Oedipus*, applauded his director's arguing for trust in the process:

He [Brook] obviously had his own concept, but we were allowed to experiment. In fact, he said he would tell us nothing but would only tell us what *not* to do. So we just rummaged about within ourselves, and in ten weeks came up with something to suit our requirements, and, ultimately, his too. You see, he too was looking

for the answer of how to do it, but we didn't know consciously what to look for. It all happened as we went along. (Croyden 127)

Lamos's responses to the cast might have been better received if he explained to them that the answers they wanted were to be discovered together as the process unfolded. Furthermore, he might have said that it could be counterproductive to solve all the problems at that point and lock in the solutions too early.



Third Day: September 4, 2003

Exposition

Lamos was scheduled to arrive late, for he had to attend the New York auditions for his upcoming production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in Washington, D.C. His schedule frequently followed this pattern. When one production was rehearsing, the next was in pre-production. Sometimes, he said, "It is difficult to keep two productions separate in one's creative imagination." However, he also mentioned that doing research for one production will often yield unexpected and stimulating ideas for the production he is currently rehearsing.

For instance, in his eventual program notes for *Midsummer*, Lamos wrote that the play is about "how our perceptions govern our acts and how our changing perceptions are almost never to be trusted" (Jones). This idea certainly had resonance in his outlook on *La finta giardiniera*, which focused so much on

the changing perceptions of the characters as they proceed through their therapies to unite their fractured psyches. An even greater alignment between the two productions was expressed in his goal for his Shakespeare production: “I felt strongly that this production should be about shadows” (Jones). Lamos was in the midst of preparing two comedies but preferred to examine the shadows cast by the “light”-ness of the humor. This is why Lamos would not be surprised if Shakespeare surreptitiously found his way into Mozart’s opera, if neatly adapted and carefully disguised.

As was the case previously, the examination of the shadows proved challenging for Lamos and the singers in this rehearsal as well. The production concept was still not yielding a leisurely rehearsal process. Lamos was finding his way with this partially new cast, and they were, at times, struggling with the fact that the director was on a rocky path with them rather than leading them to his destination *via* a smoother surface. In Lamos’s defense, many directors do not crave an effortless rehearsal process where the director simply gives orders to be followed. In fact, sometimes directors crave the opposite, especially in the beginning rehearsals, as explained by Eugenio Barba, founder of the Odin Theatre of Denmark:

Concretely, when I begin a production, I have first to startle myself. I must have a point of departure...that I don’t know how to handle, that confuses me and makes me feel insecure. It is an ambiguous process...It is an agonizing process for the actors, as it is for me,

because it demands an excess of work in an atmosphere of uncertainty. (Shevtsova and Innes 13)

Lamos was not as deliberate as Barba in creating “an atmosphere of uncertainty,” but he had to face the fact that his performers would continue to be inhibited by the production concept rather than freed by it if they did not deal with their confusion more directly. Thankfully, at the end of this rehearsal day, a discussion would occur that clarified many issues and, most importantly, provided the production with its unifying theme. Once Lamos had this epiphany, he began to speak more clearly and directly than he had previously. This seemed to change the atmosphere altogether as the cast was able to sense that this idea would be the anchor of the production and generate greater excitement about subsequent work.

The discussion would take some valuable blocking time, but Lamos did work through three major arias with success before the discussion started. His success would largely be the result of taking the limitations of the libretto, the mute role of the Doctor, and one performer’s lack of mobility and transforming them into assets that enhanced and solidified the production concept. The same can also be said of the discussion that led to his epiphany and the motivating words that followed.

The discussion started because the cast could not proceed in uncertainty, and it ended with a clearer sense of how each character would inhabit the landscape that Lamos had created. On balance, the discussion would be enormously valuable even considering the precious staging time it expended, for

nothing can bog down a rehearsal process more than a dispirited cast. This is why it is so essential for directors to be effective communicators—to both enliven and enlighten the cast to their contribution in the production. Director Harold Clurman, reputed to be one of the best communicators in the profession, wrote this about the importance early “talks” in rehearsal:

My remarks may be sociological, psychological, “poetic.” I avoid the dry sound of scholarship. The purpose of the talk is to arouse a feeling of worthiness to our project, to create enthusiasm. The first rehearsals are the honeymoon period in our love affair with the play. (92)

Development: Staging

With Lamos absent, Sam Helfrich continued staging from the Florida production book and video, notwithstanding his comment that “it was a weird way of working.” He never did take time to elaborate about what was considered conventional. His mind was on the task of the day, and he was anxious to continue. Time rarely seemed on the side of the production. The rehearsal time allotted was very short for a new production.³³ The opera was advertised as a new production, but within the walls of NYCO, many felt that the production had not been given the time or the resources to match such a billing.

³³ Lamos had commented earlier that NYCO had scheduled the short period as if the production were simply a remount because the production had premiered in Florida only a few months prior. What was not considered, according to the artistic staff, were the facts that this production had a new cast, a new conductor, a new costume designer, and other less obvious but significant details that were concomitant with a new production.

Lamos arrived just in time to begin staging the *Podestà's* first aria, "*Dentro il mio petto io sento*" ("In my breast I hear / A sweet sound"), the second major aria in the opera. The first aria is Ramiro's "*Se l'augellin sen fugge*" ("If one day the little bird / Escapes from its cage"), but Lamos wanted very little movement during this aria to fit its somber and lachrymose quality. There was no need, therefore, to restage this aria much. The singer, Sandra Piques Eddy as the heartsick Ramiro, was in the original Florida cast, which was another reason not to spend much time on the aria. Eddy's memory was foolproof and she repeated her simple, slow movements with grace and tenderness. More than being merely convenient for Lamos so that he could move on, Ramiro's aria warranted a stillness that would appropriately balance the mayhem that reigned from the opening scene of the production. With the *Podestà's* aria, however, chaos would come again.

The *Podestà* uses a metaphor of music to express the full range and tumult of his emotions. Specifically, he sings about flutes, oboes, trumpets, violas, bassoons, and timpani. When he mentions these instruments in the text, the words act as a cue for each instrument to be heard briefly and in isolation. It is as if the *Podestà* is actually in control of the orchestra—in short, a conductor. Lamos saw this aspect of the aria as an opportunity to exploit a comedic moment within the new world he had devised for the opera.

Lamos described and blocked the scene as follows: The Doctor instructs one of the orderlies to place headphones over the ears of the *Podestà* to calm his passions from the previous recitative ("*Son fuor di me, che smania*" ["I am

beside myself, what agitation”]). This “music therapy” is the treatment he receives when his unruliest emotions get the better of him. The *Podestà* immediately feels the soothing balm of the music and smiles widely. He looks out to the audience while in the midst of his musical reverie. Shockingly, the *Podestà* discovers that even after he takes off the headphones, he can still hear glorious music. He moves farther downstage, breaking the theatrical “fourth wall,” to discover the orchestra playing the music he hears. He waves enthusiastically to the conductor, who graciously returns the wave with one hand as he continues to conduct with the other. The delusional state of the *Podestà* causes him to believe that the conductor and the musicians are there to do his bidding. He demonstrates this within the aria by conducting and cueing the musicians to play each instrument he mentions in the text.

The others remain in the world of the asylum, and find this display an excellent opportunity to mock the *Podestà* maliciously. To emphasize the two realities—the *Podestà*’s orchestra and the patient’s asylum—one of the inmates moves downstage and tries to see what has so captivated the *Podestà*. Of course, he sees nothing, shrugs, and returns to his place within the asylum set. The ridicule finally gets the better of the *Podestà*, so he runs away while singing the final notes of the aria, leaps onto a bed, rearranges his clothes, and turns his back to the others in perfect timing with each of the final chords.

Satisfied that the foundation of the *Podestà* aria was solidly staged, Lamos moved on to the first aria of Sandrina, the garden-girl, “*Noi donne poverine*” (“We poor women”). Surprisingly, the first brief discussion was about

whether the aria should be cut. One would think that the first aria from the title character would not be disposed of casually. On the other hand, there were definitely cuts that had to be made. This is not uncommon by any means in the current world of opera production.³⁴

The discussion about cutting Sandrina's first aria focused on artistic merits rather than an administrative choice. Saffer told Lamos that the aria was "musically odd." She continued, "It seems to be in between soprano and mezzo-soprano. Maybe Mozart is playing with her." It was not clear whether she meant the singer or the character. Mozart usually knew the singers for whom he was composing, so perhaps the aria was "musically odd" because of the singer Mozart had been given. Lamos was more attracted to the idea that the "liminality" in the aria had to do with the lack of stability in Sandrina's character. Before the action in the opera proper begins, Sandrina has been stabbed and left for dead by her lover, so she has taken on the identity of a social inferior to track him down for reasons still to be revealed. The fact that the aria does not appear to have a clear musical range is perfectly acceptable for a (literally) wounded woman in disguise. In short, Lamos decided that he wanted the aria to remain in the opera, and he began staging it with Saffer's comments in mind.

The deeply personal nature of this aria allowed Saffer and the other women involved to devise their own blocking. This aria did not require elaborate

³⁴ Cuts are usually made for both artistic and practical purposes. Some cuts are so common that the associate conductor, Neal Goren, even called them "traditional cuts." As with Shakespeare's plays, some of the most popular operas in the world have traditional cuts and are more recognizable in their truncated versions. One artistic reason for a cut is evaluating the strength or the weakness of a particular singer. If the Baritone is not strong, the difficult Baritone aria might be cut, for instance. Other cuts are made for administrative reasons. Orchestras are very expensive, and union rules dictate that they must be paid overtime after three consecutive hours of playing. It is possible, therefore, that an opera house might decide to have a season of operas that do not exceed three hours to save precious funds.

movement, so Lamos let the singers move as the music moved them. This “organic” blocking was fine with Lamos because he much preferred that singers feel the emotional weight of the music and allow their characters to move as necessity dictated. Lamos only intervened when he wanted to create a specific stage picture. For instance, he slightly adapted the singers’ original inclinations to capture what he called a “female picture” within the aria. Sandrina appeals to the other women for support, and they kneel with her in solidarity (“*O siamo brutte o belle / Il maledetto amore / Ci viene a tormentar*” [“Whether we are ugly or beautiful / Accursed love / Comes to torment us”]).

A problem arose when Brenda Harris, as Arminda, could not kneel without experiencing some pain. She had a previous knee injury that limited her movement. Lamos adjusted and had Arminda stand with Sandrina and Serpetta kneeling in front of her. The result was a triangle of feminine strength that actually looked more interesting than the original picture of the three women kneeling in a row. They were much more connected, and related to one another with a greater sense of purpose. In this case, Lamos turned the supposed limitation of a performer into an asset, demonstrating a skill that all directors must master to be successful.

After the “female picture” passed, Saffer went on to finish the aria, gathering tempo and emotional intensity. Lamos did not interrupt for fear of disturbing her momentum. Saffer sang the final notes with a passion that drew the attention of all in the room. Her improvised cadenza—an elaborate solo passage of virtuoso singing—was especially impressive and caused Lamos to

exclaim, “Oh! Very cool!” Saffer responded with a mocking haughtiness that she was “a queen of emotional changes in cadenzas.”

With Saffer’s *bravura* finish, the aria seemed to be on good footing. There was one issue, however, that returned the focus back to Lamos’s complicated concept. When Sandrina (Saffer) involved Arminda (Harris) into the aria, Saffer was at a loss as to how to react. She explained, “This is the first time I’ve seen her so...,” and then she made a shrugging gesture toward Lamos to signify her confusion. “Don’t go there right now,” Lamos responded, not wanting to have a detailed character discussion when the blocking needed to be finished. When time did permit, the issue was discussed, however.

Lamos, Saffer, and Harris all offered ideas of how the characters relate to each other within the world of the concept. The core problem was that it was not yet determined whether Arminda had just arrived as suggested by the libretto. Had she been institutionalized as a “patient” for some time and her entrance as a newcomer was only part of her role-playing therapy? Lamos provided Harris with a possible background story that he emphasized was not set in stone. He said that he was “making it all up, anyway,” so the cast should not feel hampered by his spontaneous responses.

The production concept was slowly taking on the shape of a double-edged sword. On the one hand, Lamos relished the idea of creating an original production fuelled by fascinating and provocative discussions with the cast, the designers, and his assistants. On the other hand, his concept did not have a definite shape, so confusion sometimes reigned for members of the company.

Lamos often admitted that he was constantly rethinking and adjusting his production concept in a perpetual argument with himself.

The present discussion did not finalize the nature of the relationships between the women, but all were content to move on anyway. This decision was made to avoid becoming bogged down in the details of an already convoluted concept. Despite the uncertainty, Lamos gained one invaluable insight from the discussion. In a burst of inspiration, he summed up in one statement the unifying theme of the opera that applied to both his production concept as well as the conventional opera as written: "We become other people when we're in love." Lamos seemed to want the cast to focus on this as a through-line no matter how chaotic and confusing the subsequent rehearsals became. They were to remember that love is the cause of their delusions, and that bravely confronting lovesickness was their character's way to health and stability. This epiphany was a firm justification as to why they needed to role-play in the spa. If we, indeed, become other people when we are in love, then the characters would literally become someone else as their primary form of therapy. As a result, all of the characters written into the opera were simply "roles" that the "patients" would play in a vast psychodrama. All else would be dealt with when these scenes were revisited. Lamos was careful not to minimize the importance of details, but he expected that they could be addressed during the polishing rehearsals. Presently, he wanted the focus to remain, in a Stanislavskian manner, on the spine or the super-objective of their characters: They all need to become other people to cure their ills and quench their heart's desires.

The last part of the rehearsal was spent on Arminda's aggressive aria, "*Si promette facilmente*" ("The lovers of today / Pledge their troth very lightly"). This powerful aria explains in no uncertain terms that she will not play a secondary role in her marriage to the Count. To emphasize her dominant behavior, Arminda is armed with a long hose (it is a spa, after all) that she uses as a bondage tool on the Count. The music and text both support her foray into sadomasochism-lite, ("*Ma se mai...m'ingannaste, / lo le mani adoprerò*" ["But if ever...you should cheat me, / I'll make use of my hands"]) but Lamos was adamant that she not play just the surface.

Lamos was quick to recognize a hint of fragility in the music, and he used that to explain to Harris that there is a touch of desperation in her attempts to possess the Count in the midst of her aggression. Moreover, he wanted Harris to play the power of the aria to demonstrate that she was causing the musical changes rather than having the music determine her vocal variations. Lamos wanted the aria to have "an electric energy." To achieve this, he instructed the Count to respond feverishly to her dominance and ask for more and more punishment. Arminda is ready to oblige, and she pulls his hair, binds him in the hose, pushes him to the floor, and steps on his back. The violent energy is continually reciprocated to show that they need one another to work through their neuroses. To underscore that this sadism is in tune with his vision, Lamos said, "I want the whole opera to move toward a more surrealistic dark-land." He intended this scene to externalize the paradox that love can create havoc at the same time as it can help resolve deep personal issues.

With such an overwhelmingly physical scene, Lamos and the performers were bound to experience blocking problems. When this happened, Lamos consulted Sam Helfrich for guidance. Helfrich was the authority on the Florida blocking because he was studying daily the video and the production book. Helfrich was continually reminding Lamos what he previously did, and sometimes had to resort to comments like, "I don't know why you did that, but I told them [the cast] to do it anyway." In the midst of their discussion, the stage manager signaled that the rehearsal was over. Lamos and Helfrich remained to discuss the limitations of the Florida production book. Helfrich was constantly frustrated by how poorly the book had been prepared. He felt that the New York rehearsal process was suffering as a result. If the book had been more carefully crafted for them, they would be working through the "Florida matrix" much more quickly. The book should have contained not only the blocking but detailed notes explaining the rationale behind the director's many decisions. For instance, Lamos explained that there should have been a note like, "She's thinking about her own psycho-sexual problems here," referring to the Arminda "S&M" aria.

Recapitulation

Peter Hall's production of *Don Giovanni* in 1977, like most theatrical productions, went through rehearsal periods of tension and elation in a seemingly endless cycle. John Higgins, who chronicled the production, notes the fickle nature of adrenalin and how it can dissipate from a rehearsal as quickly as it has arrived:

Days go by when problems are approached, then skirted or shelved. These are the times which feel routine and therefore dull and drear, when the adrenalin for one reason or another ceases to flow and the preparation of even a Mozart opera seems little more exciting than running through a ledger of figures and ensuring that the totals are correct at the end. Pleasure comes when a discovery is made which appears so utterly and totally right that the only surprise derives from the fact no one had thought of it before. (112)

Lamos was caught up in this cycle most acutely on this third day of rehearsal. As with Hall's rehearsals, some problems were solved and others were "skirted or shelved" which created confusion and apprehension among the cast. Just as anxiety was reaching a peak due to the temporal pressure to move on, Lamos formulated the organizing principle of his production: that we become other people when we are in love.

One cannot underestimate the importance of the moment when a director discovers the theme of a production that lets him crystallize his vision in a few words. The theme becomes a rallying cry for the entire production to gather around, from the performers to the stage managers to the conductors, *et al.*. As Higgins suggests, the thought is often not revolutionary, but it still is a wonder that the idea was not articulated before.³⁵

Lamos's skill and inventiveness solved many problems in this rehearsal. For instance, blocking stylized movement for an injured performer saw Lamos

³⁵ The idea that we all become different people when we are in love is not the deepest of philosophical profundities, but discovering how this one impression merged perfectly with a complex production provided an agreeable relief until the next problem surfaced.

using Harris's physical limitation as an opportunity to transform a detriment into an asset.³⁶ Lamos was then free to create the "female picture" with Harris standing, which, in the end, created a more interesting stage picture for the aria.

Another problem to solve was whether to risk having Mathew Chellis as the *Podestà* break the fourth wall and conduct the NYCO orchestra during his aria. Since the libretto specifically mentioned the instruments playing in his mind, the choice to exploit this to reveal the *Podestà*'s delusional state was appropriate and captured the *buffa* sensibility of the opera. Lamos knew the audience would respond to the metatheatricality of this aria. Audiences frequently enjoy being surprised, and the idea of a character onstage taking over the conductor's duties is striking and unusual. The blocking was exemplary for the way Lamos gave due respect to Mozart while adding his own flourish by having the *Podestà* relate to the musicians in the pit rather than the musicians in his imagination.

As craftily as Lamos solved these problems, the prevailing tone of the rehearsal was apprehensive. The cast did enjoy the solutions provided to particular staging issues, but they were not satisfied with Lamos's comments of "Don't go there" or "I'm making it all up, anyway." The cast continued to put their best effort forward, but some seemed puzzled and hesitant about such a method of working. Their hesitation did not seem to come from any willful resistance to or disenchantment with the work. Rather, their difficulty lay in how to reconcile

³⁶ This transformation is crucial to the art of directing. If Harris could not kneel, then kneeling had to be perceived as an ill-advised choice in the first place.

the work they had previously done on the music with the present staging and their characters as they understood them.³⁷

Each side was challenged to adjust their working methods for the sake of a balanced approach. Lamos needed to take more time explicating his thoughts so that the singers could feel more confident in their work. As much as he treated them as actors, Lamos needed to keep in mind that singers are not as accustomed as actors are to character work that unfolds gradually. On the other hand, the singers needed to appreciate that Lamos was on a journey with them and not just giving them directions to follow scrupulously. Russian director Lev Dodin, who has also directed opera, explains his similar process by employing the “journey” metaphor:

Some sort of leadership arises from this act of drawing people into an expedition. It’s a relatively risky thing to do because you have all sorts of inner doubts and you are drawing people in when you yourself do not know the road or where you will arrive. Yet, it seems that everyone must assume that you know both the road *and* the destination. If the road changes, then everyone has to see it as a discovery and not as a defeat. (Shevtsova and Innes 61)

To arrive at an optimal balance between preparedness and spontaneity required the cast to trust their director and his vision perhaps more than other conventional productions. Lamos always seemed to have his cast’s trust even if they were sometimes mystified when working through the parts of the opera.

³⁷ This is an example of how the tremendous preparatory work by the singers in opera can be a detriment to the creative process. Conversely, it would also be disastrous if the singers did not thoroughly prepare their music.

The whole, for the time being, was on a firm ground, especially after his stating the thematic center of the production. Ideally, all could focus on this most crucial signpost to continue their navigation toward their ultimate destination.



Fourth day: September 5, 2003

Exposition

On this rehearsal day, Lamos was particularly focused on the intersection of movement and meaning. The benefit of the previous three days of staging had been that both Lamos and Helfrich had found their stride in terms of blocking and were becoming accustomed to the singers' comfort with the initial movement patterns. In sharp contrast to a stereotype of singers refusing to perform elaborate movements, no cast member made a single complaint about the movement limiting their ability to sing. This was a comfort to Lamos who enjoyed a highly physicalized rehearsal process and aesthetic. As exemplified during his rehearsals up to this point, Lamos felt that it was necessary for the singers to work from their bodies to approach an emotional truth. And nowhere was this more apparent than when Lamos took the stage.

Again, it is worth noting that Lamos began his career as an actor. His directing frequently had him approaching problems first as an actor and then stepping out of that role to see the larger picture as a director. The actor in him needed a visceral connection to the material through movement, and then he would step away to see how that movement either revealed or detracted from

meaning in the character or the scene. His fascination with movement is shared by many eminent directors. Marshall W. Mason, founder of the Circle Repertory Company in New York, is also attracted to the movement that directors help performers find, especially since Mason also began as an actor:

I'm most deeply attracted to the concept of directing as sculpture in motion. The changing physical relationships of the actors within an environment, the pattern of movement and the visual beauty of that, have become more and more important to me. It developed late in my directing because I started out from the actor's point of view and I didn't think about the externals at all. (Bartow 198)

Lamos provided many examples for the cast on this day by leaving his table to demonstrate the physicality he wanted to see in the rehearsal space. This happened frequently, most likely, because there are no "line readings" to give in opera. Sometimes as a last resort, a director of a play will demonstrate how she wants a line delivered and ask the actor to say it in just that way. Line readings are one way, albeit a controversial one, that the director of a play can influence the meaning, the pacing, and the emotional tone of a production. Since the delivery of the text in opera is controlled by the music, the singer does not have as much freedom as an actor in a play who can vary inflection, pitch, and tempo in many ways for each spoken line. Consequently, Lamos concentrated more heavily on the movements of the singers to convey meanings that would complement the feeling inherent in the music.

The most obvious display of a movement that needed clearer meaning was when Lamos had to demonstrate the men's reaction to Arminda's "S&M" aria. The men were not exactly sure how to execute Lamos's instruction that they be licentious in response to her aria. Once Lamos demonstrated in a way that showed he was not bashful, the men and all assembled were inspired by his willingness to be so free with his body. This was especially important when it came time for Julianne Borg, as Serpetta, to sing her delightful *cavatina* alluring Nardo and the *Podestà* into her spell.³⁸ Borg was quickly encouraged to go farther with her flirtatiousness. She must have had Lamos's earlier display in mind since she was not inhibited a bit when she sang and swayed so alluringly that both male characters who were attracted to her could not ignore.

Aligning the movement and the meaning did not always proceed as smoothly as with Arminda's "S&M" aria and Serpetta's coy *cavatina*, however. There was one moment where Lamos would be baffled by a movement that he had blocked in the previous Florida production. It was a bit surreal for the cast to watch their director struggle so mightily with his earlier work. Moreover, Lamos would struggle with justifying a direction he gave to Craig Phillips as Nardo which seemed to contradict a character-defining direction in a previous scene. Phillips would be caught between expressing aggression and frustration and how to distinguish the two. With words failing him, Lamos would rely on an outside cultural reference to capture the meaning he was after. This technique of providing outside references to the cast as a useful kind of shorthand became

³⁸ In the late-eighteenth century, a *cavatina* was a song shorter than an aria, typically written in a simple style without repeated sections.

another theme in this rehearsal. The incongruous assortment of Fellini, Shakespeare, Michelangelo, and Jesus all would make an appearance during this day's rehearsal as the company strived to define the interrelationship of Mozart and madness.

Development: Staging

Instead of moving forward from where the company had stopped in Arminda's aria, Lamos decided to run again what they had done with the aria at the end of the previous rehearsal. He was full of encouragement, offering comments like "Yes!" and "Good" and "Gorgeous!" His comments seemed particularly directed at Brenda Harris as she improvised movements using the hose while singing the aria with gusto. Actors love props, and singers do, too. Lamos was happy to see Harris's initiative as she spun Count Belfiore (Brian Anderson) around and around, wound him up more and more tightly, and shoved the hose in his mouth. He, subsequently, bit down on the hose with masochistic exuberance, which caused Harris to restrain him with even more glee. When she finished this acrobatic run of the song, Harris mused, "I'm going to the *Cirque du Soleil* auditions next week."

Lamos seemed thrilled with the overall shape of the aria, but he did want the Count and Nardo (Craig Phillips) to react to Harris's bondage-business with risqué gestures to show that they are turned on by Harris's dominatrix behavior. When both men seemed too self-conscious and gave a half-hearted libidinous effort, Lamos said, "Wait. Here, watch me." He then convulsed and gyrated and

demonstrated other salacious movements. Lamos was never afraid to be crude to convey what he wanted. When the laughter had died down, the men had no trouble with their movement. Although Lamos's ribald performance was intentionally humorous, he did not want this to override the idea that the two men must base their physical reaction in the truth of the moment. Indeed, Lamos was exploiting the humor of the situation, but his approach suggested a plausible reaction from two mental patients suffering from love's torments. Lamos was clear in showing the singers that bold physical choices can lead to the emotional truth of a character.

The next trouble spot in Harris's "dominatrix" aria came when Lamos wanted to clarify the timing of a particular section. Since so much of his blocking was inextricably linked to the music, knowing the right tempo was extremely important. The problem was that the conductor was not attending all the blocking rehearsals.³⁹ Therefore, Neal Goren, the associate conductor, was always present, but he did not know precisely what choices the conductor would eventually make. When Goren said he did not know the tempo that Maestro Manahan would eventually set, Helfrich and Lamos exchanged a glance that said, "How can we block this without knowing the timing?" They did not, however, seem overly concerned and assumed that any problems would be worked out when the Maestro arrived.

The challenge that needed to be worked through next was another elaborate physical movement that did not read clearly enough. Exasperated,

³⁹ Again, there were many rehearsals at NYCO happening simultaneously, all at different stages. It is very likely that Maestro George Manahan was attending a piano or orchestra dress rehearsal for another opera set to open within days.

Lamos cried, “I need to know the meaning!” Ironically, Lamos himself was the one who had blocked the scene for the Florida production, but, once again, the production book was not helpful in capturing what Lamos had originally intended. It was another moment that had him thoroughly confused and led him to the bizarre situation of arguing with himself about his own previous work. He was sure that he had something specific and evocative in mind, but now he claimed that “her foot on his back seems like a bad revival of Fosse.” Harris held still while holding the hose in her hand and her foot on Anderson’s back as he laid face down on the floor, and both of them were waiting for a signal from the director about what to do next. Since they were near the end of the aria, Lamos decided to move on and clean up the specific motivations and psychological meaning later. His former self in Florida had won the argument for now.

Serpetta’s sweet and deceptively innocent *cavatina* (“*Un marito, oh Dio, vorrei*” [“Dear God, I would like a husband”]) followed Arminda’s more boisterous aria. Serpetta knows that Nardo is in love with her, and she knows that he is watching her presently, though he believes he is spying voyeuristically. To agitate him, she pretends not to know he is there and sings about the kind of husband she desires. Julianne Borg, as Serpetta, was a bit hesitant to begin. She asked Lamos very directly, “How far do you want me to go?” Presumably, she wondered how indelicate and suggestive she should be to lure Nardo into a potential fit. In the world of the spa/asylum, anything was possible. Lamos responded with a director’s perennial maxim: “Go as far as you want. We can

always pull back.” It was essential for Lamos to keep assuring the cast that they had complete freedom to invent and create.⁴⁰

One invention, however, that was not quite what Lamos wanted was Nardo’s reaction to Serpetta’s flirtations in the *cavatina*. He felt that Nardo was much more desperate for Serpetta than Craig Phillips was showing. When Lamos could not explain the exact nuance of emotion that felt right to him, he relied on an outside reference to capture the essence of the feeling. It was rare, up to now, that Lamos used cultural references, yet he asked Phillips, “Have you seen [Fellini’s] *La Strada*?” Phillips replied that he had not seen it for a long time, so Lamos told him to see it again. Lamos wanted Nardo to have “more sadness, more helplessness, and not be so aggressive.” Phillips seemed slightly confused, and with reason.

Nardo’s first aria is full of aggression, rancor, and misogynistic tendencies. However, Lamos’s direction to Phillips in the aria transformed Nardo’s harsh words about the fairer sex (“Despise them...flee from them...let them die!”) into satire by having the Doctor give him Barbie dolls to take the brunt of his hostility. By the end of the aria, Nardo and the other men in the scene were mauling and decapitating every Barbie and flinging the limbs every which way. It is possible that Lamos hoped that this puerile behavior would minimize the overt misogyny in the text and add to the madcap hilarity of the opera. With Nardo’s aggression successfully purged, he could get on with the business of pursuing Serpetta in

⁴⁰ Lamos was rarely dictatorial, and preferred to be like a cook choosing the right ingredients for a meal. There are, of course, infinite permutations and combinations of ingredients, so Lamos depended on his cast to give him many options from which to choose to create the most sumptuous meal.

more reasonable ways. As a result, Nardo's previous belligerence as written did not match Lamos's thoughts that Nardo is more sad than angry.

While Phillips was pondering the way to be more sad than angry, Borg sang through the *cavatina* with coyness and guile. Lamos was pleased and he assured Borg that she could be even more confident, despite her lower social status. This comment led to a discussion of what Lamos described as "Enlightenment thinking." He mentioned the idea that there was a notion contemporaneous with the opera that there was only one person whom one was destined to marry. With rare exceptions, this destined couple was of the same social class to correspond to a proper ordering of society. Therefore, Serpetta (a servant) will end up with Nardo (also a servant) eventually despite her outward display of affection for the *Podestà* (a Mayor). With this in mind, Lamos stressed to Borg that Serpetta is in the enviable position of playing two men against one another. Serpetta can entice Nardo all the more by seeming hopelessly attracted to the *Podestà* while the two men are none the wiser. Lisa Saffer joined the discussion at this point to say that, "Like most Mozart, the women are strong and the men are weak." Lamos agreed and added, "Yes, like Shakespeare." The reference to Shakespeare's comedies provided another historical foundation to the neat and tidy final coupling that ends this opera. Serpetta is destined to be with Nardo eventually, but in the meantime, she can have all the fun she wants. Lamos asked Borg to consider this when they revisited the scene.

The rehearsal day concluded with Saffer going through what became known in other rehearsals as the "*tortorella*" (turtle dove) *cavatina* ("*Geme la*

tortorella ["The turtle dove sighs"]). In the opera proper, Sandrina is in a hanging garden singing about how the turtle dove laments the separation from her mate. The *cavatina* is beautifully melodious and has a tempo and lyricism reminiscent of a lullaby. In Lamos's production, Sandrina began singing while lying flat on a hospital gurney that was rolled out to center stage. Lamos suggested to Saffer that Sandrina has been sedated and is singing a comforting nursery rhyme. Although the focus is on Sandrina, the others remain onstage and gradually become caught up in the restorative nature of the music. Eventually, Sandrina leaves the bed in her drugged state and explores the space around her.

Given that her character was medicated, Saffer had more freedom to gesture and move in ways that were not bound by specific meaning but rather more impressionistic and fluid. However, Lamos wanted to choreograph the movements so that the rest of the cast could follow Sandrina and thus be united by the sense and tone of the aria. This idea had not worked in the Florida production because of the limited movement abilities of some performers there, so Lamos was enthused about the prospect of trying it again in New York.⁴¹ They had just enough time to let Saffer experiment with some movements with no plan to set anything. Lamos did see one important gesture that he wanted to keep. At one point, Saffer tilted her head lightly downward with her arms at her sides. On a particular line, she slowly raised her arms straight out to her sides. Lamos told the others to follow Saffer but to put their heads down even farther since they did not need to sing. The line in the text that accompanied the

⁴¹ Lamos did not elaborate as to the limitations of the Florida performers, but it was seemed that he was suggesting that they did not have significant training in dance or stylized stage movement.

movement was “*Vogli destar pietà*” (“She [the turtle dove] hopes to arouse pity”). Lamos wanted to keep the image of the cast in positions suggestive of a crucifix just as Sandrina was singing about arousing pity. Moreover, the word “*pietà*” in the text has a strong cultural reference to Jesus in the Michelangelo sculpture of the same name. As a result, Lamos ended the rehearsal with a captivating mixture of sight and sound.

Recapitulation

Mark Lamos is, of course, not the only director to feel that madness is a rich topic to explore. Peter Brook fixated on the theme of madness when he directed one of the most groundbreaking productions of the twentieth century—the Antonin Artaud-inspired play *Marat/Sade* by Peter Weiss. During extensive preparatory workshops, Brook immersed the cast in an asylum environment and, like Lamos, required them to use outside research to further authenticate their portrayals:

[Brook] told the cast to study paintings by Breughel and Hogarth and etchings by Goya; articles on mental illness were read together; the company saw two French films...that studied various aspects of madness...At first he required the players to create (“We were all convinced that we were going loony,” Glenda Jackson said); then, when they tired, he produced his own ideas...He believed that the only directing method to give results was a fusion of several different methods, all aimed at getting the actor to

contribute more and more: every rehearsal became a living process. (Trewin 64)

As J. C. Trewin relates in his account of the production, Peter Brook rejected the idea that successful directing derives from one prevailing methodology. Each production, each cast, each play, and even each performing space might influence a director to use “a fusion of several different methods” to create an engaging and intelligent production. For *Marat/Sade*, Trewin explains that Brook encouraged his cast to explore widely outside the rehearsal hall for inspiration. He wanted them to “dig out the madmen from themselves, and to find personal expressions of madness” (64). Brook knew that this exercise might be different for each actor. He provided many different sources of inspiration in the hope that each cast member might discover just the right approach to the fragile and disturbing world of psychosis.

Although *Marat/Sade* and *La finta giardiniera* are quite different in tone and plot, Lamos’s production concept brought the opera and the play much closer together. Both explore the devastating effects of madness, both use music as a primary form of expression, and both use the inmates of an asylum to communicate a story to the audience. With this in mind, it is not a surprise that in this rehearsal in particular, Lamos should have encouraged the singers to investigate outside sources to grapple with the major themes of the production.

When Lamos suggested that Craig Phillips watch Fellini’s *La Strada*, he showed that he was fascinated by the ambiguities and contradictions that were becoming more and more a feature of this production. Lamos always seemed to

prefer to investigate more complex emotions than simpler ones. He seemed to want Phillips's performance to capture a Felliniesque quality that rooted his brutishness in melancholy rather than pure rage. Perhaps Phillips would be able to create in Nardo what Roger Ebert writes when he discusses Zampano from *La Strada*: "In almost all of Fellini's films, you will find the figure of a man caught between the earth and the sky...They are torn between the carnal and the spiritual" (36). The carnal aspect of Nardo is capable of ripping the heads off Barbie dolls, while the spiritual side of him can humbly obey when Serpetta tells him, "*Presentatevi; / Fatemi degl'inchini, / Dritto, brillante, snello.*" ("Present yourself properly; / Bow to me, / Nice and straight, brilliantly, nimbly.") If Lamos believed that Nardo is more helpless, sad, and frustrated than Phillips portrayed him, then this gave the singer more layers and opportunities to give a nuanced performance. Anger is a relatively easy emotion for a performer to play and is always an easy fallback choice. The last thing that Lamos wanted was for Phillips to stomp around the stage, seething with anger trying to "out-Herod Herod," as Hamlet says.

Other outside resources that Lamos encouraged the cast to explore were what he called "Enlightenment thinking" and the comedies of Shakespeare. Even though the sets and costumes outwardly presented a contemporary world, Lamos did not want to ignore inner psychological assumptions that would have prevailed in Mozart's time. It was essential that the cast, especially the women, ground themselves in the highly regimented class structure that dictated most courtship behavior at that time. Since acting is, in many ways, behaving,

becoming familiar with the rules of conduct of the eighteenth century stood to help the cast with both the physical and emotional aspects of their characters.

Lamos helped start the process by telling Julianne Borg about the societal taboo of Serpetta going above her class for an amorous adventure with the *Podestà*. Lamos wanted Borg, as a contemporary woman, to appreciate the profound limitations that a woman in her position faced. The heart wants what the heart wants, but a woman in the eighteenth century would never have the opportunity to love indiscriminately above her station.⁴²

Again, Lamos was able to turn a limitation into an asset when he encouraged Borg to conceive her pursuit of the *Podestà* as a game, since it would be virtually impossible for them to actually end up together. The game, Lamos believed, would free Borg's character of the torments of love and allow her to demonstrate her skills in flirting. This notion, deriving from an Enlightenment perspective, would be far more interesting for Borg to play rather than the conventional lovesick maiden. Furthermore, the intelligence Serpetta reveals when playing the game is what motivated Saffer to comment about Mozart's female characters being stronger and more intelligent than the male ones. Lamos agreed with this and added that the same is true for many women in Shakespeare's plays.

Shakespeare is one of the most common points of reference for a director to use since his work permeates all the arts and is compulsory in many educational systems across the globe. The cast may have not been particularly

⁴² One exception, of course, is Pamela in Samuel Richardson's epistolary novel of the same name, and the scandal of the relationship even in its fictional form was enough to make the novel the publishing event of its time.

familiar with the films of Fellini or the major philosophical and social precepts of the Enlightenment, but few opera singers would be ignorant of at least some of the plays of Shakespeare. Lamos's reference was useful because the women in the cast could share a sisterhood with more recognizable figures such as Rosalind, Viola, Beatrice, Portia, and Hermia. These characters all pursue love and its rewards, but they must follow circuitous paths that require them to be inventive, cunning, and witty. These same qualities could be applied to Sandrina, Arminda, and Serpetta in *La finta giardiniera*.

Lamos could have hardly chosen a better point of reference for the three singers to consider to deepen all of their characterizations. Peter Brook has articulated why this is so:

The present-day writer...seems to lack a certain tremendous compassionate generosity that the very great authors of other periods have had, of which Shakespeare is the finest example. That compassionate generosity enables the author to enter fully into totally contradictory human beings. Every actor who's ever played in Shakespeare knows that any one of his five hundred or more characters is a fully resolved human being. (Delgado and Heritage 310-11)

Progressing from the cultural reference to Shakespeare to another unintentional, yet fortuitous reference came when Lamos choreographed Saffer and the others into crucifix poses while she sang about arousing pity (*"pietà"*). While Saffer was singing one of the most beautiful pieces in the opera, it became

clear to all that she was feeling the full emotional weight of the aria. Lamos was wise to stay out of the way except for some gentle side-coaching suggestions.⁴³ Saffer did plan the iconic pose, but when Lamos saw it, he immediately exploited the referential power of the crucifix.

This was an example of an ideal collaboration. Saffer was fully engaged in the emotional moment of her performance and Lamos allowed her to motivate the movement until he saw a stage picture emerge that exquisitely captured the thematic center of the production. “Arousing pity” is what many hope to achieve in the tumultuous affairs of romantic love, and Saffer and Lamos together discovered a single evocative reference to communicate this ideal to the audience. Since Sandrina, before the opera’s action commenced, had already been stabbed and left for dead by her lover, Saffer’s crucifix pose appeared to ask the audience, “How much more than my own life and blood do I have to sacrifice at the altar of Love?”

In this rehearsal, Lamos employed “a fusion of different methods” to achieve results similar to those of Peter Brook while working on *Marat/Sade*. Brook suggested paintings, scientific articles, and films to inspire the actors. Lamos chose Fellini, Enlightenment philosophy, Shakespeare, and religious iconography to motivate the singers to expand their range of choices. Helpful as literature, film, and philosophy can be to provide performers with inspiration, the unexpected can also produce satisfying results. Lamos’s intellectual curiosity is

⁴³ Side-coaching is a common technique where the action onstage does not stop with the director’s comment, yet the performer can receive immediate feedback to enhance their performance while the run-through is in progress.

vast, but he also allowed his instinctual and emotional reactions to dictate his vision, if necessary.

The importance of directors allowing for the unexpected is crucial, and they sometimes will build entire productions around such moments. When the director Robert Lepage was mining for ideas for his planned production about the explosion of an atomic bomb over Hiroshima, an unexpected discovery influenced his entire view of the forthcoming production. He said:

The only things in Hiroshima that actually threw images of horror at me weren't things like visiting the museum, or the memorial, or seeing photographs of people who'd had their skin burnt, losing their hair or seeing all the horrors that we usually see: that wasn't the horror that struck me. The horror was communicated to me through miniature events, stories or little things, which is actually very Japanese. We were visiting the city with a man who was in his sixties and who was, we discovered later, a victim of the bomb...He never imposed that on us for the visit...He told all sorts of little stories, sometimes really insignificant, that were so simple, but actually translated onto the devastation much more than a lot of films, museums, and art we were seeing. (Delgado and Heritage 136)

Just as Lepage was willing to allow for unintentional inspirations, Lamos also made room for unanticipated revelations to shape his vision of the production. This meant that he and the cast could rehearse with spontaneity and

stay open to the unexpected. And it was the unexpected that fostered what was to be one of the most stunning visual moments in the production.



Fifth Day: September 6, 2003

Exposition

This day would prove to be one of the more troubling and strange days in the rehearsal process. Lamos would, indeed, accomplish much in the rehearsal, but the progress he would achieve did not come easily. In fact, the difficulty led Lamos to be much less lighthearted than usual, and he would fight hard to restrain his frustration, losing the battle once or twice.

Undoubtedly, Lamos's aggravation related to the dual roles that he cast himself as libretto-adaptor and director. He was caught between the blessing and the curse of a reconceptualization. The work was more stimulating and creatively challenging to him than a traditional production would have been, and Lamos often said so. He knew intuitively that, despite all the turmoil, he was more inspired as an artist risking failure than remaining satisfied with a previous success. He approached every rehearsal with the mind of an explorer, knowing that he might end up in the dangerous and swampy territory of that day's rehearsal. This is why he noted that one could never anticipate all the problems of a "freely associative" production, including ones that could impede the

rehearsal process. Lamos was forced as a co-writer of the plotline to do his “rewrites” with the cast in the rehearsal hall, and this led to some tense moments.

Whenever a director decides to create a production that is more exploratory and less conventional, there is always the chance that the tension in rehearsals will be more palpable. While Peter Hall was working on Mozart’s *Don Giovanni*, he, like Lamos, had to gather the cast for a discussion at a crucial juncture of the rehearsal process when a leading soprano, Elizabeth Gale, felt that “The Hall method began sapping some of the Gale confidence” (Higgins 147). Hall responded honestly:

[Working on] *Giovanni* has been more exhausting because we are constantly investigating, exploring and doing things quite differently. At times I confess that I have been a little dispirited because I’ve been confused about the way we are supposed to be going.
(Higgins 147)

Despite being both “dispirited” and “confused” at times, Lamos was able to accomplish the major goals of the rehearsal. He successfully guided Saffer through a psychologically complex aria, effectively staged the end of the first act finale that commented ironically on the stand-in-place Mozart sextet, and, when he returned to the beginning of the opera, inventively defined the setting when he structured Ramiro’s first aria as a group-therapy session. These were all incredibly important objectives to achieve, and Lamos was able to complete them even when the rehearsal took a very strange turn.

Lamos had directed a production of *Madame Butterfly* a few years before, and it was being remounted in the current season by director David Grabarkewitz. Grabarkewitz had worked as Lamos's assistant before on "Butterfly," and it was his responsibility to implement the production book directives that he and Lamos had created. On this day, in the middle of his own rehearsal, Lamos was called upon to address conflicts with the lead soprano playing Cio-Cio San, presently on the City Opera Main Stage and opening within days.⁴⁴ Lamos visited the Main Stage twice and tactfully handled differences in interpretation between the singer and himself to the delight of the production team of *Madame Butterfly*.

In the end, this day's *La finta giardiniera* rehearsal was a mixture of struggle and success, but both productions benefitted from Lamos's commitment to the collaborative process. He was steadily inclusive of other's views in solving problems and sharing ideas. He knew that the art of directing was enriched by the sentiment expressed by Zelda Fichandler, co-founder of the Arena Stage in Washington, D.C.:

We want actors not only as actor-instruments but also as probing, intelligent actor-human beings whose dreams, politics, observations, life experiences can be beacons in the search. We have to teach ourselves and each other the art of collaboration, "co-

⁴⁴ Although these two "breaks" pulled Lamos away from *La finta giardiniera*, he was faced with similar challenges and choices while interacting with the lead soprano from *Madame Butterfly*. As a result, including these incidents provides further insight into how Lamos engaged opera performers and their specific talents and needs. Moreover, the coincidence of Lamos rehearsing in one hall while a former production of his needed attention in the main performance hall is too unique to be ignored.

laboring” in order to express a collective consciousness—the
fundament of the act of making theatre. (Bartow 114)

The act of making theatre can be as frustrating as it is thrilling, and Lamos would benefit much by using the collective resources of the cast to lessen his burden.

Development: Staging

The rehearsal began immediately with the continuation of staging Saffer’s “turtle dove” *cavatina*. After she ran through the song once, still with no set blocking except for the final pose, Saffer was frustrated with the apparent ambiguity of her movements (“This feels really bad...I mean this walking around doing nothing...”). Her instinct was to wander the stage aimlessly in a way that matched her sedated and disorientated mind, yet this same aimlessness did not allow her to ground her performance in anything specific enough to satisfy her. Lamos offered assistance by asking her whether she wanted “to deal with any of this stuff,” referring to the prop flowers or dolls strewn downstage. Perhaps the “floral arrangement therapy” that Sandrina engaged in before would help this song to have more clarity for her. Lamos was aware that performers often love to use props to give their gestures or words more resonance. Saffer did not believe that relating to the props would solve her problem, so Lamos suggested that she try the song again using less movement.

Consequently, the opposite problem arose because Saffer was equally uncomfortable with no movement. She remarked that she was “not very good at [just] standing and singing. I’m not into the ‘Diva’ thing.” “Standing and singing”

was never the goal of her performance. Rather, her strenuous work ethic was devoted to utilizing her instrument to enhance and complement a nuanced, rounded, and thorough characterization. It was obvious that Lamos appreciated her efforts, and that was also why he was so willing to offer suggestions to help her.

Lamos's next idea was to have Saffer use the sheet from the bed as something protective for Sandrina. She could do some simple choreographed movements with the sheet, which might also be visually interesting for the audience. Once the gurney comes to a stop and Sandrina rises and steps on the floor, she could pull the sheet off the bed and experiment with different gestures and poses. Saffer did "play" with the sheet for some time, but she did not seem convinced that this was the way to solve the problem. She did not dismiss the idea entirely, though, as she joked, "We could work out an interpretive dance with this [sheet] later. Maybe that would help." Lamos chuckled but quickly turned back to business, saying, "I'm willing to do this to help you, but I want to go for as much stillness as possible as the ideal. There is so much frantic activity in this conception that I want as much stasis as possible here." As with most directing, Lamos had consistently to keep a dual focus. On the one hand, he had to help a performer struggle through one difficult moment by offering suggestions and encouragement. On the other hand, he had to anticipate how this moment would fit into the larger structure and tempo of the production.

The solution was a blend of most of the ideas previously worked out. Saffer moved freely after she stepped off the gurney in her character's sedated

state, then wrapped herself in the sheet for protection and finished the song with the crucifix pose that was more directly aligned with the text and subtle enough to satisfy Lamos's desire for stillness. In fact, after the gestures had been worked out, Lamos felt that he had an opportunity to enhance the stage picture by involving the other performers whom he had experimented with the previous day. Lamos was always willing to build upon the Florida production with the New York group. He wanted to break with the Florida blocking when it came to what the others would be doing during the "turtle dove" *cavatina*, and he said, "Let me change this since we have a new group of people." Essentially, he had the others match Saffer's slow, controlled, and elegant gestures to create unity among the patients of the asylum, especially with the final pose. It was as if all the patients were experiencing her sense of loss and desire for compassion ("*E par che in sua favella / Vogli destar pietà*" ["And it seems that in her own tongue / She hopes to arouse pity"]). The individual circumstances of each character were vastly different, yet their desire for understanding and sympathy was universal. This was the subtext that Lamos wanted to capture as all the performers were moving harmoniously as one.

The production team was now ready to move on to the act 1 finale. The finale would be a particularly difficult section for Lamos to stage because he had to make the convoluted plot clear to the audience while capturing the manic and confused state of the characters at the end of the act. The various couples all confront one another and hidden identities are also revealed.⁴⁵ One

⁴⁵ Believing her to be the garden-girl, Arminda tells Sandrina that she is going to marry Belfiore. Sandrina is so shocked by this revelation that she faints. Arminda calls on Belfiore to help, leaving the unconscious

confrontation would prove exceptionally troublesome for Lamos. He addressed the cast directly for guidance, "Help me solve this. How can we solve this?"⁴⁶

The issue Lamos put in front of the cast was that Nardo, who knows the true identity of Sandrina/Violante, was standing idly by during the reconciliation of the Count and Violante. This did not make sense to Craig Phillips because his character had been protecting both her identity and her person since they arrived at the asylum. Therefore, why would he not engage in the action during one of the more devastating moments of Violante's life? She has just fainted from hearing the shocking news that the lover who stabbed her and left her for dead is engaged to another woman. Immediately upon regaining consciousness, she sees the Count for the first time since their violent encounter. At such a profoundly vulnerable time for her, Phillips did not see how he could witness this and do nothing.

This concern led the cast to speculate about the relationship between Nardo and the Count. Most agreed that some hostility between them must linger because Nardo would not likely forgive the Count for his despicable crime. Conversely, what could Nardo do if the production was committed to obeying stringently the class distinctions and rules of behavior? Servants rarely, if ever, were permitted to reprimand or judge the actions of the aristocracy, no matter

Sandrina with him while she goes in search of her smelling-salts. On returning, Arminda encounters her earlier lover, Ramiro, while Sandrina and Belfiore also recognize one another. All express shock and mutual embarrassment. Belfiore attempts to persuade Sandrina to reveal her true identity as Violante. She begins by denying who she is, but then forgets herself and reproaches him for his infidelity. He falls to her feet in remorse. The rest of the characters rush in and heap Belfiore and Ramiro with reproaches. Belfiore is overcome with embarrassment, not knowing whether to choose Sandrina or Arminda. The act ends in confusion.

⁴⁶ If a problem was particularly vexing, Lamos never had any compunction about eliciting help from the cast. He realized that they knew the material well, and respected them as thinking artists.

how outrageous those actions might be. Moreover, when Lamos's concept of the asylum was added to these questions, further problems arose. Does the fact that Nardo and the Count are actually patients at an institution influence their relationship or any of the issues currently facing their characters? It seemed to be a conundrum that Lamos was not interested in solving just then. This moment was noteworthy because it marked one of the few occasions when he became visibly frustrated. He closed the discussion curtly by saying, "I'm tired of talking. Do it with the music."

Lamos must have sensed that his sharpness caused some uneasiness in the room. To diffuse the tension, Lamos asked for patience from the cast. He explained that the problem for him was that "the libretto is already insane, so sometimes I have to say 'I have no idea' to your questions when they relate to the characters Mozart created, never mind the characters that we are layering on top of those." Ironically, the "insane libretto" is what had partly led Lamos to come up with the spa/asylum framework in the first place, as had proved fruitful in Florida. In New York, however, with a new group of artists and a flawed production book left from the Florida production, Lamos was constantly interrogating his own work as well as Mozart's. He summarized his feelings in an aside to Helfrich: "I feel like I'm fighting my own brain trying to figure out what I did [in Florida]!" Lamos arguing with himself became a recurring theme in the entire rehearsal process.

With all the talk of insanity, it was appropriate when Lamos moved on to the end of the act 1 finale where the singers in the sextet would be

straitjacketed.⁴⁷ Lamos wanted this dramatic stage picture to work both with and against the notion of “a standing and singing sextet.” He did not want the singers to stand in a straight line and sing to the audience without a specific reason. The reason in this production was that the “patients” were becoming unstable and frantic, so the orderlies had to come in and restrain them. Lamos was emphatic that the performers still must “act” despite their straitjackets. He instructed them to struggle, contort their faces, and individualize their protest. He demonstrated by contorting his own body and face to reinforce that they could be dynamic and active even when rooted to one spot. The final stage picture of six inmates frantically trying to free themselves while singing with force and passion was also a comment by Lamos on other tired opera productions where singers seem to be performing in a straitjacket with feet nailed firmly to the ground. Lamos was not going to settle for “park and bark” performances.

“Butterfly” Break

After running the “straitjacket” section of the first finale again, the rehearsal was nearly over. However, Lamos was interrupted and presented with an interesting request by stage director, David Grabarkewitz, about a former Lamos production in the current NYCO season rehearsing simultaneously—Puccini’s *Madame Butterfly*. He came to retrieve Lamos just before the lead

⁴⁷ Lamos wanted a striking image to end the first act. What he devised was that the supers, as orderlies, come onstage and realize the severity of the situation with the patients. They return with straitjackets for each “patient” and quickly confine them. The scene ends with the patients wrestling violently to free themselves as they sing, “*Che smania orribile! non ho ricetta, / L’ira, la collera ch’io sento in petto, / Non so reprimere, non so frenar*” (“What a terrible upset! I know no way / To subdue, to restrain the anger, the rage, / That I feel in my breast.”).

soprano was to sing an aria during their dress rehearsal on the main stage. The aria in question was Cio-Cio San's "*Che tua madre dovrà prenderti in braccio*" ("That your mother should take you on her shoulder").⁴⁸ The soprano believed that the aria should be sung with more sentimentality and be more emotionally moving. Grabarkewitz tried to implement Lamos's direction that called for more stoicism in the aria, but the soprano was resisting this interpretation. Moreover, she wanted confirmation from Lamos himself that he wanted the aria to have the effect that Grabarkewitz was suggesting. In an expedient move, Grabarkewitz wanted to tell the performer that Lamos indeed "saw" the performance and suggested that she alter her interpretation for the current production. Grabarkewitz's instincts were correct, for Lamos sat in the darkened house and whispered to Grabarkewitz that, although her performance was moving, he felt strongly about Cio-Cio San's stoic strength for this aria. After the aria, Lamos walked surreptitiously out of the theater and returned to his rehearsal.

Back to Mozart

Since they had finished with the act 1 run-through, Lamos wanted to start from the beginning again and work certain sections. He only had time to work the scene just before the first aria in the opera (Ramiro's "*Se l'augellin sen fugge*" ["If one day the little bird"]) after the supertitle prologue. The scene was quite short, but Lamos knew it was vital because it was the first opportunity since the

⁴⁸ At this point in the opera, Cio-Cio San has just revealed the child that she had with Pinkerton. She explains in the aria that she will not return to her former life with Pinkerton's child in tow, especially now that she finds out that Pinkerton is returning to Japan. Little does she know that he is returning with his new American wife, Kate.

opening chorus had ended to see the characters in a more individualized way. The concept called for all the characters to need some degree of psychiatric help.

An image that Lamos counted on to have an immediate resonance and recognition was a group-therapy session. Lamos seated the characters downstage in a semi-circle with the Doctor observing and pacing just upstage of them. Lamos wanted to convey the sense of an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting with no one eager to begin the meeting with their own confession. One by one around the circle, each character would rise eagerly just on the verge of speaking, just as quickly think better of it, and sit down ashamed of their cowardice. The musical introduction to Ramiro's aria would underscore this action, and the plan was for it to be Ramiro's turn to speak just as the aria began, as if the aria were the beginning of the meeting. The singers just had time enough in the rehearsal to figure out the timing of their false-start contributions until Ramiro rescued them and filled the silence with "his" aria/confession.

"Butterfly" Break—Part Two

Just before the rehearsal day ended, Lamos's counsel was sought again regarding *Madame Butterfly*. This time, Grabarkewitz was concerned that the singer playing Cio-Cio San was attached to a particular interpretation of the suicide scene that closes the opera. Lamos was shuttled back to the main auditorium to see the suicide scene as currently played. After seeing the scene, Lamos was not happy that the audience could not see Cio-Cio San because her

back was to them. Lamos went on stage to discuss the issue with the singer, Grabarkewitz, and the rest of the artistic staff. The singer said through her interpreter (she only spoke Chinese and Italian) that she wanted to reach for Pinkerton upstage while committing suicide to demonstrate for him her utter desperation. Lamos said that he believed that “Death is taking her away from Pinkerton.” Therefore, it would be a stronger choice to turn away from him for her final release. Lamos added a diplomatic touch by saying that “Your face is so expressive, and we [the audience] want to see it!”

To bolster his interpretation, Lamos demonstrated the exact blocking he wanted, and the singer said, in English, “Very nice.” They then discussed in facetious tones how this choice to face the audience might give her “a better death,” which is the stereotypical desire of all sopranos. Lamos closed by commenting that he was “very grateful that [she] made changes for this production.”

Recapitulation

Ariane Mnouchkine, director of France’s famed Théâtre du Soleil, is not the first person to describe the creative process as a birthing, but she is probably the first to assign the role of midwife to the director:

I’m like a midwife. I help to give birth. The midwife doesn’t create the baby...But still, if she’s not there, the baby is in great danger and might not come out. I think a really good director is that...A midwife is not somebody who just looks at the baby coming out

easily. Sometimes she has to shout at the woman, sometimes she says “Push.” Sometimes she says “Shut-up.” Sometimes she says “Breathe.” Sometimes she says “Don’t do that.” Sometimes she says “Everything is alright. Everything is alright. Go! Go!” It’s a struggle. (Delgado and Heritage 187)

This description of directing is apt, for the director is charged with delivering the production but is also a partner with others in the living creation. And whether the midwife is gently encouraging or relentlessly demanding, the singular fact about the whole affair is that it is bound to be “a struggle.”

On this day, Lamos’s production of *La finta giardiniera* struggled more than in any previous rehearsal. Several times he was close to losing his typical gregarious and affable demeanor. There were so many forces working against him in concert that it was challenging for him to focus on one at a time. His lead soprano was not happy with one of her major arias; the massive fifteen-minute finale was muddled to say the least; all the performers’ previous character uncertainties were exposed more sharply than before; the Florida production book that existed to help was only hurting things; and the rehearsal was interrupted twice by *Madame Butterfly*, which he could ill afford, especially on this day. It is not surprising that he summed up the entire experience with the quip: “I feel like I’m fighting my own brain....” This was the moment when it became clear that the primary challenge of this production would be the arguments Mark Lamos would have with Mark Lamos.

It was true that the poor production book did not help Lamos very much, but the arguments with himself also occurred as a result of the subjective nature of art that can cause directors to second-guess their choices. Every day was a chance to assess and evaluate what came before in rehearsal whether it was weeks, days, or moments ago. These arguments with himself were all the more frequent for Lamos since his production concept involved alternate realities, an “insane libretto,” and paucity of time. These forces combined to create a rehearsal that caused Lamos to temporarily lose the fight with his own brain.

As distressing as it was, all directors face a day like this one. It is a day where confidence is at its lowest, the production seems to be caving in on itself, and failure seems imminent. Fear of failure, however, is what can separate true visionaries of the theatre from the producers of safe and predictable productions. All directors must try to banish the fear of failure, as Lev Dodin explains:

Failure is very dangerous. Failure, however, leads to quite artistic things, because if you are not afraid of failure you can try, you can experiment, you can search for new ways, whereas when you are afraid of failure you wouldn't do it, you would do it the way you did it yesterday, only to repeat that success. (Delgado and Heritage 74)

Since Lamos was committed to his vision despite the prospect of failure, he had to stop the rehearsal and take stock with the cast. This was the most important and effective way to put the rehearsal back on track. He had to be direct and honest with the cast to instill confidence even in the midst of utter chaos. Asking for their patience was probably the best decision he could have

made at that moment. Performers rarely hold onto frustrations when they feel a director is forthright and sensitive to their concerns. Lamos's admitting that he had no idea how to answer all their questions legitimized their issues rather than disregarded them. It was much better to admit his own lack of clarity than to provide half-baked answers that might only compound the problems later on.⁴⁹

Lamos is not alone as a director who admits uncertainty to a cast of inquisitive performers. Charles Marowitz describes just such a situation when Peter Brook was rehearsing *King Lear*:

It is amusing to see Brook's experimental approach at work with actors and technicians who are used to quick, expeditious, black-and-white decisions. One such person, after describing two alternatives for a certain design problem, was more than taken aback by Brook's 'I don't know'—*the phrase which Brook uses more than any other.* [emphasis mine] (10)

How a director relates and collaborates with a cast can often determine whether a production succeeds or fails. Whatever setbacks the rehearsal suffered on this day, Lamos was successful in negotiating the trouble spots so that the rehearsal could end on a good note. The cast seemed to appreciate the choice to set up the last scene as an AA meeting that would release their

⁴⁹ The only danger that Lamos faced here, as was typically the case, was time. A director letting the cast know that he does not have all the answers, especially on the spur of the moment, is reasonable if the cast is sure that their concerns will be addressed in a timely fashion. When a singer or an actor feels compelled enough to stop a rehearsal and ask a question, there usually is a problem. A director must know this and take this into consideration as the rehearsals progress if the issue is not handled in the moment. Otherwise, a director can run the risk as coming off as uncaring, which can be irreparable and damaging for the rest of the process.

character's tension. The group therapy session was just a beneficial for the cast as it was for the characters they were playing.

Lamos was also able to rectify the thorny situation with the lead singer in *Madame Butterfly*. Murphy's Law was in full force this day when Lamos had to interrupt his distressing Mozart rehearsal twice to attend to Puccini. Despite the language barrier, Lamos was able to achieve the dual goal of reinstating his original conception for the ending of his production and finessing it in such a way that the performer actually ended up preferring the change as a result of working through the scene onstage with the director. Lamos was particularly conciliatory to this performer when he said that he was "very grateful that [she] made the changes," and one may wonder why since he was the original director of the production. The collaborative interplay revealed that Lamos was sensitive to the unique needs of an opera singer as opposed to a stage actor.

Opera singers have a significantly reduced performing repertoire when compared to stage actors. As a result, they might perform a particular role over and over for many years in many different productions. They might even achieve fame by being associated with only one or two roles, similar to a television actor in a long-running series. It would be fair to assume that this was the case for a Chinese soprano for whom there are not a plethora of roles by conventional casting standards. Lamos must have been aware of this, which is why he chose to be so diplomatic and appreciative. This brief episode highlighted yet another situation that an opera director must finesse in order to achieve optimal results.



Sixth Day: September 7, 2003**Exposition**

During the previous week, the cast appeared generally supportive of Lamos's new interpretation of the opera. There were definitely some spirited conversations about the new framework for the production, but everyone appeared to embrace the adventure as most of their general concerns were addressed. When general concerns reemerged as specific confusions, however, then the cast was more apprehensive. This rehearsal would begin with a fairly smooth run of act 1, but it swiftly took a sharp turn when Brenda Harris (Arminda) was completely mystified about a major character development issue having to do with the nature of reality established in the production concept.

At this stage of rehearsal, the performers were beginning to build their character choices moment by moment rather than relying on the overarching ideas expressed during the early rehearsals. When a specific issue like Harris's seemed to contradict what she developed up to that point, the performance and the rehearsal stopped abruptly. When an opera rehearsal at a major venue like New York City Opera halts in its tracks, a greater risk of impending trouble exists considering the scale of opera production. Lamos was almost hoping that Harris would not notice the problem and finish the run of the act. Once the rehearsal was completed, he would have told the cast about a major change that would have alleviated Harris's confusion. Instead, Harris stopped the action, perhaps

feeling too uneasy to move on for fear that the rest of the act would suffer as a result.

Lamos was sensitive to this unease, which is why he chose to withhold announcing the change until he and the cast were more firmly grounded in the new geography of the production. He seemed rather insecure himself, and he knew that it would be unfortunate if the cast reacted badly to his insecurities. Instead, he focused on fine-tuning the right questions that would allow him to find the answers he eventually needed. Fellow opera director, Jorge Lavelli, articulates the type of questions Lamos was preoccupied with:

The most important work I did was at the level of the opera's concept. I apply the same criteria as I do for the theatre. How and where is this story going to be told, and in what way? How will it be accomplished that the work of the singer, often not chosen by me, fits into the total concept of the character? How will the dramatic action imposed on an opera have repercussions on the work of the singers and the chorus? Resolving all this means a lot of small alterations. Sometimes it means facing the opposition of the director of the orchestra, soloists, and sometimes the whole orchestra. My job is to go out there and convince them that there's a point to what I want to do. (Delgado and Heritage 125)

As the director, Lamos did not feel he had to have all the answers, but he needed to maintain a definite and pursuable course for his concept to work. At

this point, the answers would have been convenient, but Lamos almost always was hesitant to answer questions too prematurely.

Development: Staging—Run-Through Act 1

The entire company, including the conductor, was present, prepared, and eager to begin the act 1 run-through. The many layers of meaning that had been established by Lamos in his role as director/adaptor would prove either cohesive or disjointed quite soon. All went smoothly until Brenda Harris (Arminda) had a few questions regarding her “entrance” to the spa. As a patient in Lamos’s “spa” concept, Arminda lives at the spa and plays the role of the fiancée to Count Belfiore (Brian Anderson). Her entrance in the opera proper, however, comes later than Lamos had her entering. Therefore, Harris was not quite sure how to interact with the others so long as the libretto conveyed the idea that she had never seen any of them previously. “I might as well come clean right now...,” Lamos responded to Harris. He confessed that the entrance of Arminda and Belfiore in the introduction “wasn’t making sense to [him] either.” He realized earlier than this that he was going to cut the Belfiore/Arminda entrance, but he did not want to announce this significant change too precipitously.

Before this run-through, Lamos knew that the course of his concept was offline, yet he also knew that telling the cast about a major change before an act run-through would probably create a deleterious psychological effect. His choice to withhold the change to the Arminda entrance was now in jeopardy. Harris’s legitimate and understandable questions prompted Lamos to “come clean,” and

he mentioned that they should fix the problem by cutting the Belfiore/Arminda entrance and rework the opening without them while the rehearsal was already stopped. This reworking of the opening without Harris and Anderson was accomplished after some time, but Lamos still had to consider when they would enter now that their former entrance had been cut.

The first concern was how to reconcile the entrances of Belfiore and Arminda in the opera in accordance with Lamos's "spa" concept. Lamos quickly thought of a way that their entrances later in the scene would not disrupt the fact that they were in fact patients and not guests of the *Podestà*. Lamos wanted to cut and rearrange some recitatives to accomplish this solution. The cast and crew began to chat a bit while Lamos was working out the editing with the conductor, George Manahan, and the music staff. The chatter increased as time ticked away, which provoked Lamos to respond, "Guys, can you please be quiet for two minutes while I work this out."⁵⁰

The decision to rework the entrances of Arminda and Count Belfiore was discussed and solved for the moment. The company would see whether the editing of the recitatives worked well during the next run-through of the act. Now, Lamos was preoccupied with finishing as much of the act before the rehearsal ended since so much effort had been spent on reworking and running several sections.

⁵⁰ Generally, the rehearsal room was quiet, but the noise did become a distraction on several occasions. This, again, is a subtle yet significant difference to many play rehearsals. If Lamos wanted to discuss cutting lines to a play with the playwright, the actors and small crew would be more conspicuous if they made noise. In this rehearsal, the sheer number of people in the room with assistant directors, stage managers, music staff, understudies, et al., made it much easier for people to divert the attention away from the main action on stage.

The company had just enough time to run Arminda's aria (*"Si promette facilmente"* ["The lovers of today / Pledge their troth very lightly"]), otherwise known as the "S&M aria." Lamos noticed a problem right away. As much as he enjoyed the highly physical aria, he did not believe that the action was motivated enough once he saw the aria in context. No doubt the aria was amusing on its surface, but Lamos never wanted the zany action of the opera to appear forced. Every action and reaction, no matter how crazy or bizarre, had to make sense to him and be grounded in his production concept. Lamos accordingly instructed Harris to make sure that she noticed when the men beat the Count with flowers, which occurs just before she begins her aria, "You've got to see that action in order for your aria to make sense. If we don't set that [violence] up, then your aria won't work. If you see it and register it, then we're rolling with the S&M stuff." Lamos believed that the S&M business is plainly in the text (Arminda says, *"Adopro anche il bastone"* ["And I use the stick"]), but he wanted to motivate Harris by having her witness the playful violence of the men. Again, it was Lamos's insistence on blending text with action to make the "already insane libretto" make sense to the audience. Although he was taking a risk by including a sexual fetish in a minor Mozart classic, Lamos was not going to give outlandish directions capriciously or without due diligence.

Recapitulation

Cheek by Jowl joint founder Declan Donnellan articulates one of the sharpest distinctions between directing for spoken drama and directing for opera—scale:

It's very important for us that Cheek by Jowl has only fourteen people and they are almost permanently on tour so that we don't separate off into separate parts. We don't travel as a family or as a commune, but a certain degree of closeness is often there...at its very best you are close and you do good work as a result. But that's more difficult the larger the group that you have. In an opera house you've got the orchestra, the chorus, and the musical staff. The great thing about Cheek by Jowl is that we are able to be much more specific about the agenda that's addressed, rather than me doing my bit in the corner of the room, and the stage manager doing another bit in that corner of the room, and so on. (Delgado and Heritage 88)

On the surface, this explanation seems obvious because the physical structures alone of an opera house are much larger than most theaters are. Beyond the concerns of space, there are administrative, economic, and artistic differences that play out in predictable as well as unpredictable ways in rehearsal.

This rehearsal was the first day for Lamos when the difference in scale was a factor that had to be dealt with more directly than before. When Lamos “came clean” to the cast about the major change to delay the entrances of Count

Belfiore and Arminda until later in the opera, the scale of the production was made most noticeable.

The ripple effect of the change spread out through the entire rehearsal hall and affected many people. This is understandable considering the immense complexity of an opera rehearsal as compared with one for a spoken drama. During the rehearsal of a play, Lamos would typically have a much smaller cast, a stage manager, and perhaps an assistant. Crowd control is much easier when there is little or no crowd. For the rehearsals of *La finta giardiniera*, Lamos had a cast of seven principals, seven covers for the principals,⁵¹ five to seven supernumeraries, two people to take notes for the supernumeraries, three assistant directors, three stage managers, a rehearsal pianist, a cover conductor, and the conductor. And this does not include the four principal designers and their assistants who would visit rehearsals from time to time. All of these people were continually in hushed conversations, trying to accomplish the goals of each respective department while, at the same time, adapting to the primary vision of the director, which remained fluid from moment to moment.

This flurry of activity is anathema for most play rehearsals. A rehearsal for a play has one focus for all concerned: the stage. In opera, the focus is diffused throughout the room, yet concentrated in different areas as each small group has a specific job to attend to. Lamos could command the attention of anyone present in the room if he had a question, but he usually concentrated on the performers, content that the constant hum around him was serving the needs of

⁵¹ Covers serve essentially the same function as understudies in spoken drama. One exception is that each principal character in opera has a particular cover who attends all rehearsals and vocal coaching sessions. In plays, there are frequently supporting cast members of a production who understudy multiple roles.

the production. When the hum actually turned into noisy chatter, Lamos would quiet the room with a simple request. This did not happen often, as most in attendance had an appreciation of the larger scale of an opera as well as a profound respect for the director's task. Lamos commented on the scale of opera directing: "Sometimes I feel like General MacArthur trying to organize all the disparate elements. All these soldiers going into battle, but I don't know if they have everything they need. There are so many things that come up every day that require new tactics."

These "new tactics" that require daily attention emphasize one of the more challenging aspects that Lamos and most directors face. For directors, a production is the result of hundreds of detailed decisions being made to clarify the storytelling and overall vision unfolding on the stage. All these decisions contribute to the signs, clues, and signals that directors must use and that audiences frequently need to comprehend the production. It is not an exaggeration to say that being an astute semiotician is yet another job requirement to excel in directing. In other words, directing is in the details.



Seventh Day: September 9, 2003⁵²

Exposition

⁵² Generally, there were two sessions of each rehearsal day divided by lunch. What follows is the account of only the second session. During the first session, Lamos felt strongly that I should attend the piano dress rehearsal of his former production of *Madame Butterfly* to provide a broader scope to his directorial work in opera.

The tremendous scale of many opera productions also has a noticeable effect on scheduling. With so many disparate parts that eventually must be brought together seamlessly, the schedule becomes a constant source of stress for a director, as would be evident on this day for Lamos. Of course, producing plays provides the same worries for directors, but in opera the schedule challenges are frequently more intense and exponentially greater. Given the fact that Lamos was working with a shorter schedule since the production had already premiered in Florida, it was no wonder that the schedule would take precedence over the performers' needs on this day. Unfortunately, the anxiety that this caused for one performer was the most aggravated of the entire process.

Moreover, this day would be a microcosm of a continual directorial problem for Lamos. He knew that his concept was challenging for the performers, but he also knew that if he attempted to answer every question for every character, he would never remain on his already tight schedule. The early rehearsals had been primarily a delicate negotiation between mollifying the cast so that they could live comfortably with uncertainty and solving enough technical and textual problems to keep moving forward.

Development: Staging

Most of this rehearsal was spent on act 2 after the cast had been able to stumble through most of act 1 during the previous rehearsal. Helfrich continued to map out the original Florida blocking to lay down a foundation that Lamos

could adjust or amend. At this point, both Helfrich and Lamos felt slightly behind, so finishing the basic blocking was the priority. This rushed feeling was confirmed when Brian Anderson asked, “Why does he [the *Podestà*] strangle the Doctor?” Lamos replied, “Brian, don’t go there.”

Chellis, as the *Podestà*, was frustrated by Lamos’s apparent brush-off, but he did not choose this moment to convey his displeasure in words, though his expression was unmistakable. Lamos wanted to continue even though he knew that Chellis wanted something to motivate the *Podestà*’s irrationally violent behavior. Again, Lamos knew that he would return to the scene when the particulars would be worked out during polishing rehearsals. Conversely, Chellis seemed to want guidance so that he could absorb the direction before returning to the scene at a subsequent rehearsal. Chellis seemed to carry his frustration into his performance, for his act 2 aria, “*Una damina, una nipote*” (“A young lady, a niece”), had an extra exuberance and physical panache. Lamos reacted enthusiastically and remarked, “Matt, if you want to add more steps to that, do.” Lamos knew that Chellis had professional dance training, so he gave him license to add whatever he wanted to enhance the aria.⁵³

Happy with Chellis’s aria, Lamos moved on to a favorite moment of his in the production—Ramiro’s beautiful aria, “*Dolce d’amor compagna*” (“Sweet companion of love”). The reason it was a favorite, however, had more to do with the stage picture than with the music and vocal performance alone. Lamos was so excited about what was to come in performance that he cried out to the whole

⁵³ Lamos was committed to the idea that the cast should contribute as much as possible no matter how specific or detailed his directorial vision proved to be. This was especially the case when Lamos felt that the cast had an expertise to exploit, such as Chellis’s ability to dance.

rehearsal hall, "This is one of the best lighting cues on the face of the earth." Sandra Piques Eddy, as Ramiro, sang while all imagined the gorgeous stage picture and were caught up in Ramiro's desperate commitment to hope (*"speranza"*). When Eddy finished the aria, the room was silent for a moment and then erupted in spontaneous applause. This was not particularly rare as most of the singers were very supportive of one another and demonstrated this often in rehearsal. What was rare was the way in which the applause led to an interesting production question. The Florida production had not left room for applause and had briskly moved to the next section of recitative. Therefore, if the audience had the same impulse as the rehearsal room showed, there would be an awkward moment if they continued the scene as had been done in Florida. The potential awkwardness would be that Eddy's applause would be muted prematurely as the next scene began, and with the added problem of the audience not hearing the first several lines of the next recitative. Everyone knew how awful it felt on stage when an audience's applause comes at the wrong moment. At worst, both audience and cast would appear stumped about what to do next.

Lamos opened a brief discussion about what to do. All felt that the aria, and particularly Eddy's performance, deserved the applause. Saffer went so far as to say that the song "was the best aria of the piece." Lamos then agreed that during technical rehearsals he would manipulate the timing of the moment to leave room for Eddy's deserved ovation.

Recapitulation

It is almost a cliché to say that a healthy artistic collaboration is the cornerstone of a successful rehearsal process and, by extension, a successful production. Legendary director Harold Clurman writes about this special dance between director and performer:

It is not the director alone who shapes the production; he employ's everyone's talent. He chooses those whom he may be able to inspire and those he believes will aid and inspire him. As a leader, he must be a knowing follower...Though the director must at all times leave himself open to suggestion and be prepared to accept correction, he must never release his command. (173)

The collaborative nuance that Clurman refers to was put to its most severe test in this rehearsal of *La finta giardiniera*. The rehearsal was unique, for never was there a time before or after that an actor was as visibly displeased as Mathew Chellis. Chellis's face turned red when Lamos chose not to address Brian Anderson's question as to why the Doctor was being strangled by the *Podestà* at that moment. Moreover, Lamos's comment, "Brian, don't go there" exacerbated the situation because it was received as if they were being scolded for asking the question. "Don't go there" did suggest that all in the room knew where "there" was. "There" was the consistent questioning of the director's concept. Lamos's brisk comment revealed a crack in his confidence about the work, but he was determined, in Clurman's words, to "never release his command."

Although Clurman's dictum is generally a wise one, it did not serve Lamos well in this situation. Time was moving forward, but Lamos chose not to engage an opportunity that seemed to scream out for attention. It was a moment when he could have chosen to go the proverbial "middle way." He might have addressed Anderson's question with an answer that inspired greater confidence from the entire cast and kept his "command" at the same time. The situation was so excruciating for Chellis that Lamos might have even taken the risk of making up an answer on the spot. His present belief in his answer was not as crucial as keeping the cast, Chellis especially, moving forward confidently.

This is not to say that it is preferable for a director rely on cajoling very often, but when the discontent is as severe as Chellis's appeared to be, a bit of acting on the director's part may be warranted. Harold Clurman has also written:

Every director invents or improvises "tricks" to deal with the individual actor's hang-ups...but my principal maxim in cases of personal difficulty is: Never, never, never win an argument with him, never persuade him that he is "wrong," just get him to do what you want! (165-66)

Lamos, of course, was under pressure to stay on schedule, but a few moments of clarifying, even extemporaneously, would have saved him and the cast from many moments of confusion and struggles later.

The incident was rare in the entire rehearsal process because, previously, Lamos had handled performers' confusion about his concept effectively by admitting his own confusion and inviting them to find solutions together. On this

occasion, the pressure of the tight schedule won, and understandably so. The choice, however, to admonish a performer had a deleterious effect. It was quite clear that cast was sympathetic to Anderson's discomfort, which grew exponentially greater after Lamos's curt rejection and Chellis's flushed complexion. From Anderson and Chellis's point of view, clarifying why their characters behaved as they might in the world of the asylum had to be the priority, even at the expense of falling behind schedule.

Directors Robert Cohen and John Harrop provide summarizing words on the topic of answering performers' questions in a timely way:

Why is a terribly important word for the director. If there is one simple word with which to conclude a chapter on working with the actor, it is *why*. The director should constantly explore and question himself, and the actor when necessary. Only by a complete mutual understanding, which need not always be stated, can actor and director work together toward the final good of the play and the satisfaction of each other's creative aims. (215)

Anderson and Chellis completely refuted the notion of "theatrically incurious singers" (Saffer's words) reluctant to find answers to character development questions. This kind of search is mother's milk to many performers, and directors ignore this at their peril.



Eighth Day: September 10, 2003

Exposition

This day's staging rehearsal would begin without Lamos present. His tardiness was the result of having to attend auditions for the *A Midsummer Night's Dream* production that he would direct immediately following his commitment with New York City Opera. This would be significant in the day's rehearsal as many issues arose that typically would need strong input from the director. Assistant Director Sam Helfrich was, indeed, present and continued staging the pre-determined Florida "matrix" blocking. When the cast became inquisitive, however, about a particular issue or two, Helfrich was uncomfortable with making key decisions without his superior present. The cast eschewed this concern and began to solve some issues by craftily shifting the focus to the music—typically not the domain of the directing staff.

Buoyed by their own initiative, the cast quickly attacked a recitative section that had inherent disparities with the overlay of Lamos's production concept. The plot moves forward mainly in recitative sections; therefore, it would have been perilous to ignore these sections in this production where the cast was not confident of the story they were telling or, for that matter, in what dimension of reality their characters were residing from one moment to the next. With a sense of renewed freedom, the cast worked through the section with enthusiasm. This did not last long once Lamos arrived shortly after and put an end to their director-less interlude.

Everyone seemed content not to share much with Lamos about what had gone on in his absence, especially since he arrived flustered about a problem

with the costume department. Once this was handled, Lamos would move on with the staging of act 2. Everything would go well until all were confronted with the challenge of the non-stop, sixteen-minute finale. Lamos allowed the cast to review the music before beginning his staging. And just as they were all about to begin, the rehearsal halted so that Lisa Saffer could ask a question about reconciling the world of the libretto with the world of the production concept.

Essentially, Saffer needed to know how to play the madness suggested in the libretto given that she has been a patient in an asylum since the opening of the opera. Although *La finta giardiniera* is not among the most familiar of Mozart's operas, its act 2 finale is relatively well known owing to the theatricality of the mental breakdown experienced by both Sandrina and Count Belfiore. Therefore, how do they play *going mad* when they have been mad all along? This problem would be the most complex acting challenge to date for Lisa Saffer and Brian Anderson.

It is a standard, beginning-acting concept that characters must develop, evolve, and frequently transform themselves through the course of a performance. This evolution is often referred to in acting terminology as the "arc" of a character. This suggests a trajectory that an actor will frequently map out to avoid a stagnant or inert performance. For instance, if an actor playing Blanche DuBois from *A Streetcar Named Desire* reveals her psychological breakdown too soon, then she has nowhere to go by the end of the performance. The crucial last scenes are in danger of falling flat and because the audience would have seen too many cracks in Blanche's psyche. This example also illustrates the

perpetual direction to actors to “not play the end” of their characters’ journeys before the actual end of the performance. Romanian director Andrei Serban warns actors about this delicate process in the context of Greek tragedy, a genre in which madness figures frequently:

Every moment, every corner of a Greek tragedy is built from one climax to another. The play releases just enough to build up to the next climax. So an actor has to know that that’s his challenge, to climb acting mountains, to know how to go from the valley to the next peak. (Bartow 294)

One reason why this is so difficult to accomplish is that performers in both theatre and opera often relish the chance to play roles that have emotional complexity and often cannot wait until the end to manifest a character’s most radical or interesting change. Directors want actors to stay true to the journey, and Lamos was no exception when he called for his cast to find “an entirely new delusion” in the finale. This would prove to be no easy proposition, however.

Development: Staging

Sam Helfrich began the rehearsal by moving briskly through the foundational blocking from the Florida production. The cast was working on the act 2 recitative section following Ramiro’s aria, “*Dolce d’amor compagna*” (“Sweet companion of love”).⁵⁴ Brenda Harris, as Arminda, had some questions

⁵⁴ The section involves the *Podestà* questioning Count Belfiore about the veracity of the rumor that he stabbed and killed the Marchesa Onesti (currently disguised as Sandrina, the garden-girl). Arminda, the Count’s bride-to-be, advises the Count in a series of asides to deny the rumor so as not to disrupt their forthcoming wedding.

about how to deliver the asides in the section, some of which are sung to the Count and others to the audience. In a conventional production, asides are not problematic. The actor or singer simply offers their line directly to the audience, momentarily breaking the illusion of the “fourth wall.” Audiences generally enjoy being made co-conspirators in a production from this type of direct address. Lamos’s concept, however, caused Harris some confusion. She commented to Helfrich, “I know that reality is a small commodity in this [production], but I need to get these focus issues straight with the asides.” Surprisingly, this relatively mild comment led to an in-depth conversation among the cast about character motivation, the dramatic architecture of music, and ontological uncertainty.

Everyone seemed to share Harris’s confusion about the nature of reality within the production. As a result, the cast decided to “set some ground rules” so that one character’s perspective on reality was the same as the others’. Helfrich was a bit apprehensive about such ground rules and tried to dissuade the cast by noting, “Without a director in the room, we can’t make those decisions right now.” Undaunted, the cast finessed the discussion away from purely ontological concerns for their characters (which needed input from the director) and focused on musical issues to address their collective confusion.

It was a given that musical matters were the purview of the conductors, so the cast tackled the question of reality by attempting to differentiate the real world from the spa world within the music. They felt that they could solve some of these issues by altering the tempo of the recitatives. The dialogue could be delivered in one tempo and the asides could be delivered in another one. This

idea allowed the cast members to continue their discussion about the uncertain world of the production. During their conversation, which proceeded with a sense of liberation without the director present, the cast decided to take it upon themselves to solve the issue of their characters' perception of reality that had been a problem for some time. Once a tentative agreement was reached about their characters' sense of reality, they all gathered in the middle of the room for a huddle, put their hands in the center, and gave a loud "Break!" This display of solidarity led to some laughter and a sense of urgency in attacking the scene anew. They met next with the associate conductor, Neal Goren, and the rehearsal pianist to examine the possible flexibility of tempos in the recitative to solve the problem.

Some cast members checked the score with the rehearsal pianist, while others spoke with Goren, who was encouraged to work on the recitatives in a more detailed way. Goren commented that it is crucial to rehearse recitatives thoroughly because, if ignored, they can sound flat and "have no shape or dramatic architecture." He went on to note that recitatives take longer to rehearse and finalize as a result of their dramatic indeterminacy. This seems ironic since the memorable pieces of almost all operas are the arias that one might assume require more rehearsal time with the conductors.⁵⁵

The cast tried some of the tempo changes to sharpen the asides and the dialogue. The work paid off because the characters showed greater decisiveness and confidence in the scene than they had before. The Count's

⁵⁵ Since composers craft arias with great specificity, there is a limit as to what a singer can do when interpreting them. Of course, there are qualitative, interpretive, and stylistic differences among singers, but, essentially, the tempos are the tempos, the dynamics are the dynamics, and the notes are the notes.

discomfort while being interrogated about the murder of Violante was much clearer and more desperate when the dialogue was in one tempo, and the asides were more cutting and abrupt when delivered in another tempo. The cast's feeling of accomplishment was obvious, but was quickly dashed when Lamos arrived hastily to announce that an unfortunate communication gaffe that had ruffled some feathers.

Lamos told all present that he had received a frantic message from the costume department explaining that they needed to do fittings immediately. The tone of the message was apparently confrontational since the costume department had been informed that Lamos "was not releasing anyone from rehearsal." Lamos said he was shocked to hear this because nothing could be further from the truth. He was willing to let the cast do fittings at any pre-arranged time, and he was baffled at how such a falsehood could have been relayed to the costume department. Helfrich quickly pacified Lamos by explaining that he would solve the communication problem as well as arrange all the fittings for the cast so that they could remain on schedule. Lamos thanked him and jumped into the rehearsal.

All felt confident about the restructuring the recitative section to clarify the asides, so they moved on to the next scene.⁵⁶ The first item of business in that scene related to technical issues discussed at the production meeting several days before. Lamos wanted to proceed with the rehearsal on the assumption

⁵⁶ Interestingly, nothing was mentioned about the cast's "ground rules" or Helfrich's apprehension about the cast making too many definitive decisions without the director present. Since there had been a bit of tension the day before, nobody seemed to want to risk confrontation at this point. Furthermore, the cast probably did not want to give Lamos a chance to contradict their collective choices, so they were content to remain taciturn on the subject.

that the rear projections that were cut in Florida would be implemented in New York.

In this scene, Sandrina (the disguised Marchesa Violante) flees the *Podestà's* estate in a fury because the Count (her former lover) is planning to wed Arminda. In her weakened condition, she does not realize that she arrives in a sort of no man's land described in the text as "a deserted mountainous spot with ancient, partly ruined aqueducts, among which there is a dark grotto."⁵⁷ In Lamos's production concept, Sandrina cannot leave the asylum; therefore, her barren and antiseptic room becomes the "deserted...spot" and the figurative images of horror in the text become actual horrific images projected on the walls as a representation of her terrifying delusion. Furthermore, Arminda, as her rival, comes into the room wearing a gruesome mask and further taunts the fragile Sandrina. As confident as he was about the technical crew in New York, Lamos was still cautious. This was obvious when he mentioned to Harris, "I'm warning you that what you're about to be given may be taken away from you. It has nothing to do with your ability, but with sightlines and money." To which Harris replied sarcastically, "Ah, the important things in Art."

Before Harris's phantasmagorical entrance, Helfrich had, once again, to establish the Florida "matrix" blocking with Lisa Saffer as Sandrina. It was obvious to Helfrich that the blocking from the production book was neither organic nor well motivated by the singer. This was especially clear when he delivered his instructions to Saffer about her emotionally weighty material in such

⁵⁷ In the opera proper, Sandrina quickly becomes frightened by the dark, foreboding surroundings and cries out, "*Dovunque il guardo giro, altro non vedo / Che immagini d'orrore*" ("Wherever I turn my eyes, I see nothing but images of horror").

a cut-and-dried way: “Now, you see the knife...now put it on the bed...don’t drop it on the floor because we have so much ‘floor work’ in act 3,” etc. The sight of a knife would be terrifying for Sandrina as a result of her recent stabbing. The knife represents such a painful physical and psychic wound that it seemed odd when juxtaposed with Helfrich’s casual delivery of the blocking instructions. Moreover, Saffer had established that she had a keen interest in psychological character exploration. Perhaps Saffer knew that time was scarce, or that she could do more character work in the later polishing rehearsals. Either way, for now, Saffer dutifully took the blocking and diligently executed the movements.

With the core of act 2 complete, all that remained was the staging of the finale. With the daunting task of singing a sixteen-minute, non-stop finale in front of her, Saffer requested that the cast run through the music first to solidify the singing as much as possible. The cast agreed and gently suggested that they felt the musical rehearsals had been imprudently streamlined. Moreover, this was to be a fast, feverish, and continuous sixteen-minute finale, so they welcomed the idea of running through the music. Lamos knew that this step could affect everything else, and he said to Helfrich, who wanted to move on quickly, “If they do not have that bedrock, it can cause all sorts of problems for them.”

While the cast was reviewing the music, Lamos lost no time in working on other production concerns. He consulted Helfrich about a new costume idea so that the characters would not so readily recognize one another in the chaotic act 2 finale. Since the cast did not have the advantage of a cave, grotto, and cover

of darkness as described in the opera itself, Lamos had to invent some justifiable reason that the characters would not immediately recognize each other. Initially, he thought that they could manipulate the ubiquitous sheets and bedding already present and plentiful in the asylum. Lamos quickly discarded this idea, not wanting the stage to appear “too much like a cheap Haunted House from Halloween.” Instead, Lamos suggested to Helfrich the idea of dressing the cast in clown or *commedia dell’arte* costumes as a disguise. Whether these garish costumes would be connected to Sandrina’s delusion or to the sartorial choices of the asylum inmates was to be determined later. This change, however, did solve the problem of recognition as well as offering, perhaps, a historical nod to the endearing *opera buffa* production style. If Lamos feared that the audience might not join him on his conceptual journey, at least this costume choice might seem more familiar to traditionalist Mozart *buffa* connoisseurs.

Just before the cast was finished reviewing the music and ready to try the act 2 finale, Saffer had an important question. She wondered, “In the ‘normal’ version, this is where the madness starts. Should we take this somewhere else?” Lamos’s response was immediate and emphatic, “Yes! Absolutely. This can be an entirely new delusion.”⁵⁸ When the cast began the scene, they seemed to be struggling again with their director’s vision of the opera. How could they demonstrate the madness called for in the act 2 text when they have all been mad enough from the beginning to require hospitalization? Immediately,

⁵⁸ Lamos knew that the characters must continue to progress and complete their journey. This production had already established from the outset that each of the characters is mentally imbalanced and on the verge of an actual breakdown. It was critical, even though the Mozart libretto suggests that the madness begins in earnest in the act 2 finale, that Lamos’s production remain consistent and that required the cast to explore and cope with an entirely new set of mental instabilities.

Lamos tried to release them from feeling too obligated to solve this matter so late in the day, and he suggested that they run the finale and let instinct be their guide for the moment.

While the finale was in progress, Helfrich whispered to Lamos, “Mark, there’s a move here that I don’t understand and maybe you can make sense of it.” Lamos replied sardonically, “Gee, how unusual.” This response captured the nucleus of Lamos’s difficulty in restaging *La finta giardiniera* in New York. There was a constant battle to make sense of, first, Mozart’s opera as written, second, the opera as filtered through Lamos’s production in Florida with its incomplete production book, and third, reimagining the opera again with some performers of different sensibilities in New York. Helfrich lamented that many movements in the video seemed random and unmotivated. The most obvious and logical solution to provide motivation for the performers would be ineffective in an opera primarily about madness and illogical behavior. Lamos, therefore, admitted that he had no immediate practical solution and told Helfrich that they would address each concern when they had more time alone. The cast finished the finale just before the end of the day, and Lamos said that he would give them notes when they returned to the act 2 finale at a later rehearsal.

Recapitulation

One of the most challenging aspects of directing is how to work with performers who are wrestling with characters’ emotions that are often elusive and ineffable. Director Michael Bloom addresses this problem when he writes about

the ideal, harmonizing balance achieved between director and performer in rehearsals:

For the most part, a director obtains superior results when she translates an awareness of the emotional currents of a text into playable actions. No matter where they've trained, most experienced American actors understand and work with action as a fundamental tool, whether the play is by Shakespeare, Molière, Ibsen, or Mamet. And a director who solicits actions rather than results gives actors a greater opportunity to make their own contribution. (119)

As Bloom makes clear, the director and the actors translate the text into “playable actions,” and the actors then play those actions or offer their own ideas about actions for the director to evaluate. This day’s rehearsal demonstrated clearly that there was an imbalance in the rehearsal hall. The performers spent a significant amount of time approaching, but not transgressing, rehearsal etiquette. Assistant Director Helfrich was clear when saying that certain decisions could not be made “without a director in the room.” When the cast seemed to go ahead anyway and searched for answers under the guise of exploring the music, it became evident that the actor/director partnership was out of alignment.

It was oddly unsettling that the cast was so gleeful when they were searching for solutions without their director present. They behaved as if they were liberated, which was surprising, for Lamos had never placed any severe

restrictions on them. He had actively solicited their contributions on many occasions and even admitted several times that he did not have, nor wanted to have, all the answers. Yet there they were, huddled center stage, energetic and vivacious, clapping their hands and shouting, "Break!"

For several days, the cast had struggled with exactly how their characters function in the world that Lamos had created for them. When he had shared his vision at the first company meeting, he generated an excitement and enthusiasm amongst the cast and all others present. Briefly outlining an inspired idea in a meeting is very different, however, from implementing the concept from scene to scene and moment to moment in a rehearsal. If Stanislavski was right in believing that generality is the enemy of art, then Lamos and the entire company had to discover the specifics within the concept for the artistic process to progress. And a refreshing interpretation of *La finta giardiniera* was certainly called into question when Brenda Harris said wittily that she knew "reality was a small commodity" in the production.

Harris's comment was the catalyst for the cast to "set some ground rules" for their characters despite the fact that the director was not in the room. It was a step they felt was imperative, and this overrode the unorthodoxy of their initiative as well as challenging Helfrich's admonition. Still, their action was an understandable one. Whether performers are in an opera, a play, a musical, or a puppet show, performing at the City Opera, on Broadway, at a community theater, or in a high school gym, they must have a firm notion of whom they are

playing and where their characters are going or else the production is at risk of being nebulous and forgettable.

Moreover, the fact that the cast did not tell Lamos what they had been up to signaled more than ever that they were apprehensive about the process. He did enter the room flustered about the communication gaffe with the costume department, but this need not have stopped them from revealing what they had accomplished in his absence. With so much at stake and so little time, they could have shared the work they had done on the music with Neal Goren to solve the focus problems in the recitative with the asides. This might have led to a discussion as to whether or not other challenges within the concept might be solved musically as well as dramatically. Lamos might have welcomed such contributions since he was having so much trouble adapting his ideas from Florida to the New York staging. With a few notable exceptions, Lamos encouraged their active participation and demonstrated that this was the most ideal working relationship.

This relationship is like the one Bloom describes above, and it is the interrelated relationship that opera director Jonathan Miller espouses as well:

What you're trying to do with actors is to give them an example of something, in the hope not that they will copy what you are doing, but that they will do a whole series of subsequent actions of their own in accordance with what you have shown them. (Delgado and Heritage 169)

Both Bloom and Miller are emphatic about actors playing actions inspired by an idea or example from a director. Unfortunately, Lamos's ideas, or "transla[tion]... of a text into playable actions" was still muddled at this point. Otherwise, the performers would not have taken it upon themselves to make ground rules for their characters. It was a shame when Lamos and the cast found themselves so far apart on this day when the cast was more excited about the work when he was not in the room.



Ninth day: September 11, 2003

Exposition

After the extensive act 2 finale and with the production concept still a thorny issue, the production team would welcome this day's work on act 3. This act should not have presented as many problems as the others since the primary focus of the act is to bring the plot of the opera to a tidy conclusion. This meant that questions of character development and motivation, ideally, would be minimized as all of the couples are neatly paired off in the end. The cast, however, still would not feel completely settled. Ironically, this was most apparent when they were involved in staging scenes with which they should have had less difficulty. The challenges would be far more obvious precisely because

act 3 is more straightforward and the difficulties the cast faced would have been less expected.

Lamos would choose to focus his solutions on the role of the Doctor. He was continually searching for ways that this character could clarify and ground his vision for the opera. This was more easily accomplished because the character had been invented by Lamos, which gave him the greatest flexibility in using the Doctor to solve problems. Beyond the oddity of having a mute character in an opera, the Doctor would prove to be an essential tool for Lamos to convey his thematic ideas. Moreover, by having a mute therapist take such a central role in helping the characters heal from psychic wounds, Lamos was offering the thought-provoking insight of non-verbal communication being equally effective as “talk” therapy in remedying madness.

The Doctor would, indeed, solve some individual moments in this rehearsal, but Lamos would soon have larger problems to solve. As the opera progressed to its final moments, Lamos would express a general dissatisfaction with the conclusion. This would have nothing to do with the performances, but rather with the overall tone. It was too happy, too neat, too *buffa*. What he wanted was the same sense of an ending often experienced in Shakespeare’s late romances.

Scholars have long separated Shakespeare’s late romances (e.g., *The Winter’s Tale*, *Cymbeline*, *The Tempest*) from the rest of his works precisely because the romances lack the convenient, improbable, and *deus-ex-machina*

conclusions of, for example, *The Comedy of Errors* or *Twelfth Night*.⁵⁹ In the romances and others of Shakespeare's late plays, the characters tend to have personal epiphanies about how they have arrived physically, mentally, and spiritually at the resolution, as toward the end of *The Tempest*:

Prospero: "And my ending is despair, / Unless I be relieved by
prayer, / Which pierces so that it assaults / Mercy itself and frees all
faults. / As you from crimes would pardon'd be, / Let your
indulgence set me free." (Epilogue 15-20)

This is easily contrasted with, say, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, where the characters literally wake up from their "dream" and have no recognition why they are miraculously in love with the one they are nearest:

Demetrius: "I [know] not by what power-- / But by some power it is,-
-my love to Hermia / Melted as the snow..." (4.1.161-63)

This quality of recognition, or lack thereof, is essential in most drama beyond Shakespeare, dating from its roots in Aristotelian dramaturgy, and is discussed at length in his *Poetics* (35-37).

Lamos seemed to want his production to remain faithful to this classical conception. The self-realization for each character was crucial, especially when Lamos constructed a world where therapy is the centerpiece. For therapy to be successful, there must be some acknowledgement or recognition of the patient's progression from illness to a state of relative health. Otherwise, a patient might

⁵⁹ *Deus-ex-machina* literally translates as "god from the machine," signifying actors playing gods in Greek drama that would often descend from a crane-like contraption at the end of the play to solve the unsolvable dilemmas of mere mortals. From the Roman critic Horace onward, the expression came to mean an ending of a play that was too contrived or too abrupt, which was seen to lessen the literary value of the work.

be in danger of repeating all the same self-destructive behaviors again. Therefore, Lamos wanted the characters in the opera to have this vital recognition, and this was why the ending he saw as too sappy would not do. To realize this depth of character development, Lamos would return to implementing more clearly the genre that so fascinated him in the beginning of the process: *dramma giocoso*.

Development: Staging

The rehearsal began with staging act 3. Helfrich mentioned that it “should be easy” since there were fewer ambiguous moments in this act than in the ones before. The initial act 3 staging did seem to run more smoothly, but not without the singers seeking some clarity. Chaos and uncertainty seemed the normal state of affairs in these initial staging rehearsals. While working on act 3, a lack of confidence remained among the cast. Act 3 is primarily concerned with tying up all the loose ends and moving toward a romantic and harmonious conclusion. At this point, the cast may have sounded harmonious, but they were far from that in terms of how their characters functioned in the world of Lamos’s production.

The production concept came to be at issue again during the first pause in the staging rehearsal. Matthew Chellis, as the *Podestà*, was confused as to why he was directing a line to the Doctor when he addresses Ramiro in the text. Since the Doctor is not in the actual opera, Lamos was continuously looking for ways to integrate him into the staging. Lamos knew that his invented character must appear as seamlessly connected to the action as the other written

characters or the effect would run the risk of seeming gimmicky. This is why he would sometimes forgo the stage directions in the text, and why he told Chellis to direct this particular line (*“Più non posso soffrir”* [“I can stand it no longer]) to the Doctor. Additionally, since the *Podestà* is clearly upset in this scene as Ramiro and Arminda pressure him to keep his former promises, Lamos told Chellis that the *Podestà* “is fed up with everyone and wants therapy from the Doctor.” This provided the dual solution of giving a reasonable motivation for Chellis as well as keeping the Doctor actively engaged in the scene. This solution led to another direction from Lamos to the entire cast. To keep the Doctor involved as much as possible, Lamos said to the cast that “when your character is ever in doubt, see the Doctor for venting. He is always there for you.”

The rehearsal continued with the staging of Ramiro’s final aria, *“Va pure ad altri in braccio”* (“Go then to the arms of another!”). The blocking moved faster because Sandra Piques Eddy, as Ramiro, knew the movement so well from her experience in the Florida production. Lamos gave minimal notes and encouragement as Eddy progressed through the aria with confidence and grace. She set the tone for a more relaxed rehearsal and this was welcomed by the cast.

While watching the act 3 finale, Lamos was concerned that he had established the wrong tone for the conclusion. He said to Helfrich, “Now, I’m afraid it has too much of a *‘buffa’* feel to it.” He had no difficulty with this comedic genre in the act 2 finale since the scene was filled with madness, mistaken identity, and an exotic location, and provided the perfect recipe for *opera buffa*.

As for the conclusion, Lamos mentioned that he felt that a serious component was missing despite the admittedly comedic ending the text suggests.

Underneath the *buffa* slapstick, campy plotline, and affected melodrama was a serious commentary on the fragile, desperate, and precarious nature of love.

Lamos never wanted to veer far from his initial impulse that the characters in his conception were very, very troubled. There was a fine line to be negotiated between allowing the audience to laugh harmlessly at ridiculous situations the characters encountered and making a derisive parody of mental illness. Lamos turned to Shakespeare for guidance.

He explained to Helfrich that he wanted the same quality that Shakespeare achieves at the conclusion of his late romances. He wanted his characters, as in Shakespearean romances, “to have a more progressive realization of the forces that have brought about the resolution.” Moreover, Lamos felt it would be worth investigating the characters’ reactions to the resolution rather than simply accept a “*buffa* oversimplification.” In practical terms, Lamos tried adjusting the tempo of the finale to achieve his more serious ending. This gave the cast more opportunities to demonstrate their recognition with gestures, facial expressions, and physical connections with one another. Saffer seemed to absorb all of this, but did mention that she was worried that slowing down too much “might adversely affect the tempo of the recits.” Lamos agreed, but felt that a happy medium could be reached. He said that they could explore this further at their next rehearsal of act 3.

Recapitulation

Lamos frequently used the term *dramma giocoso* to describe the blending of genres he wanted to achieve in his production of *La finta giardiniera*. Though the term is used almost exclusively in the world of opera, it was a playwright who first used the appellation. Mozart scholar Daniel Hertz describes how the Italian playwright and librettist Carlo Goldoni essentially created a “new” genre in opera of *dramma giocoso*:

In several librettos written around 1750, Goldoni combined character types from serious operas (*parti seri*), usually a pair of noble lovers, with the ragtag of servants, peasants, and others (*parti buffi*) who populated his unalloyed comic librettos.

Sometimes he also added roles that were halfway between the two in character (*di mezzo carattere*). His name for such an amalgam, applied fairly consistently from 1748 on, was *dramma giocoso*. It summed up the ingredients quite well, inasmuch as *dramma* by itself signified at the time the grander, heroic world of *opera seria*, while *giocare* means to play or frolic, also to deceive or make a fool of. “A frolic with serious elements” would be one paraphrase of *dramma giocoso*. (195-96)

It is fair to say that the genre was created out of Goldoni’s desire to please his opera audiences who seemed to have frustrated him to no end. In a preface to a libretto,⁶⁰ Goldoni articulated his frustration by writing, “The populace decide the outcome in an instant; if the opera fails, the book is bad. If it is a little serious, it’s

⁶⁰ *De gustibus non est disputandum* (In Matters of Taste, There Can Be No Disputes)

poor because it doesn't bring laughs; if it's too ridiculous, it's poor because it lacks nobility" (Hertz 96). This is precisely the frustration that Lamos was experiencing in this rehearsal. He felt that the opera was coming off as "too *buffa*," which in Goldoni's mind had the danger of appearing to lack nobility. Goldoni decided to give up "such a disgusting exercise" and invent a "mixed genre" that would "succeed with a wider public and accommodate the many demands inherent in opera" (Hertz 96). If Lamos could achieve a delicate balance in his production, then he would be as successful as Goldoni in gaining the favor of "a wider public."

It appears that Goldoni satisfied himself, if we are to believe his writing in a different libretto preface:⁶¹ "These *dramma giocosi* of mine are in demand all over Italy and are heard with delight" (Hertz 196). The high point of this new genre, and significant to the young Mozart, came in 1760 when Niccolò Piccinni composed music for Goldoni's *La buona figliuola* (The Good-Natured Girl). This libretto was the one, above all others, that influenced the opera world most at a time when it was hungry for innovation. And who, above most others, welcomed such innovation and the challenge to create a masterwork but Mozart. The qualification of "musical" masterwork is probably more appropriate since Daniel Hertz summarizes the consensus view when he calls the libretto of *La finta giardiniera* "an anonymous and clumsy offspring of *La buona figliuola*" (199).

Both *La finta giardiniera* and *La buona figliuola* contain the perfect recipe for a *dramma giocoso*: a nobleman in love with a woman beneath his station (both garden-girls, in fact), who, it turns out, is also nobly born. This way, the

⁶¹ *I portentosi effetti della madre natura* (The Miraculous Effects of Mother Nature)

operas can conclude by honoring the Great Chain of Being.⁶² Both operas have *seria* lovers, *di mezzo carattere*,⁶³ and remaining *buffa* clowns and sassy servants. Beyond the character types written into the librettos, the composers help the “frolic with serious elements” by composing music that helps to distinguish the characters. For instance, in *La finta giardiniera*, according to Daniel Hertz, “The *seria* lovers are Arminda and Ramiro, both sopranos, and Ramiro, correspondingly, has the most coloratura singing of the opera” (199). Arminda, not to be outdone, “establishes her credentials as a *seria* character with a very long range aria in G minor, *Allegro agitato*, at the beginning of act 2” (199). The *buffa* characters, on the other hand, typically are given “simple strophic songs of folklike nature” or “simple, songlike ditties and rapid dialogue exchanges” (197).

These musical distinctions are precisely why Lamos was well-advised to start with the music when he wanted to alter the emotional tone of the finale to conclude the opera. Slowing down the music might, as Saffer explained, “adversely affect the tempo of the recits,” but Lamos was willing to sacrifice the purity of the music in favor of establishing the emotional tone that he wanted. The finale of any opera is the last chance a director has to engage and affect the audience, so it was not a surprise that Lamos felt that the music should serve his

⁶² The Great Chain of Being is a metaphysical, hierarchical structuring of all matter and life with God at the top and base minerals at the bottom. Current to the eighteenth century, humans were believed to be in the middle of the chain and further subdivided with king at the top, then princes, then nobles, then the common man. Marriages were often arranged so that the order was not disrupted, which is one of the reasons why it was so scandalous for people of different classes to marry.

⁶³ The term is literally defined as “half character” or, loosely half-comic, half-serious character. These characters did not reside exclusively in the comic or serious world. They might be serious and heroic in one scene, then absurd and silly in the next. The *Podestà* is a good example in *La finta giardiniera* as a high-born Mayor with many ridiculous tendencies.

production concept more than he should serve the Mozart purists if the recitatives would, indeed, be adversely affected as Saffer suggested. This choice would become all the more crucial given Lamos's desire to have the characters, finally, experience a moment of clarity and self-realization instead of leaving them and the audience in a state of tragicomic ambiguity, or worse, as he said, captive in "a *buffa* oversimplification."

Because a *dramma giocoso* is a blend of opera *buffa* and opera *seria*, in effect, a mixing of the irreverently comic with the tragically heroic, one has to tread lightly to achieve the right emotional balance at the end. The old theatre saying of "leave 'em laughing" is tempting since *buffa* is an essential ingredient of *La finta giardiniera*. Lamos, however, was after something different. He wanted the audience to feel the full weight and gravity of his concept: namely, that love will find a way. This may sound as clichéd as the abused libretto, but Lamos's focus on the "way" to love rather than the bliss of "love" shifts the trivial toward a more complex exploration. Lamos wanted his production to demonstrate that the heartache, the betrayal, the confusion, and the madness are all worth it in the end. The opera resolves all the love pairings, restores order to chaos, but not without cost. And Lamos's altering the tempo of the music at this stage of rehearsal would expose this cost by having the characters take time to realize what they had suffered so that the opera did not end by giving them and the audience a false sense of security. The characters do, indeed, end "happily," but perhaps the *dramma giocoso* does not guarantee the "ever after," just as in life.



Tenth Day: September 12, 2003

Exposition

This rehearsal, unquestionably, would be the most effectual and successful rehearsal to date for Lamos. All of the prior struggles with the production concept were eased by the fact that Lamos would hone in on the pure theatricality of the second act rather than the convoluted issues that were still not resolved. More than in the past, Lamos would rely on his experience as a theatre director. Whether he was conscious of it or not, this would provide him with an assurance lacking in previous days.

The first example of his theatrical sensibility came when Lamos worked with Brenda Harris on the “S&M” aria. The structure of the aria is a creative challenge for both singer and director. The song repeats word and phrases several times, which would cause Lamos to tell Harris to “telegraph more the need to repeat yourself.”

This seemingly simple direction would have within it a crucial directorial statement pertaining to Harris’s particular type of aria.⁶⁴ Lamos wanted her to “telegraph more the need to repeat” so that the audience would feel that her emotional intensity demanded repetition rather than that she was just a singer simply obeying the score and singing the same notes. Often in opera, the sound

⁶⁴ “*Vorrei punirti indegno*” is written in a modified sonata form. It is similar to an orchestral sonata, but the precise form is adjusted to fit an aria. What is typical of both forms of music is that there are repeats (or “Recapitulation” as termed in a sonata) of a theme. These repeats sometimes vary the character of the original material for emphasis or ornamentation while still remaining faithful to the theme by often staying in the same tonic key. The reason that these recapitulations were so vital for Lamos was that he wanted Harris to use them as another way to develop her character.

can take such precedence over the sense that a director without theatre experience might allow for the song to speak for itself, redundant repeats and all. Conversely, Lamos felt that Harris could demonstrate an emotional distinction from the first section through her phrasing, physicality, blocking, and vocal expression. This distinction would show that her need to repeat was an imperative and not simply an echo. In short, Lamos would give this direction because he was confident that he was directing an actor as much as a singer.

Directing the only professional actor in the cast would be the next time Lamos's knowledge of theatre history would guide his directorial choices. In attempting to refine Nick Wyman's character of the Doctor, Lamos would say that he wanted the character to have the same function as a chorus from Greek drama. In ancient Greece, choral groups often acted as interlocutors between the audience and the characters on stage. They commented on the action, questioned the characters, and provided a moral basis on which the audience might judge the events. The Doctor's being mute was a deliberate choice because Lamos wanted the character to be more of an observer and not a vocal participant who might upstage the singers. He did, on the other hand, want Wyman to be an active observer and use his non-verbal communication to provide running commentary on the action typical of a Greek chorus. Lamos gave the example: "It's as if you are one of those plate spinners; you have these seven plates spinning at once and you need to step back and watch them carefully." By watching the Doctor watch the patients, Lamos expected the audience to be able to appreciate the fragility and damage in the characters by

witnessing specific moments in their therapy. Again, Lamos was always conscious of the fact that his concept could be trivialized, so he went to great lengths to establish it as a serious study of psychosis.

To balance this serious study with humor, as befits a *dramma giocoso*, Lamos would employ a comic theatrical device for the remainder of the rehearsal. He was ready to introduce the cast to the zany world of *commedia dell'arte* for a large section of act 2. This comic device had not been included in the Florida production, so everyone would be more excited to explore the possibilities of a fresh approach. This would provide a welcome burst of both creative energy and amusement for a cast who needed some levity.

Development: Staging

This day began with a run-through of act 2. Typically, Lamos had the cast run a scene, whether it was a recitative or an aria, before giving blocking and/or character notes. If there were many acting or blocking notes in a given scene, the company might run the scene again to solidify the details. If the notes specified slight adjustments of movement or a simple character suggestion, then Lamos was content to side-coach and let the run-through continue. As everyone knew, he could always rely on the copious notes the stage management team were taking during the run.⁶⁵

⁶⁵ Hardly anything seemed to escape the notice of the stage management team since there was at least one of them assigned to each aspect of the production: principals, supers, technical concerns, etc. Moreover, if anything did sneak by the stage managers, then the two assistant directors might be called upon to resolve the issue. In short, Lamos was very well supported.

One significant note came during Arminda's aria, *Vorrei punirti indegno* ("I wanted to punish you, worthless man."). This was the aria that quickly was nicknamed the "S&M" aria where Arminda wraps the Count up with the garden hose and proceeds to beat him with it. Lamos was having difficulty seeing how Brenda Harris was communicating the contradictory aspects of the aria. He told her, "There should be more wanting, and then resisting, wanting, and then resisting." Lamos wanted this contradiction to be emphasized because it was a central thematic point to his conception, which is that love has an innately illogical and contradictory nature. Lamos wanted Harris to demonstrate in the aria that love has the possibility for both extreme joy and extreme pain (read: S&M), which sometimes can be experienced simultaneously. Harris also had the help of the text that reads: "*Vorrei strapparti il core/...Ma mi trattiene amore /...Ah! Mi confondo, oh Dio / Fra l'ira e la pietà.*" ("I wanted to tear out your heart/...But the love that makes me sigh/ Will not let me do it...Oh God, I am torn/ Between anger and pity."). Harris quickly integrated Lamos's direction and was much more physically expressive the next time through. She captured both the contempt and the compassion of Arminda, which made for a bizarre yet accessible interpretation. Lamos's last comment to Harris was that it was much better, but that she needed to "telegraph more [her] need to repeat [her]self."

Lamos stopped the action again during Harris's aria when he was concerned, again, that his invented character of the Doctor was not active enough. Lamos told Nick Wyman to be more involved with and concerned for the patients. Furthermore, he mentioned that the audience should be able to

sense how the Doctor interprets the given actions of a patient by taking more specific notes. These notes should let the audience into his therapeutic process by showing what the Doctor finds confusing or encouraging. Lamos even mentioned to Wyman that he should relate more to the audience, especially since the convention of the fourth wall would be broken from the outset of the opera. Another reason Lamos wanted the Doctor to connect more directly to the audience was that he considered him to be “sort of like a Greek choral figure for the audience.”

Beyond the Greeks, another historical theatre element dominated the next section of rehearsal when the ensemble donned, for the first time, the *commedia dell'arte* costumes. Lamos had the cast perform the costume change onstage instead of offstage. Therefore, Lamos wanted stage business so that the audience was not just watching a lengthy wardrobe change. Lamos said that putting on the costumes should have three separate beats: 1. The patients should exhibit a childlike glee about the costumes similar to children’s fascination with “dress-up” or Halloween; 2. They should all feel good wearing the costumes as if the clothes are an immediate balm to their woes; 3. Once the clothes are on, the cast should ridicule the *Podestà* who has become their favorite target.

Despite *commedia*’s popularity as a theatrical style, Lamos knew that he had to adapt the form within the confines of an opera. An example of how he did this was the way in which he choreographed the Count and Nardo’s entrance before the act 2 finale begins. The costumes lent themselves to a heightened physicality, so Lamos suggested that the Count and Nardo sneak in arm-in-arm

taking exaggerated steps and hunched over in a stealthy pose. The picture was similar to a cartoonlike movement of sneaking in a room on tiptoe. To add to the fun, Lamos instructed them to take each step in perfect timing to the music. This also fit the text that suggests that they are frightened and need to be careful of how they proceed (“*Oh che tenebre, che orrore/ Camminiamo a poco a poco*” [“Oh, what darkness, what horror/ Let us walk very slowly”]). The effect was that the movement, the music, and the text all fit seamlessly together to create a charming *commedia* “*lazzi*.”⁶⁶

Another “*lazzi*” that caused some concern behind the scenes involved the introduction of large flashlights on the stage. Once the entire cast was onstage, groping around in the darkness of the imagined “grotto,” Lamos came up with the idea of using flashlights to illuminate the stage. It was an idea that had the potential of putting creativity and practicality at odds. Several stage managers converged, unbeknownst to Lamos, to discuss the execution of the idea. Was there an upstage entrance in the wings where a stagehand could hand the performers the flashlights? Who would collect the flashlights once the performers were done with them? Would there be a prop to carry the lights so that they would not need to be held in some ungainly fashion by one stagehand?⁶⁷

⁶⁶ Prominent *commedia dell'arte* scholar John Rudlin cites one of the earliest definitions of *lazzi* from Luigi Riccoboni in 1728: “In sum they are bits of uselessness which consist only in comic business invented by the actor according to personal genius” (57). *Lazzi* are useless because they “are inspired by the action but do not further it” (57). They are frequently “sight-gags” (55) that are “most useful when the action is flagging” (57).

⁶⁷ It appeared that Lamos was not hampered often with the practical execution of his ideas at New York City Opera. The scale of opera and its obviously larger production staff gave Lamos a bit more freedom than he might have had in the theatre. The cohort of stage managers usually found a way to resolve many

The final solution was an excellent fusion of sight and sound. A stagehand would stand in the wings with a prop basket full of large flashlights. As the music established a regular rhythm, the performers would form a line across the stage and pass the flashlights one by one in perfect rhythm with the music. Once the final performer received a flashlight, the cast would disperse and the flashlights would shine in all directions at once. This was a reflection of the music growing more chaotic and desperate as well as a visual reminder of Sandrina's state of madness. Implementing this solution took the remainder of the allotted rehearsal time, yet Lamos seemed visibly pleased about such a productive day.

Recapitulation

Spanish theatre director Lluís Pasqual describes the point in time when theatre directors began to have much more influence in the aesthetic decisions and production values around opera staging:

I came to the opera at a point where even the stage director was an important new development. Opera was trying to shake the dust from itself, and renew its audience. Together with the record industry, it was completely renewed. It lost part of its bourgeois audience, and renewed the rest. This called for a new aesthetic, and beginning with people like Visconti, followed by people like Strehler and Chéreau, opera became something else: a place

of the challenges Lamos presented to them, often without him knowing that there was a problem to solve in the first place.

where it was possible to have an aesthetic discourse to accompany the music. (Delgado and Heritage 218)

If the mid-nineteenth century was when directors established their profession and gained more power over stage productions, the mid-twentieth century was when opera practitioners recognized that visionary directors could help revitalize the art form and attract new audiences. It was in this rehearsal that Lamos's credentials as a veteran theatre director were most evident and helped to revitalize a rehearsal process that had sometimes been troubled.

Two of the three major concerns for this rehearsal were rooted in Lamos's theatrical background. His discussion with Nick Wyman about injecting an element of Greek drama into the character of the Doctor, coupled with the company's enthusiastic exploration of *commedia dell'arte*, gave the impression that Lamos was rehearsing a play just as much as he was an opera. While all of his directorial choices were informed by his experience in spoken drama, this rehearsal was unique for its nearly exclusive focus on the language of the theatre.

It is not surprising that Lamos referenced Greek drama when he expressed what he wanted from Wyman. It must be remembered that Wyman was the only cast member who was not a singer, so it was natural for Lamos to give this stage actor a theatrical example and expect him to understand the reference. There followed a refreshing clarity for Wyman once he grasped that his character was "like a Greek choral figure." He appreciated this reference especially since there was no antecedent for Wyman to consult. Placing

Wyman's character squarely in the Greek theatrical world provided him with a valuable tool to understand the depth that Lamos wanted from the Doctor, and it took the character from the periphery to the center of the action to serve as an indispensable conduit for the audience. Previously, Wyman had appeared to hesitate to involve himself too much as the Doctor for fear of upstaging the singing from all the patients. From Lamos's using the Greek theatrical reference, Wyman reestablished his centrality to the thematic significance of the production. He was the Head of Spa, after all.

Besides the focus on Greek drama, Lamos spent much rehearsal time on *commedia dell'arte*. Adding the *commedia* elements provided a welcome energy to the rehearsal, for those elements had not been included in the Florida production. The few Florida cast members now in New York were more visibly engaged by having something fresh to work on. Lamos showed more confidence and certainty about what he wanted for the scenes, he blocked the movements much more quickly than he had the other scenes, and he seemed to enjoy demonstrating the exaggerated physical movements he suggested to the cast. In fact, quite often the cast would do a variation on his movement that he liked better than his own and, through his laughter, told them to keep the idea.

The physicality and improbability of *commedia* is well-suited for opera, for the style matches the large scale inherent in opera production. Histrionic gestures, exuberant costumes, and booming voices are elements that would suit a 2,586-seat theatre like New York City Opera's. The willing suspension of disbelief must be more willingly suspended in opera, as Robert Lepage explains:

An extreme example of the theatre is opera. Opera is mega theatre, it's hyper-theatre, everything is so theatrical, more theatrical than theatre because absolutely everything is fake. You don't sing 'pass me the salt' in opera. Some people write that, but then you end up on Broadway in musicals and that's not opera. Real opera is always vertical because it's always about myth and the gods, and, if it's not about gods, it's about metamorphosis and transfiguration and things like that. (Delgado and Heritage 144)

Metamorphosis and transfiguration are exactly what Lamos was trying to emphasize. The characters literally metamorphosed in front of us as they donned new identities in their *commedia* garb. All of this was to aid an element of transfiguration of the characters so they could arrive at a place of health through humor, playacting, and pure fun. And fun was had by everyone at this rehearsal.

It was undoubtedly the most successful rehearsal to date. After so much wrestling with his ideas and confidence, perhaps the success of the rehearsal was born out of a subconscious desire of Lamos to play to his strength and remain, for a moment, in the world of the theatre.



Chapter 5

Rehearsal Log: “Stumble” and Full Run-Throughs

Eleventh Day: September 13, 2003

Exposition

The day would begin with a stumble-through of act 1.⁶⁸ A “stumble-through” is not as recognizable a term for a rehearsal as a “run-through,” but many directors use the designation to signify the place in the process between staging rehearsals and run-throughs. It is not a staging rehearsal because there is no expectation that the rehearsal will stop until the act is complete, and it is not a run-through because there is no expectation that the run will be smooth and polished. The act will “stumble” along, ideally not tripping up too often to require major reworking. Primarily, the purpose of a stumble-through is for a director to evaluate all of the previous blocking and character development and to begin to see some semblance of the pacing and the thematic through-line of the production.

⁶⁸ Before the rehearsal would actually begin, Lamos and some of the production staff discussed the performance of the lead in *Lucia di Lammermoor*, which was currently performing in repertory at City Opera. The performer, Jennifer Welch-Babidge, was visibly pregnant, and the choice was made to work her condition into the opera rather than make the more simple choice of hiding it with voluminous amounts of tulle. Lamos commented how it was a bold choice that added several new provocative layers to the opera. He noted that the choice was yet another example of how seeming adversity can be transformed into artistry.

This stumble-through would spend the first block of rehearsal on notes and reworking specific sections. The notes would ultimately emphasize the relationships between the characters that Lamos was just beginning to discern as a result of seeing the entire act 1 for the first time. The clarity of these relationships would be crucial to the effectiveness of the production since there were so many added layers, possibilities, and complexities from Lamos's production concept. What Lamos would stress over and over again in this rehearsal would be for each cast member to sharpen the specificity of their character choices, which would clarify the relationships between all the characters. This move from the general to the specific is a fundamental task of performers at this stage in any rehearsal process. This production would welcome such a focus on specifics since this is what had been lacking often in previous rehearsals.

Development: Stumble-through and notes for act 1

This day of rehearsal focused on the notes session with Lamos and the cast after the stumble-through of act 1. The primary note was a general comment that the performers should "trust that the sadness that you are playing is real and not a mocking or pathetic sorrow." This would, in turn, create the possibility of a real happiness rather than a fairytale "happily ever after." The more truthful the sadness and despair, then the more accepting the audience would be that the characters' joy and contentment at the end is not contrived. Lamos added that while the opera is more comedy than drama, "Do not forget

the dark undertone.” One way that he suggested they capture the “dark undertone” would be for them to develop a more specific and direct connection to the audience. For instance, they could gaze more pointedly out into the house when they were downstage to give the effect that “the patients are looking out the window.” The audience would thereby be more drawn into the world of the asylum and feel more sympathetic to the patient’s lack of liberty and stability.

Other than some blocking notes about who should be standing where and when, Lamos gave other notes that indicated his priorities at this stage of the rehearsal process. Most of his notes centered on the cast’s reactions to one another. The opera has a comparatively small cast, so the relationships between them are crucial. The first note on the subject was Lamos’s comment: “It helps the conceit when you play that you are used to each other’s neuroses.” He wanted the cast not to be so surprised about the bizarre behavior of some of the patients because it would ruin the illusion that most of them have lived together for some time. Moreover, the less one reacts on stage to someone exhibiting some strange or awkward behavior, the more comic possibilities can follow. For instance, if one character is banging his head against the wall and another one is standing next to him unfazed, the audience will see humor in such unexpected indifference.

Exhibiting strange behavior was at the heart of the next note as well. Whether a cast member was acting or reacting in an odd way, Lamos sacrificed clarity and said, “Even if I don’t understand what your choice is, as long as it is specific, I buy it!” Conversely, though Lamos was willing to risk clarity for

specificity, he was not willing to sacrifice the reality of the world-on-stage. He said, “This is a general Mark Lamos thing. Please don’t ever, in an opera, mime that you are talking to someone in character. Everything that needs to be said is sung. If you do it, it takes us out of the construct of belief that we are in.”

Before Lamos wrapped up the notes so that he could rework some sections, he gave one final instruction that caused the greatest reaction from the cast. When he could not quite articulate what was wrong with a particular moment, he said, “I want to watch it again because I have a new idea.” This caused Brenda Harris to reply with an emphatic and drawn out “Noooo!,” and she placed her hands over her ears in an “I’m-not-listening” fashion and shouted in jest, “Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah....” Saffer quickly joined Harris, then Chellis, then Phillips, then Anderson, and so on. The opera was already so complex and, at times, convoluted, that the last thing some of the cast members wanted to hear was a “new idea.” Lamos took their ribbing in stride and laughed along with everyone else.

Lamos spent the remaining moments of the rehearsal reworking two sections in two different arias.⁶⁹ First, he wanted to clarify the *Podestà*’s delusional episode in his aria, “*Dentro il mio petto io sento*” (“In my breast I hear a sweet sound”). This is the aria to which Lamos had added a metatheatrical touch by having Matthew Chellis address the actual City Opera orchestra when he mentions the instruments and conducts the music he hears. Lamos felt that it

⁶⁹ Even though the company was almost in “run-through” mode, Lamos wanted to explore and fine-tune the opera as much he could, time permitting. This added strength to the premise that the Florida production was just a foundation for the New York production. Lamos was continually wrestling with himself and the material to add fresh insights. There was never the feeling in the rehearsal hall that this production was simply going to be a remount, as convenient, practical, and stress-free as this might have been.

was important that this delusion should be the *Podestà's* alone, and this point had not been clear in the stumble-through. Lamos had noticed then that someone was trying to see what the *Podestà* was doing, so he added the movement of Ramiro and Nardo walking down to the lip of the stage to see what the *Podestà* was looking at while he was conducting. They, of course, could see nothing, so they looked at each other in bewilderment, shrugged, and returned casually to their positions upstage. This action highlighted the severity of the *Podestà's* delusional state as well as the total indifference the other two feel about the *Podestà's* passion for Sandrina. The blasé reaction of Ramiro and Nardo to the *Podestà's* agitated state also helped to clarify the relationships among them, which would continue to make the *Podestà* the laughingstock of the group as much as possible.

The other relationships that Lamos wanted to work on toward the end of the day concerned the Count Belfiore's first aria, "*Che beltà, che leggiadria*" ("What beauty, what charm"). Lamos was concerned that the other patients were mocking the Count or were embarrassed by the unrestrained way in which he revealed his heart. Some of the reactions to the aria were quite funny, but Lamos felt that it was better to tone down the comedy in favor of a more realistic feeling. He told the cast, "[Your reactions] can't be campy or comic. You should all be touched by him. You should play it absolutely realistically." Lamos then added more specific movement for the Doctor to manage the patients who were closer to the Count. He wanted to create the sense that the Doctor was bringing them together to witness the Count's confessions to Arminda so they would all

feel a connection to the therapy he was providing not just for the couple, but for all of them collectively.

Recapitulation

Known primarily for his foundational texts on the craft of acting, Constantine Stanislavski also trained opera singers in the latter part of his career. His writing demonstrates quite clearly that his “system” was applicable and transferrable to opera:

You must come to love the words and learn to bind them to the music. An opera actor is only creative when he produces sound in visual form. Make it a rule for yourselves: not to sing a single word to no purpose. Without the organic union of words and music there is no such thing as the art of opera. (22)

Stanislavski’s words reveal one of the pillars of his actor training, which is that nothing can happen on stage unless a performer finds for his character a specific purpose. A line should not be uttered, a note should not be sung, a movement should not be executed, until the external action is justified by an internal one. This focus on specificity and truth were the main themes in the rehearsal hall for Lamos on this day. He had enjoyed, the day before, his most successful effort by employing his theatrical experience, so embracing the legacy of Stanislavski’s wisdom on this day was not surprising.

This day marked the rehearsal which, up to that point, Lamos had spent the most time exploring the inner lives of the characters. There were certainly

echoes of Stanislavski when he used such phrases such as, “Trust that the sadness you are playing is real,” or “Do not forget the dark undertone” (read: subtext), or “You should play [the scene] absolutely realistically.” By instructing the cast to focus on their inner lives and the richness of their imaginations to create truthful moments, the troublesome days that had been taken up with the eccentricities and difficulties of the plot were put to rest for the moment.

Lamos trusted that he could speak the language of the theatre to the singers in order to achieve his goal of revealing the darker realities of love that lurked within the problematic and convoluted text. Lamos knew that sadness captured on stage for the briefest of moments could induce the audience to overlook the distractions of a poorly conceived libretto. And inspiring the imagination and commitment of his actors to play the truth was the surest way to achieve these evocative moments onstage. Stanislavski captured this sentiment while directing an opera singer:

There is one thing to remember—the expressiveness of the words. They must paint pictures for my imagination of the life created by the author. But how shall I, the listener, be able to visualize these pictures if you, the conveyor of them, do not see them? You must infect me with the desire to see your pictures, images, and I shall follow your example and also create images in my own imagination. Act through the words and the music on my imagination and not just on my eardrum. (25)

Lamos also followed Stanislavski by asking for a kind of specificity above all else that would stir and “infect” the imagination of the audience. He went so far as to say that even if he did not understand the choice a performer was making, it would be permissible “as long as it is specific.” In an opera where madness was nearly ubiquitous, it is not surprising that Lamos would not comprehend all the character choices the singers made. What would be unforgivable to him, however, would be choices that were vague and purposeless. This is why Lamos spent so much time in this rehearsal clarifying moments, always encouraging the performers to make more specific choices. It was not enough, for instance, for Chellis’s *Podestà* to exploit the humor of the scene and conduct the City Opera orchestra while the others looked on. The better choice was for Nardo and Ramiro to move downstage to juxtapose their realities of seeing nothing and reacting nonchalantly to the *Podestà*’s antics in a way that would solidify the relationships between the patients and heighten the *Podestà*’s neuroses. These more specific choices clarified the objectives of all onstage, which is the linchpin of Stanislavski’s system. While working on the concept of objectives with a singer, Stanislavski said that one must always have a clear objective, for “You cannot come out onto the stage and do something ‘in general’” (9). By emphasizing this theatrical law, Stanislavski established one of the foundations for Western acting in the twentieth century.

Stanislavski’s demand for specificity and truth onstage has influenced all directing since his passing. More recently, English director Declan Donnellan expanded upon the theme of specificity:

The text is a generalization; the actor's belief and imagination must be specific. That's why it's pointless saying "That's not Hamlet" because there are as many different Hamlets as there are actors multiplied by the days of the week. It's seeing how the actor has made the words specific which is moving. (Delgado and Heritage 85)

This notion of being specific and avoiding doing something "in general" calls forth the more familiar acting adage purportedly said by Stanislavski: "Generality is the enemy of all art." Lamos was fighting this enemy during this rehearsal and, again, scored more victories than he had earlier on in the campaign.



Twelfth Day: September 16, 2003

Exposition

This rehearsal would begin by continuing the stumble-through of act 1. Almost immediately, Lamos began to turn to Helfrich to comment on a particularly bad piece of directing. Lamos's self-deprecation demonstrated his willingness to throw out his previous direction when it became obvious that his initial idea was misguided. He took a practical approach that there were simply good ideas and bad ideas, and no amount of directorial pride would allow him to ignore his bad ideas.

The cast seemed to appreciate this working method, though some seemed to appreciate it more than others. Matthew Chellis especially welcomed

any opportunity to clarify something that was muddy. His demeanor and body language on this day especially would appear to shout out “Thank God!” whenever Lamos acknowledged a confusing piece of business, blocking, or character motivation.

Chellis was the one performer who had been the most frustrated with the process of “reimagining” this opera. Or, perhaps, he was the cast member who was most demonstrative in his displeasure. He would never be baldly defiant, but he would have no qualms about expressing his frustration in non-verbal ways such as sidelong glances and sighs of frustration. This behavior would continue through most of the day. Though it would not stop or interrupt any rehearsal in an obvious way, his attitude would create an energy in the room that seemed to bespeak a general distrust in the director.

Lamos never chose to address directly Chellis’s disgruntled behavior because he either did not notice it or felt there was more to be gained fixing problems than in mollifying a performer’s agitation, however justified. Furthermore, he would have plenty of opportunities to work with other singers to solve complex issues. For instance, an awkward transition would challenge the singers, directors, and musical staff to find a workable solution. The act 1 finale would take several runs before all were content with it. Lastly, in the thick of an act 2 stumble-through, Lisa Saffer and Brian Anderson would run into a character dilemma that had broad implications for both their performances. In the end, the rehearsal would prove mostly successful not because the director and cast had ready solutions to all the problems but because they would confront the adversity

with the spirit of an ensemble finding their collaborative stride at just the right time as full run-throughs were looming.

Development: Continue Stumble-through act 1

On this day, the company began reworking act 1 where they had left off. Lamos did not have many comments until he reviewed Serpetta's *cavatina*, "*Un marito, oh Dio, vorrei*" ("Dear God, I would like a husband"). During a particularly complicated movement, Lamos could not contain himself and remarked aloud, "Now about that cross: That was a ghastly piece of direction. Can we fix that?" Though Lamos questioned his own work by commenting on the "ghastly piece of direction," he decided to have Helfrich make a note of the problem rather than stopping the stumble-through. Lamos often showed a keen sense of when to let a run-through continue and when it needed to be stopped to control any further damage.⁷⁰ Lamos chose to ignore the bad direction in the blocking of Serpetta's *cavatina*, but he did decide to halt the run-through to address the transition from the *cavatina* into Sandrina's "*Tortorella*" ("turtle dove") song.

The problem of transitions is most evident during run-throughs, and this particular transition presented additional problems. Not only is there a drastic change of mood from Serpetta's coquettish flirtations to Sandrina's somber lamentation, but the complete opera has an aria for Serpetta that had been cut from Lamos's production. This aria would undoubtedly have helped with the

⁷⁰ Trusting his instincts was an important feature of Lamos's directorial process. In this instance, the performers had to be imbued with a rhythm of the entire production as soon as possible, yet Lamos did not want to rush the process either. Rushing could have had a harmful psychological effect on the cast because, if Lamos ignored too many problems in a run-through, then the whole production could have felt like a train wreck.

transition, so without it, there was bound to be an awkward shift in the tone of the scene. When the scene faltered and a solution did not present itself immediately, the associate conductor, Neal Goren, offered a musical suggestion to help smooth out the transition. He said that he could either alter the tempo at the end of Serpetta's recitative or, although it would be more obvious, he could add a *fermata* so that the transition could happen at any pace necessary.⁷¹

For Lamos, changing the tempo of the recitative would allow Saffer to begin the "turtle dove" *cavatina* in more or less the tempo that had ended the previous scene, but the slower pace might damage the comic nature of Serpetta's final lines. The *fermata* would give Lamos as much time as he needed to get Saffer into place and set the stage picture for the song, but any clearly perceptible halt in the action might give the transition too much importance and harm the overall pacing of the opera.

Saffer stepped in and said, "Maybe it's not my place to say, but I have an idea." She then suggested to Julianne Borg a way to "end the recit[ative] more deliberately to give a clearer sense of one piece ending so that another can begin." This choice would conveniently circumvent the need for a smooth transition, for there would be no attempt to link the pieces together. The songs would follow one another separately with Borg's more emphatic delivery to end the scene. Lamos liked this idea and there was no sense that he minded Saffer's giving direction to Borg. Saffer had handled the situation very professionally, and

⁷¹ A *fermata* is an added notation in the score by the conductor that tells the orchestra to hold until the signal is given to continue. It is often used so that the stage director does not always have to time stage movements, especially transitions, to the precise tempo of the score. In fact, there is an old joke in the opera world that suggests that all stage directors really work in the *fermatas*.

Lamos wanted to utilize the *fermata* to support the finality of Borg's recitative by holding the music a moment before Saffer began the "turtle dove" song.

Lamos did not have anything to say about Saffer's performance. He did, however, give her one of the most distinctive directions thus far in the process about the scene immediately following this song. During the recitative, Arminda (Brenda Harris) announces to Sandrina (Saffer) that she is going to marry the Count Belfiore, Sandrina's former lover. The news overwhelms Sandrina. She sputters out a few desperate lines and then faints. Commenting on the delivery of her lines before she faints, Lamos instructed Saffer to "be more diagnostic in an eighteenth-century way." He wanted her to be more preoccupied with her body and try to reason out the strange symptoms of burning, freezing, heart failure, and "spirit being torn asunder" as given in the text. Then, when she has no power to reason out what is happening to her, she loses consciousness and falls to the floor. Even with the modern setting, Lamos still wanted to highlight the eighteenth-century obsession with the science and symptoms of ailments.

Saffer immediately integrated Lamos's obscure direction and played the moment again with a more distressed and desperate physicality, trying to rescue her body from a complete meltdown. This ultimately proved unsuccessful for her, and she collapsed lifeless on the ground. Lamos was impressed and remarked to Helfrich, "There's not that many performers you can give that direction to, but she gets it!"

After the troublesome transition was solved, the cast moved on to the task of cleaning up the act 1 finale. In the text, the characters are all contending with

the revelation that the “garden-girl” of the opera’s title may have a suspicious past. This suspicion has a ripple-effect of calling into question all the major relationships on stage (i.e., Nardo/Serpetta, Serpetta/*Podestà*, *Podestà*/Sandrina, Sandrina/Count, Count/Armindia, Armindia/Ramiro). The blocking as set down in previous rehearsals had been as frantic and chaotic as the libretto. For instance, one stage picture had the *Podestà* raging back and forth downstage with Nardo and Serpetta in tow, while the three couples are upstage of him, one in the “garden,” the second under the sheets on Sandrina’s bed, and the third behind the chairs on the opposite side of the “garden.” All of the couples are in various stages of romantic intimacy (hugging, kissing, gyrating, etc.), and all of this was heightened for comic effect. It was evident that this scene had been the most difficult for Lamos to polish up to this point. He had to make sure that the physical exertion demanded of the performers did not harm the singing. He also had to keep some sort of order in the chaos of the blocking so that the audience could know where to focus and still be able to follow the relationships.

After the first run of the finale, the cast was visibly discontent. They knew that the run of the scene had been too sloppy and frenetic. They knew they had the foundation and the humor, yet they had trouble manifesting it for the entire fifteen-minute finale. The difficulty in maintaining clarity in Lamos’s multi-layered conception was never more apparent to them than in these moments. It was as if the entire cast lost a modicum of faith in their production simultaneously. Lamos sensed their frustration.

In the quiet that followed the first attempt at the finale, he gave some crucial directions to help restore their confidence. The primary concern, he said, was that everyone was rushing physically to complement the characters' mental breakdown. He appreciated their energy, but he thought that clarity was being sacrificed. The scene was, indeed, going to end with their straightjacketing, but Lamos told them that if they could slow their movements and make more controlled choices, the audience would still accept their need to be restrained. He said to them, "All the violence should have a dulled edge to it. There should be a comic feel like the slow motion action of *The Three Stooges*." To further tame their wild movements. Lamos reminded them that, most importantly, "The emotional pain is much more severe than the physical pain."

The direction had an immediate effect and everyone seemed to feel that the scene improved during its second run. The movements were now sharp, focused, and more measured, yet they did not slow the pace enough to lose the madcap and frantic nature of the scene. Saffer, especially, made some original and evocative movement choices that many commented upon after the run ended. She responded by saying, "I'm taking all of my movements from my disabled baby sister." This was Saffer's way of making the mental disability of the character within the concept more personal and truthful. Given that the act 1 finale had key importance, the company ran it several more times before moving on to act 2. The repetitions had the result of solidifying the movements as the cast transferred them from psychological memory to muscle memory.⁷²

⁷² Similar to choreography in dance, the cast's movements would ideally be so imbedded into their bodies that when they returned to the scene again, their bodies would react before they could forget the blocking.

Sensing that the cast was becoming fatigued from repeating the fifteen-minute finale, Lamos felt confident enough to move on. Then, he stopped abruptly as if in mid-thought and said to the cast excitedly, "Wait a second, I have another idea!" Before Lamos could say one more thing, Anderson pointed an accusatory finger at him and bellowed a mocking curse, "Damn you and your ideas!" The entire room burst out laughing. Everyone understood that the cast was, at last, making significant progress on the most difficult scene to date and were not in the mood to entertain another flash of insight from their director. Lamos processed this, withdrew his comment, and laughed with the rest of the room.

This jocular mood carried over the short break as the cast was set to "stumble" through act 2. The set was changed, and was dominated by enormous sitz baths for the "patients" to receive their "hydrotherapy." Chellis sat in one of the baths and began to play with his rubber ducky. Since his character is hopelessly in love with Sandrina, Chellis squeaked the ducky toward Saffer several times to try to get her attention. He must have squeaked the duck one too many times because Saffer was finding it difficult to concentrate and said to Chellis, "Don't you dare!" Chellis responded sarcastically, "Oh, sorry everyone, she's trying to make Art!" Lamos's laughter seemed to drown out the rest as he appreciated Chellis's witty retort.

The act 2 stumble-through went smoothly with few interruptions or comments from Lamos other than giving whispered notes to Helfrich. The first time the rehearsal stopped for any length of time was when Sandrina (Saffer)

and Count Belfiore (Anderson) confronted one another once the true identity of Sandrina as the Count's former lover was discovered. Again, the problem concerned the need for clarity in the world of the concept.

Lamos felt that Anderson's "entrée into madness" was happening too soon in act 2. It is clear in the libretto that both Sandrina and Count Belfiore go mad by the end of act 2. The text reads: "*Che caso funesto, / Che gran frenesia; / Più strana pazzia / Chi mai può trovar.*" ("What a dreadful event, / What great frenzy; / Surely no one could find / A stranger madness.") In the world of the concept, Saffer had been playing Sandrina as if she knew she was only pretending to be the eponymous garden-girl who goes to the "spa" for relationship counseling and recovery. In act 2, once she is secure in her identity, she would be free to taunt and jeer at Count Belfiore as he struggles with the ghostly sighting of his former lover whom he presumes is dead after he had stabbed her in his jealous rage. Up to this point, Sandrina had relished the fact that the Count was in a fragile mental state, and her harassment of him only accelerated his diminishing grip on reality.

When Lamos watched act 2 during the run-through, he saw a problem. The Count was on the path to madness too early in the act, detracting from his complete madness at the end of the act. Moreover, since Sandrina was more mentally secure at the beginning, she would have to "catch up" to the Count when she descends into madness for their "mad" duet in the finale ("*E già comincio a delirar*" ["And I am beginning to get delirious"]). Lamos was not comfortable with this lack of symmetry. He decided to return to the storyline set

forth in the libretto where Sandrina and Count Belfiore go mad more or less simultaneously. Therefore, he instructed Anderson to slow his progression into madness so that it would be more poignant at the end of the act. This was a relatively simple solution, though it proved not to be so for Saffer.

Lamos explained that they could achieve consistency with both the libretto and the production concept if Saffer entered the asylum not knowing her true identity. When the Marchesa Violante had been stabbed and left for dead, he continued, “The traumatic event affects her mind so adversely that she loses her sense of identity.” She then goes to the “spa” to help her recover her sense of self. When she sees her former lover in the flesh, she recalls the truth and begins to regain her former identity. The Count also receives a shock upon seeing his divine Violante (a.k.a. Sandrina), and he tries desperately to understand her Lazarus-like return to the living. This proves too much for him as well, and he struggles to understand his own identity and environment. The text mentions that he might believe he is in the “*Campi Elisi*” (“Elysian Fields”). With this shift in the arc of Sandrina’s character, both the Count and Sandrina experience their madness together as is suggested harmonically in the score.

Saffer and Anderson ran the scene a few times to see how they felt about the change to experience their madness simultaneously. Both seemed to appreciate the return to the libretto for some firm grounding. Although Saffer was always willing to experiment with Lamos, she, like most of the cast, could not help but be pleased to have the text to consult in times of confusion. Even though all were pleased with the change, Saffer did caution that to return to the

text was simple theoretically but that they might need to “track” her character development to see whether her identity crisis in act 2 would affect anything that she had established previously in the opera. For instance, the changes in character had also affected the blocking. Now that Sandrina and Count Belfiore were going mad together, Lamos reblocked them to be together downstage so that the audience could better appreciate the simultaneity of their mutual ravings.

Previously, Sandrina had been blocked to sing on the bed, relatively isolated from everyone else. Lamos asked Saffer whether she needed anything on the bed, like sheets or a pillow that she might need to retrieve for a later scene. Saffer replied that she did not think so, but admitted that she was not certain, especially while she was preoccupied with trying to work out the changes in blocking and business. As she, Lamos, and Helfrich tried to reconcile the change in her character with what had been previously established, time was called for the end of the rehearsal. Lamos gave a crucial note to Helfrich to watch the subsequent rehearsals with an eye to anything that would need to be reworked as a result of the change in Sandrina’s character development.

Recapitulation

If there is one American director in the late-twentieth century whose aesthetic sensibilities have presented challenges to the performers he worked with, Peter Sellars might be at the top of the list. Yet there is hardly any record of disgruntled reminiscences from actors or singers who have collaborated with him on plays or operas. Here he outlines, briefly, his rehearsal process:

The way I usually rehearse...is to stage the whole show quickly in the first week, and then we do run-throughs. We do one every day and then stop and talk, because to my mind it's important that the actors have a stake in it, that there is no exit door. If a scene doesn't go the way you want, it's too bad, you have to just stay in it and figure out a way for that character to deal with whatever's happening. And meanwhile that will then affect the scene two scenes from now. So when you next walk on, you'll be walking on with everything that upset you two scenes ago. (Delgado and Heritage 235)

This day of rehearsal for Lamos demonstrated that "there is no exit door," and much time was spent on dealing with the frustration of reworking scenes that proved problematic. This day was full of progress, but there was an unnerving pall early in the rehearsal that dominated the rest of the proceedings. Matthew Chellis seemed to be always near the breaking point, which manifested itself in petulance. To counterbalance this distraction, Lamos chose to focus on the more open and collaborative cast members, especially Lisa Saffer.

Lamos had struggled to provide clarity for the cast in previous rehearsals and had been challenged often to keep the integrity of his vision intact. However, Chellis seemed to expect Lamos to have all the answers and resolve all the imperfections of the production, which robbed the two of them having a positive collaborative experience. As Sellars advises, "It's important that the actors have a stake in it," for then performers shall be more open to exploration and creative

impulses from everyone. This often produces the most compelling moments in a production.

However, a cast's expecting any director to arrive at every rehearsal with everything figured out regarding the production can be anathema to an open process. A healthy humility is required, for, as Sellars has asserted:

I need a group of really powerful people in the room to [rehearse] with, because I have a very dim view of my own capacity or expertise. Theatre is not a solo activity. It's actually the understanding that we will never be able to understand any of these issues until we search for a collective understanding. Individual expertise or point of view is no longer adequate in this world, if it ever was. Knowledge has to be an understanding, has to be conceived much more as Plato would, as an ongoing dialogue.
(Delgado and Heritage 226)

This rehearsal might have been more productive if Chellis had chosen to engage in the dialogue rather than subvert it with sighs and grimaces of exasperation. Lamos either did not notice this or pretended not to notice. This was probably the best choice while the clock was ticking down to opening night. On the other hand, if he had invented a reason to call for a short break to speak privately to Chellis, this rehearsal as well as future ones might not have been so permeated with a sense of mistrust.

A director's winning trust from the cast is vital for any rehearsal process to be successful. By not facing an issue directly, especially when he was so open

and direct in addressing other issues, Lamos must have thought it more profitable to sidestep the concern and move on. Perhaps he thought that Chellis, as an opera singer primarily, would never be comfortable with this level of experimentation and that no amount of discussion would have brought him to consensus. This was not consistent, however, with Lamos's working with other performers who seemed to thrive on the experimental approach. And Lamos's approach was hardly as experimental as the methods of other directors.

For example, Peter Sellars has, on occasion, staged a scene for an actor which he knew the audience would never be able to see. He gave the actor "a very specific thing to do that has a very intense emotion...so the audience feel[s] something: they just don't know where it's coming from" (Shevtsova and Innes 222).⁷³ Sellars also spent part of a rehearsal day on an actor's saying two words of Shakespeare (Shylock saying to Antonio: "Fair Sir" [*The Merchant of Venice* 1.3.27]). He was convinced that these words were "what was at stake in the play—to say those two words to somebody who was trying to destroy him" (Shevtsova and Innes 227). What if Chellis had been as willing as the actor playing Shylock to spend part of a rehearsal day singing only two words to become immersed in "what was at stake" in the opera?

Fortunately, Lisa Saffer provided the antidote to Chellis's discontent, and this was more likely why Lamos avoided confronting him. Saffer proved time and again that there was no problem too large, no idea too harebrained, or no piece of business too ghastly that she was not willing to work through it with her

⁷³ Chellis would have had to be content with Sellars's sensible explanation that this choice was similar to "the way Rothko will underpaint a color that you can no longer see...but that color is in there, vibrating" (Shevtsova and Innes 222).

director. She offered guidance to a less seasoned singer about how to end a scene more emphatically. She reevaluated weeks' worth of character choices about her character's fragile mental state to be more compatible with the character development of her leading man, and, astonishingly, she knew how to translate into action the direction "to be more diagnostic in an eighteenth-century way."

These were commendable accomplishments, but they were grounded in the idea of trusting a director and the artistic process, no matter how experimental or exasperating the production might seem. The "reinventions" of directors like Mark Lamos or Peter Sellars, for better or worse, enhance the possibilities and potentialities of the performing arts. Each performer must be completely invested in creating a strong ensemble to achieve the vision of the creative team.



Thirteenth Day: September 17, 2003

Exposition⁷⁴

To oversimplify matters, directing and acting are about making choices. Hundreds of choices are made throughout opera rehearsals by directors, conductors, singers, designers, musicians, et al.. For every choice made,

⁷⁴ In order to give me further experience of opera production as well as taking advantage of the convenient simultaneity of repertory performance, Lamos suggested that I attend a dress rehearsal of the first act of Bizet's *Carmen* on the main stage. He said it might be valuable to see how a production that is a few steps ahead in the process would compare with where he was currently. Also, he suggested that by the time the first act was over, he would probably be ready for another run-through of his first act, which I would not want to miss. When I returned to Lamos's rehearsal, he was just finishing giving notes on the act 3 finale and about to start the run-through of act 1.

however, there are others that are not made, which can prove equally inspired or problematic. On this day, Lamos would recognize that making choices not to overwork an unprepared scene, not to comment on an overwrought performance, and not to follow operatic convention can sometimes be best.

The run of act 3 would reveal that the recitative before the last finale was underprepared both in the acting and in the music. This was rare because all the singers had come to previous rehearsals having the music memorized. Lamos would acknowledge the rarity of the singers' lack of preparation, which is why he made the difficult choice to bypass fixing the recitative in the expectation that the singers would rectify the situation by the next run-through.

It might be tempting to minimize the importance of the recitative since it was simply a dialogue scene to move the plot forward. Lamos, however, would never succumb to the supposed conventional wisdom that an opera's arias and magnificent finales were the only aspects of a production which truly mattered. A recitative offers many opportunities to explore and expand character as well as to provide thematic consistency. John Higgins's commentary on Peter Hall's rehearsals of Mozart's *Don Giovanni* reveals a similar emphasis on recitatives:

Characters were established more through recitative and the breaking down of ensembles than through the arias. The solo numbers tended to be polished in the small rehearsal rooms and not altered a great deal on stage, another trademark of the Hall approach. Most directors have a habit of concentrating on the arias and fitting in the recitatives later. Hall followed his own precepts

[and]...more time was spent on the preceding recitative than on the solo. (140)

Lamos would likely agree with Hall that there were tremendous opportunities for character development in recitative sections, which is precisely why he would choose not to work the scene unless the music was mastered first.

Since character development was so essential for Lamos, it was surprising that he would not comment or stop to work on Sandra Piques Eddy's performance during the act 1 run-through. To be sure, her performance was entertaining and energetic, but its lightsome tone seemed to contradict Lamos's commitment to explore the darker aspects of the opera.

The last significant and unexpected choice Lamos would make was to ignore the operatic tradition of an audience giving their praise to the *prima donna* after a beautifully performed aria. Saffer would be the last one to demand such an exhibition, but the rest of the cast would let Lamos know that he was treading on thin ice. Lamos would have his reasons for cutting the applause, for he believed that the integrity of the production outweighed obeying opera traditions, however sacrosanct.

Development: Notes and act 1 run-through

Lamos's first comment about the act 3 finale actually concerned the recitative before the finale begins. He felt that the singers were not entirely comfortable with the dialogue. He said, "Do you need any music rehearsal because I want to see some acting." Lamos knew that they were too late in the

process to allow the cast to mark the recitatives in order to concentrate on the more complex finales. While it was true that Lamos often lamented about the “crazy libretto” that he often “could hardly make sense of,” he was firmly committed to the idea that the recitatives needed to be as sharp as possible.

Another issue exposed in Lamos’s reaction to the uneven performance of the recitative was the scarcity of time. This particular recitative occurs at the end of the opera, so the obvious conclusion was that the cast would not have as much time to rehearse it, given that most rehearsals proceed sequentially. There was a continual pressure on the performers to be completely prepared musically before they entered the rehearsal hall. This preparation often depended on each cast member’s having regular, private vocal sessions with the conducting staff. Casual conversation at one time or another revealed that few of the singers felt that they had had enough time with their vocal coaches to be as polished as they wanted to be. And it was this lack of polish that Lamos was most concerned with presently. He reiterated his view that recitatives can have primary importance by saying, “In this little recit is where the audience gets closure, so it really needs to glow. Right now I see little embers. Remember, all the canals of love have to lead to this ocean.”

It was in this poetical mood that Lamos suggested that the company move right into a run of act 1 before the end of the day. He may have been trying to capture the theme of the entire opera with his talk of “glow[ing]...embers” and “the canals of love,” and wanted the cast to use these metaphors to spur them on to a passionate and dynamic run of act 1.

Lamos tried to interfere with the run as little as possible. He was tempted to interrupt many times, but he was able to ease his desire to halt the proceedings by side-coaching and by giving furtive notes to Helfrich. Typical comments were, "Keep it active" or "Use your gestures." The run was going well, and the cast benefited from the momentum gained by not having to stop to work a scene. Sandra Piques Eddy as Ramiro, especially, did well with her aria, "*Se l'augellin sen fugge*" ("If one day the little bird..."), taking command of the stage by channeling the masculine aspects of the "pants" role. The only possible drawback, however, in Eddy's so relishing the manliness of the role was that it might come off as too affected. This, in turn, would stand at odds with Lamos's desire to dig deeper into the sorrows of love.

The run-through of the act continued to go smoothly until Lamos gave a direction that shook up the cast. He told Neal Goren, the associate conductor, that for the sake of time and the rhythm of the scene, he was not to wait for any applause at the end of Saffer's aria, "*Noi donne poverine*" ("We poor women...") and move directly into the next recitative. The cast immediately reacted to Lamos's direction in a way that communicated their displeasure at such an affront to their fellow performer. Right on cue, Lamos resorted to his usual frivolity and said, "It's okay. She probably won't get any applause anyway, especially not the way she's singing it." The entire room was filled with a strange mixture of laughter and "boos" at the director's irreverence. Since time was scarce, the reaction was short-lived and the run continued.

Just before time ran out on the day, when he was unhappy with the way he had directed the “patients” to move during Saffer’s “no applause” aria, Lamos gave the final note: “I want to change what you all do during her aria. That was bad direction on my part.”

Recapitulation

Associate Director of the Royal National Theatre of Great Britain, Katie Mitchell, weighs the challenge to directors who move between spoken-word theatre and opera:

When we were working on [the opera] *Jephtha*, the main problem was finding a style for the acting and motivating the choruses so that they were credible psychologically. In the end, we opted for realism, a strange solution given the formality of the music. The Chorus of forty were given individual characters, backhistories and clear functions in each scene [in which] they appeared...always insisting that the actors adhere to the values of fourth-wall realism.
(Shevtsova and Innes 201)

Generally, since the advent of film, theatre audiences have preferred characters who are credible psychologically no matter the genre of theatrical production. Fourth-wall realism is almost compulsory in most productions, even in opera, if directors are to satisfy the widest possible audience who are acclimated to the realism of film and television. It goes without saying that the other “-isms” of the theatre (Expressionism, Surrealism, Symbolism, etc.) have their particular and, at

times, cultish devotees, but realism has to be part of the conversation when presenting a production that shall be suitable to a wide viewership.

Mark Lamos, like Katie Mitchell, has a theatrical sensibility that includes the terminology of psychological credibility, backstory, motivation, and fourth-wall realism. These were the precise terms that Lamos used to shape this final rehearsal before the company began full run-throughs. He chose to confront these theatrical terms in unexpected ways. Two of the most important choices Lamos made in this rehearsal were inactive rather than active ones. Specifically, Lamos chose not to dwell on the lack of musical preparedness, which, in turn, undermined an important recitative section, and he chose not to comment or alter Sandra Piques Eddy's bombastic and clichéd portrayal of masculine bravado. Also unexpected was when he chose not to acquiesce to operatic convention and omitted the chance for applause after Saffer's aria.

Harold Clurman once quoted Stanislavski in a way that may resonate with most directors: "No matter how long one rehearses, one always needs two more weeks" (90). The recitative section for this day's rehearsal was one of the times when it was apparent that the cast was not thoroughly prepared. The reasons for this varied, but the performers agreed that they had not been scheduled for enough vocal coaching with the music staff. Whatever the reason, Lamos chose not to investigate, castigate, or denigrate anyone other than by saying that he "wanted to see some acting" in the scene.

At this point, he would have welcomed the "two more weeks" Stanislavski mentions. Without them, Lamos preferred to transform the energy in the room

from negativity to positivity by leaping onto more solid ground. His choice not to run the recitative again and again until it was more secure musically, and then to move immediately to an act 1 run, galvanized the whole company. At this late stage of rehearsal, Lamos knew that there would be no profit in highlighting the inadequacy of the scene. If the singers were not “off-book” enough to run the recitative with full acting values, then the authenticity and import of the scene would never be achieved. His choice not to belabor the clunky recitative was effective in preserving the optimism of a company that was shortly to go into full dress rehearsals.

The cast member who could always be relied upon to show optimism was Sandra Piques Eddy as Count Ramiro. She boldly romped and stomped through act 1 with reckless abandon and vocal power. Eddy did not seem to be concerned that she was indulging in stereotypically masculine behaviors that could undermine the realism that Lamos was emphasizing elsewhere. Perhaps the lack of comment from Lamos owed to the fact that he could justify Eddy’s excesses by having Ramiro reveal in the end that “he” is, indeed, a “she” rather than a woman playing the “pants” role in the opera as written. In this context, Eddy’s masculine histrionics would make sense as the way a woman might manifest masculinity and thus preserve the verisimilitude that Lamos was after. Just as Katie Mitchell employed backhistories to direct her Chorus, Lamos provided Eddy with just such a history of being “gender confused.” In both situations, psychological credibility was enhanced and Eddy embraced the freedom to create a macho man through a woman’s perspective. Lamos chose

not to interfere with her creation which, on the surface, challenged the believability of Ramiro's being a man. His inaction left Eddy to explore more freely Ramiro's gender confusion. This had the fortunate result of being more real than the realism Lamos had touted for weeks.

The realism he sought throughout the opera did not come without a cost. When he chose not to hold for applause at the end of Lisa Saffer's aria, he risked not only flouting convention but slighting his *prima donna*. Saffer was never one to demand the privilege customarily afforded to the lead performer, but receiving applause after a beautifully sung aria is hardly a diva's particular indulgence. Lamos knew that Saffer was not cast in the typical diva mold, which is why he could joke with her about the moment in an attempt to mollify her castmates. Moreover, he was committed to his mission to bring a heavier dose of realism to an opera that might be adversely affected by a break in the action for the applause.

Most opera and theatre audiences embrace this convention and enjoy demonstrating their appreciation. Conversely, there is no doubt that such an effusive response can interrupt the flow and emotional tone of a scene. Applause can take an audience out of the scene by reminding them that they are in a performance hall where the action onstage is all make-believe.

This might be just the result that a Brechtian director wants, but a *Verfremdungseffekt* ("distancing effect") was not what Lamos was after.⁷⁵ By

⁷⁵ Brecht's "distancing effect," also known earlier as "alienation effect," was a theatrical technique he espoused to prevent the audience from becoming too emotionally invested in a performance. Brecht's plays and productions are primarily didactic, and he wanted his audiences, above all, to think critically and dispassionately about the sociological themes presented in the play. Brecht hoped that this would increase

controlling the tempo and moving directly into the recitative section, he thought he could help the audience carry their emotional involvement in the aria with them into the next scene. By removing the applause, the emotional expressiveness of Saffer's singing might also be experienced more deeply. Ideally, the audience would be so enraptured that they might not even know that they were the reason for Lamos's defying operatic tradition. Besides, as Lamos had joked, "She probably [wouldn't] get any applause anyway, especially not the way she's singing it."

All joking aside, Lamos's quick admission of "bad direction on [his] part" to conclude the rehearsal was a refreshing demonstration of accountability. This comment showed that Lamos was always ready to jettison an idea if it was not working. His modesty contradicted the stereotype of the tyrannical director barking orders through a megaphone. Other directors have also embraced a more unpretentious approach. Declan Donnellan nicely sums up the thought in this way:

For me theatre is always at its best when I'm learning as well. So as long as we do all understand that we are learning, we gain from that. That's very important, as opposed to the idea that we're predigested experts. I don't feel in any way like that. (Delgado and Heritage 86)

the likelihood that the audience would apply their judgments about the play outside the theater and foment radical change. This technique was in direct opposition to Aristotle's dramaturgy that suggested the theater was a place for the audience to be emotionally purged as the result of a cathartic experience, which Brecht felt tamed the audience and did not leave them ready to institute revolutionary change.

A generation or two before Donnellan and Lamos, Harold Clurman addressed a similar issue:

Not everything the cleverest director suggests is useful to the actor; the wise director recognizes this. Direction is not to be equated with giving orders. (95)

The usefulness of Lamos's suggestions to the cast was about to be put to the test in the following rehearsal. The first full run-through would unveil just how much Lamos and the cast had learned together about reimagining *La finta giardiniera*.



Fourteenth Day: September 18, 2003

Exposition

As the heightened activity in the room suggested, this rehearsal would be the most anticipated to date. It would be the first time the company would gather a feeling for the entire production as a result of this first full run-through. Most of the production team would be eager to see the results of their considerable efforts. Their eagerness was fairly typical for most run-throughs, yet there seemed to be more at stake for Lamos and his production of *La finta giardiniera*.

Through most of the process, Lamos had been arguing with himself by “fighting with his own brain.” His production concept dominated this interpretation of the opera, and he, as well as the cast, had never felt quite comfortable with the concept. As a result, this first run-through would be

exceptionally important and nerve-wracking. Run-throughs are notorious for exposing the weaknesses of a production, often mercilessly. The strengths can also be evident, to be sure. The primary focus, however, for a director during run-throughs must be to identify and remedy clunky pacing, ill-conceived choices, and murky storytelling.

Unfortunately but not unexpectedly, there would be murky sections of the run-through. This would cause Lamos to make two significant changes to the production, one of which could have had unforeseen consequences implemented so late in rehearsals. The more straightforward change was to be a crafty alteration to the act 1 finale. The other more substantial change would involve Lamos's contemplating abandoning a stylization that had proved to work flawlessly in previous rehearsals. He would consider cutting an undoubtedly successful and popular section of the opera because it appeared not to fit with his overall vision for the production. As funny and charming as the *commedia* interlude had played earlier, he would say that "the costumes and gestures don't make sense once the whole opera is put together." The costumes might have been fabulous and the gestures might have been hilarious, but Lamos would have to return to the substance of the production as a whole and make a choice in favor of the one quality that would serve him unfailingly: clarity.

Development: First Full Run-Through

Excitement and apprehension filled the air at the beginning of this rehearsal that featured the first full run-through of the rehearsal process. The

relatively small space was being made to seem smaller by the moment, for the rehearsal hall was bustling. Twice as many people than at earlier rehearsals were in attendance for the run. In addition to the director, assistant director, cast, covers, stage manager, and music staff, the following personnel were added to the full run: the costume designer and her assistant, three additional stage managers, all the covers, all the supernumeraries (“supers”), the supers’ coordinator, and the dramaturge/supertitle writer. The air of excitement was most palpable among the cast who were trying to diffuse their nervous energy with lots of stretching, vocal warm-ups, and even yoga in the case of Lisa Saffer.

After the warm-ups were finished and the production staff were at their stations with pencils ready, the first note sounded and they were off. To ensure that he could focus on the work at all times, Lamos gave verbal notes to Assistant Director Helfrich in hushed tones throughout the run. Sometimes, however, he did not restrict his comments to Helfrich and spoke directly to the cast by side-coaching.⁷⁶ For example, Lamos would say, “A little sadder” or “A little more sexual.”

As the run progressed, Lamos seemed equal parts enthused, entertained, and frustrated. The most impressive quality of the run, perhaps, was the fact that the run did not feel like a rehearsal at all. The entire cast rose to the occasion and demonstrated their professionalism. They were singing full out, had total concentration on the task at hand, and never once seemed to be “marking” their

⁷⁶ During a full run-through, directors often use side-coaching with basic directions that relate to volume, pacing, stage position, or a quick emotional adjustment. With more complicated notes about character development, specific choreography, or thematic concerns, the director will usually wait for the notes session to clarify a point, change blocking, or express something he has seen as a result of watching the entire production for the first or second time.

performances. The crew was equally impressive for the way they handled all the moving parts of people, props, and set pieces while noting meticulously all the corrections still to be made. How they dealt with all the notes was quite an organizational feat. Lamos would give a note to Helfrich, who in turn gave it to Second Assistant Director Beth Greenberg, who, in turn, gave it to an assistant stage manager or to the cover coordinator or the super coordinator and so on during the entire run.

During the notes session at the conclusion of the run, two major changes were announced along with the other more specific notes. The first major change was that Lamos had decided, once and for all, to cut the use of straightjackets at the end of the first act. To recall this section, the orderlies had been blocked to put all the principals in straightjackets during the act 1 finale to confine the patients as they sing, *“Che smania orribile! non ho ricetta, / L’ira, la collera ch’io sento in petto, / Non so reprimere, non so frenar”* (“What a terrible upset! I know no way / To subdue, to restrain the anger, the rage, / That I feel in my breast.”). Lamos explained that there were two primary problems with the final stage picture. First, the physical action of putting on the straightjackets was, indeed, proving to be no simple task for the supers. Second, the final image was more appropriate for an asylum and not a spa. These two terms had been used more or less interchangeably in previous rehearsals, but Lamos now saw clearly that a spa was more consistent with his vision than an asylum would be. A useful solution to the straightjacket problem came to Lamos and he offered it to the cast to conclude the first act.

Instead of using straightjackets for the patients, Lamos decided to have each orderly give the patients an instantly active sedative in the neck by using huge syringes. Moreover, Lamos's new idea conveniently bookended the production when he told the cast that they would reverse the action at the end of the opera. Just before the final chord sounded, he wanted the patients to give the orderlies a shot in the neck as final proof of their own liberation. Lamos went on to explain that he was especially attracted to this idea because of its artistic homage to Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, which has both of its acts end with the same action or, more accurately, inaction, as the stage direction reads, "They do not move" (36 and 61). The absurdism present in many Beckett plays is not unlike the absurdism Lamos was exploring in his production concept. Indeed, many Beckett plays are classified as "tragicomedies," which is also a suitable definition of "*dramma giocoso*," the classification Mozart gave to *La finta giardiniera*.

This blending of genres was also at the core of the problem that provoked Lamos to make the second major change to the production. In the second act, the patients don *commedia dell'arte* costumes to provide a visual metaphor for the lunacy that ensues in the plot as well as the mindset of each character at this point. Furthermore, the performers were directed to employ various melodramatic gestures that recalled the *commedia* style. Lamos said, "The costumes and gestures don't make sense once the whole opera is put together." He went on to explain that the *commedia* stylization worked for certain moments, but he was not convinced that it was appropriate for the entire act. Lamos noted,

“I’m having such trouble with the transitions from comedy to drama and back again that the *commedia* idea might have to be abandoned.”

This is one pertinent example of how problematic it can be to direct a “*dramma giocoso*.” One must continually strike a balance between comedy and drama so that the production is neither too “*buffa*” nor too “*seria*.” This means that there is a danger that the production will be emotionally ambiguous or, even worse, bland by straining too hard to establish a middle road between comedy and drama. Lamos’s goal was to allow his production to swerve toward “*buffa*” then swerve back toward “*seria*” without letting it become muddled and confusing.

Interestingly, this balancing act was also the topic that Lamos discussed with a representative of the Guggenheim Museum after the rehearsal concluded.⁷⁷ Lamos remained behind for several minutes to assist the moderator of an upcoming presentation at the Guggenheim in understanding his new production. The discussion focused on achieving an effective balance not within the genre of “*dramma giocoso*,” but rather between the music and the stage action. Lamos was adamant that he did not want to go too much against the music: “For example, yes, the patients are out of control at the end of the first act, but I must control the chaos by obeying all the musical cues.”

Recapitulation

⁷⁷ The Guggenheim Museum would be offering a presentation about *La finta giardiniera* in a few days in their “Works & Process” series. Several cast members would be performing excerpts from the opera and WQXR announcer Nimet Habachy would moderate a panel discussion.

Peter Hall was in the last stages of rehearsal for his production of *Don Giovanni* in 1977 when he made the following statement:

I find last-minute thoughts generally inspiring and at the same time realize that I run the risk of antagonizing others. But it's a risk I'm prepared to take because it is fundamental to my approach to opera production. Does the director arrive from on high with every move mapped out in advance? If he does, then I missed that particular boat long ago. Sometimes I've been accused of making these changes just to keep my own adrenaline flowing and subconsciously perhaps I do. My excuse is that I push myself hard during the last few days, making the work more intense, so it's reasonable to expect the same of others. (Higgins 187)

Throughout the rehearsal period, Hall had checked himself now and again to remind himself that he was directing opera singers and not theatre actors. He knew that their method of working was frequently quite different, especially in the tradition-laced Glyndebourne operas of the 1970s, but he was not surprised at how sharp the differences could be. Making last-minute changes and scheduling late-night rehearsals did "provoke grumbling" (Higgins 187) from his cast while they were trying to enjoy their evening meal at a nearby restaurant. Hall summarized his thoughts during this time about the difference between singers and actors:

If I were to say to the *Giovanni* cast, "Take the three days before the dress rehearsal off," they would be more than happy; if I made

the same proposal to a group of actors they would go berserk with anxiety and believe that the première was going to be a disaster.

(Higgins 187)

This does not suggest that actors are more serious about their work and that opera singers are indolent. Singers might well be “more than happy” for a break so that they can adequately rest and protect their voices, for this is the aspect of their performances by which they will predominantly be judged. Despite this caveat, Hall’s point about the difference in working methodologies between actors and singers is apt and wrought occasional changes in his directorial choices.

Mark Lamos was now in an equally precarious position when he decided to explore two major changes to his production. If the past was, indeed, prologue, then Lamos ran the same risk as Hall had that he might antagonize others with these changes. The cast had been unpredictable previously in their reactions to changes; some reacted with enthusiasm and had faith that the changes would be for the better, while others reacted with dread that the changes might complicate matters even more. In their defense, Lamos was, at times, equally unpredictable when dealing with the more thorny aspects of his concept. With that recent history in mind and the production now so late in the process, Lamos could not afford to antagonize the cast. This is why he made sure the changes he proposed had the absolute clarity that the cast desired and which all directors aspire to achieve.

With technical rehearsals looming, Lamos knew that clarity had to be prioritized over all other issues. He would have one more chance to see the opera as a whole before it would be broken into bits again during the days when the focus would be on the orchestra, sets, lights, costumes, supertitles, etc. It is common for directors to have as their goal that the performers are “performance-ready” before technical rehearsals were to begin. Directors often employ psychological trickery to convince the performers that opening night is not the date to have in mind to finalize their characterizations.

Just before “tech” is when the performers have the last chance to experiment, amend, or fine-tune their character choices. By that time, it can be extremely difficult for a director to focus on new choices a performer might want to explore when the director’s mind is on all the elements of the production beyond the performances, including the sets, lights, costumes, etc.. Lamos knew he needed to solidify the singers’ performances as much as possible before the technical distractions that were immanent.

Lamos’s choice, with “help” from Samuel Beckett, to change the final actions of both acts had the fortunate result of solidifying two vital moments in the opera as well as providing clarity for both the performers and the audience. By jettisoning the straightjackets, Lamos was signaling to the cast that the consequence of their character’s overexcitement would be sedation and not constriction, that their illnesses would not incur punishment but rather treatment. It was as if Lamos had the same epiphany as Jack Nicholson’s character does in the film *One Flew Over the Cuckoo’s Nest* when McMurphy realizes that nearly

all of the other patients are voluntary inhabitants of the hospital rather than convicted criminals like himself. The patients in both *Cuckoo's Nest* and Lamos's *La finta giardiniera* needed more to be healed than reformed. They have been the victimized more than victimizers, with the notable exception of Count Belfiore and his dangerous blade. This definitive shift from the asylum's constriction, institution, and incarceration to the spa's sedation, hydration, and relaxation had the potential to clarify, once and for all, the Stanislavskian "spine of the character" for each member of the cast. The performers could now filter all their previous choices through the setting of the spa to provide more consistency, vivacity, and clarity to their performances.

The second major change that Lamos considered—omitting the entire *commedia dell'arte* business—was also weighed for its service to clarity, but it also ran the risk of putting off his cast. He and the cast had worked for some time to justify and pay homage to a rich comedic tradition. In fact, the *commedia* rehearsals were some of the most successful, ensemble-building, and fun the company experienced. Would Lamos sacrifice the comedy to ensure that the production retained his initial impulse of a "dramedy?" Would the cast willingly give up some of their best *lazzi* in the opera in the name of clarity and thematic integrity? From a directorial perspective, the answer was an unequivocal "yes" to both of these questions. A director must fiercely prioritize the whole rather than the parts, no matter how brilliant and inspired any of the parts may be.

Ideally, the cast would support Lamos and his desire for clarity even though so much time and effort had been expended on sections that were to be

altered or cut entirely. Perhaps they would express a similar admiration for Lamos and his eleventh-hour decisions as Stafford Dean, the Leporello in *Don Giovanni*, did for Peter Hall:

Peter is the only [director] I know who experiments to the extent that he is prepared to throw right out the window an interpretation on which he has worked for some time. He once told me that the only thing which had got him to the top was knowing when things felt right. I respect that remark. One of his great qualities also is to know when he has gone up a blind alley and to admit it. (Higgins 152-55)

Productions can be easily derailed, choppy, and forced if the director is wedded too stubbornly to an idea that simply does not keep the story moving nor continues to unveil thematic consistencies. Presumably, directors choose or are hired to direct a particular production because they have a viewpoint on the work they are staging. That viewpoint often evolves throughout the process, but it remains the guiding force behind virtually every decision made.



Fifteenth Day: September 20, 2003

Exposition

The rehearsal for this day would be moved to the larger Main Rehearsal Hall for a planned second full run-through. The reason that *La finta giardiniera* had rehearsed earlier in a smaller hall was because the opera had a relatively

small cast compared to the other operas being presented that season.

Simultaneous rehearsals for different operas meant that space had to be shared and regulated in a very precise way. With only a few days until opening night, the production would be allowed merely one day in this larger space to familiarize the cast and crew with the dimensions of the Main Stage. Even though the actual stage dimensions had been fastidiously taped down by the stage managers in the smaller rehearsal space, the Main Hall still generated a sense of scale that would help the performers prepare for the Main Stage. Now that *La finta giardiniera* would be set into a larger room, the whole operation to prepare for the full run-through became less chaotic and more exciting. This run in the Main Hall would offer yet another reminder of how close the company was to opening night.

Despite less chaos in terms of organization, the rehearsal would not go as planned. Since they had not finished the run-through from the previous day, Lamos would inform the company that they would start the day with act 3, give notes, and then embark upon the full run. The plan would go awry when the notes session led to a discussion that would prompt Lamos to make a surprising request. He wanted to run the act 2 finale twice, one in the *commedia* stylization and one without, to make a final decision before technical rehearsals. This might have seemed an unorthodox request considering the impending performance date, yet it was a notion consistent with Lamos's working method. He always preferred practical application to theorizing. His directing style was far too experiential to assume an idea would work without seeing it in action. It did not

matter to him that this particular plan would present two radically different approaches to the act 2 finale and involve many moving parts from costumes to makeup to character reconsiderations. Ultimately, the choice would cost the company the planned full run-through in the proper stage-dimensions, but Lamos had to be sure about what might become the most distinct and elaborate alteration from the Florida production.

Lamos would say that the primary purpose for the double run of the act 2 finale would be for him to see each style in the context of the whole opera to judge whether the audience would stay engaged and continue to suspend their disbelief. Although Lamos did refer to the audience explicitly on occasion, he thought about them throughout rehearsal process far more often. This skill must become second nature as rehearsals progress. Lamos considered the audience with the same gravity as the director Jorge Lavelli, who said:

The audience contributes by constructing their own story themselves, bringing to it the elements that have an intrinsic value to them. This is why I refer to theatre as an idea about life. Without that "idea," the theatre has no meaning. (Delgado and Heritage 114)

The search for an evocative "idea about life" to stimulate the audience is why Lamos emphasized that a director must have an individual and a collective consciousness simultaneously while in rehearsal.

Development: Full Run-Through in Main Rehearsal Hall

This day began with everyone involved with the production entering with a renewed energy. The primary reason for this was because the entire production moved into the Main Rehearsal Hall for a run-through before moving yet again to the Main Stage. The Main Hall is a much larger room, and everyone immediately seemed to welcome the spaciousness. As a result of the major changes at the last rehearsal, the cast had not finished a run of act 3. The decision was made on this day to run act 3 first, and then reset for a run-through of the entire opera.⁷⁸

Lamos watched the third act and employed the same routine of giving notes to Helfrich who would later give them to the cast in a notes session. The act went very well considering that the cast had never been in this space before. There were no glaring blocking difficulties, problematic transitions, or any other confusing moments to stop the run. In fact, the performers seemed to relish the new larger scale and worked hard to fill the space as one would expect opera singers to do.

After completing the third act run, Lamos gathered the cast to have them receive the notes, which he hoped they could implement during the following full run-through. Helfrich gave most of the blocking notes and other details relating to space and timing. Lamos spoke up when the notes were about character development or strengthening and clarifying the overall production concept. For

⁷⁸ This was an interesting choice considering that the company was in an entirely new space. One might have thought that the performers would want to begin at the beginning in the Main Hall so that they could establish a sense of consistency and rhythm. At this point, however, there was no option to bypass the third act, which had not received adequate time at the last rehearsal. Luckily, the third act was comparatively short in Lamos's cut version, so there should still have been enough time to complete the full run-through as scheduled.

instance, Lamos's note to Sandra Piques Eddy for her aria "*Va pure ad altri in braccio, / Perfida donna ingrata*" ("Go then to the arms of another, / Faithless, ungrateful woman") was: "Ramiro, remember that you are the one that sets up that the music is an expression of your madness. It's as if the notes are just flying out of your head." Lamos was concerned that the tone of madness in this production be precise and integrated into every aria as fully as possible. The cast should sing with passion not simply because they are characters placed partially in the ridiculous world of *opera buffa*, but rather because they have no choice but to sing as a cathartic act. Lamos was trying to create an environment in which spoken dialogue would not be enough, and that the only way to communicate their pain was to sing. Conversely, Lamos knew that he could not ignore the *buffa* elements altogether. This was emphasized in his note to Craig Phillips (Nardo) about being "*pazzi*" ("crazy").

"*Pazzi*" is a word used frequently in the libretto, which makes sense in an opera about different varieties of madness. Lamos wanted Phillips to connect with the audience more when he was accusing others of being crazy: "Make sure you give the '*pazzi, pazzi, pazzi*' to the audience. In fact, anytime anyone has a '*pazzi*,' give it to the audience! It will be very helpful in this conceit." Lamos wanted to take advantage of direct address to the audience on the "*pazzis*" so that he could exploit the comical irony of having the characters tell the audience that another was "crazy" while it was obvious that they were not completely sane themselves. This device echoed the popular psychological notion that crazy people often do not recognize that they are crazy.

Lamos had another significant comment to make about characters' recognizing their true nature during the notes session. This comment was directed to Brian Anderson regarding Count Belfiore's reaction to Sandrina's apparent rejection of his advances: "*Si; ti lascio, ingrato amante*" ("Yes, I am leaving you, ungrateful lover"). Lamos wanted the Count to distinguish his reactions more between the two women he is involved with, Sandrina and Arminda and he told Anderson, "Belfiore, make sure during her aria that you don't get too juvenile in your reactions. We have to remember that he is in the asylum because he stabbed a woman, so it is right that he is enjoying the violence from Arminda. But I think we should feel something darker here [with Sandrina]." Lamos was afraid that Anderson was playing more of the jejune romanticism typical of ingénues in *opera buffa*, complete with histrionic gestures, heaving sighs, and overwrought expressions. Anderson immediately agreed and said, "Yeah, I think that I have been playing it too sweet." Lamos did not want to discourage Anderson, whom he felt was otherwise doing a wonderful job, so he quickly shot back, "Actually, I'm glad you played it that way right now so that I could see how it *should* be played."

Once this direction to Anderson had ended the notes session, Lamos moved on to another challenge that had to be discussed, despite the waning time. He was still not decided about or satisfied with the act 2 finale, especially as it related to the introduction of the *commedia dell'arte* costumes and concomitant zaniness for the performers. Lamos took time to explain to the cast that they would be embarking on an exercise that might seem strange to them.

He wanted the cast to perform the act 2 finale twice during the run: one with the *commedia* stylization and one without. He had to witness his two visions for the finale again to judge how far his audience might travel on his conceptual journey. Lamos was worried that the audience would become impatient with his production concept. He said that “they’ve followed the conceit up to this point in the opera, but when clowns suddenly appear on stage making wild gestures, they might ‘check out.’”

Despite the fear of losing the audience by retaining the *commedia* idea, he wanted to explore the possibility of utilizing the *commedia* aesthetic as another remedy the Doctor wanted to try. The act 2 finale is filled with delirium, mistaken identity, and climactic confrontations between all the lovers. The Doctor, therefore, might want to ameliorate the situation by having his hypersensitive patients hide behind theatrical roles (read: *commedia*) to allow them to express what has been inexpressible in the past. Lamos wondered aloud, “Is there a way to instill ‘drama as therapy’ in a convincing way for the audience to understand?”

Brenda Harris (Arminda) immediately spoke up and said that she wanted to keep the *commedia* idea because “it is brilliant and solves so many issues, musically and theatrically.” Many other cast members echoed Harris’s response. A spirited discussion ensued about how, exactly, the *commedia* version of the finale was going to work. They knew they needed to be as exacting as possible, for it was only two days until technical rehearsals would begin. Lamos and the cast discussed how and precisely when to change into the *commedia* costumes, how they were going to get the Doctor more involved so the audience would be

reminded yet again that he was the ringmaster, and finally, what possible additions would need to be made to the supertitles so that the audience would not be taken too much by surprise when clowns suddenly invaded the world of the spa. Time was running out, but most felt that the *commedia* idea was strong enough to warrant the time to restage the scene and forgo the full run and hope that it would not need much polishing. This needed to happen before the technical rehearsals when the focus would shift to sets, lights, costumes, wigs, and perhaps most daunting, the full symphony orchestra.

Surprisingly, the room was buzzing with so much creative energy that no one expressed much concern that they would not be ready in time. Lamos seemed to relish this burst of collaborative commitment to solve a major issue, although he did admit later how unique this process had been for him when he made a surprising confession. “It’s incredible,” he said, “I’ve never ever before talked to a cast this much about my worries.”

Recapitulation

“Recognition” as elucidated by Jessica Waldoff in her seminal work, *Recognition in Mozart’s Operas*, has many applications in its essential relationship to opera:

To recognize is to re-cognize, that is, to know again, but to do so in a way that involves new understanding. It implies the recovery of something already known. Knowledge is therefore inherent in recognition; it lies concealed, deep within memory, waiting to be

brought to the surface. To the extent that recognitions depend on memory, even though memory recovered with new understanding, they involve a repetition of recollected events and thoughts. Hence recognition always involves narrative. This point cannot be overemphasized: recognition always comes as part of a story. (6)

Waldoff's book is the first to apply the Aristotelian literary terms "*anagnôrisis*" (recognition) and "*peripeteia*" (reversal) to opera generally and to Mozart specifically. She sees Mozart's operas as literary tapestries worthy of classical comparisons that have been ignored by the academic community. Taking his cue from Waldoff, Mark Lamos would not overlook the Aristotelian concept of "recognition" in this late rehearsal of *La finta giardiniera*.

Although he did not elaborate, Lamos told the cast that to direct all of the "*pazzi*" ("crazy") lyrics to the audience would "be very helpful to this conceit" because anything that related to the idea of madness or craziness had to be handled delicately and precisely as the bedrock upon which the whole production rested. He knew, perhaps instinctively, that the characters should distance themselves from any notion of "craziness" and sing the word "*pazzi*" as an accusation toward each other or, better yet, throw it out to the audience to emphasize the comic irony. The audience would, he hoped, be content to be confidants and laugh at the unabashed hypocrisy of one crazy person calling another crazy. The accusers, according to Lamos, would not be aware of their current mental state. This was not the moment in the opera for a true "*anagnôrisis*" in the sense of "re-cognizing" or arriving at a "new understanding"

of themselves as crazy. Recognition would come, woven through the narrative as Aristotle advises, later in the opera.

Aristotle first documented the concept of “*anagnôrisis*” in his *Poetics* (36). Briefly, *anagnôrisis* is the moment in a play (or, for my purposes, opera) when a main character experiences a “shift from ignorance to awareness” (36) necessary for his or her tragic destiny. Aristotle considered this plot device a mark of a superior tragedy, for it suggested a complexity both in plot and in emotion. For example, when Oedipus kills his father and marries his mother in ignorance and later recognizes the truth as it is slowly revealed, Aristotle found that moment more artistically satisfying than Medea’s resolving to kill her children as quickly as she does in full awareness of her actions. Likewise, Lamos preferred to keep the characters in ignorance about their illnesses during their “*pazzi*” accusations to the audience. He wanted the production to be a serious exploration of the destructive quality of madness, but he did not dare ignore such an obvious comedic opportunity. Perhaps he was hoping to have it both ways, for the moment might garner a laugh while demonstrating the maudlin circumstance of people not knowing how sick they really are. Moreover, this lack of recognition would also emphasize their need for the therapy sessions at the center of Lamos’s concept.

Beyond the production concept, Lamos revealed a foundation in his directorial method during this rehearsal that was Aristotelian in nature. Lamos had his own “*anagnôrisis*” of sorts when working with Brian Anderson by recognizing a flawed element that no amount of preparation could have revealed.

Lamos instantly went from “ignorance to awareness” about Count Belfiore when Anderson had demonstrated what not to do. This newfound re-cognition by Lamos followed because he trusted himself to let a performance evolve in rehearsal.

He continually worked on the assumption that all the planning and preparing in the world cannot often substitute for the creative and collaborative process live in the rehearsal hall. Lamos felt fortunate that Anderson played the scene “wrong” so that he would be more confident about what was “right.” Such rightness usually follows in a moment that needs to be worked out with the actors live during the creative process in rehearsal. Peter Brook famously illustrated this concept when he reflected on his first rehearsal of *Love’s Labour’s Lost* with the Royal Shakespeare Company (then called the Stratford Memorial Theatre) in 1945.

Brook was a young, up-and-coming director from Cambridge who would be working with some of the most experienced and world-renowned classical actors in England. As he wrote about the night before his first blocking rehearsal:

I sat agonized in front of a model of the set, aware that further hesitation would soon be fatal, fingering folded pieces of cardboard—forty pieces representing the forty actors to whom the following morning I would have to give orders, definite and clear.

(106)

Brook maneuvered the cardboard pieces again and again, trying desperately to stage the first entry of the Court to his exacting specifications. After a long night,

he arrived with “a fat prompt book under [his] arm” (107) and began staging the first scene as he had blocked it with the cardboard pieces. Almost immediately, Brook realized that human beings do not move the way cardboard pieces move, and he was moved by the actors’ “individual enthusiasms,” “personal variations,” and “many unexpected possibilities” (107). Brook summed up the experience by writing:

It was a moment of panic. I think, looking back, that my whole future work hung in the balance. I stopped, and walked away from my [prompt] book, in amongst the actors, and I have never looked at a written plan since. I recognized once and for all the presumption and the folly of thinking that an inanimate model can stand for a man. (107)

Like Brook, Lamos knew that he could not pre-plan every moment, character choice, or bit of business and expect the performers to respond as if they were robots or cardboard pieces. The recognition of Anderson’s flawed performance was extremely valuable, despite the negativity implied in the statement. A performance emerges from whittling away all the ill-devised choices and keeping the effective ones. This is why Lamos could experience such satisfaction with a “bad” performance because Anderson had helped him find a better way.



Chapter 6

Rehearsal Log: Technical and Dress Rehearsals

Sixteenth Day: September 23, 2003

Exposition

To put the first technical rehearsal in perspective, it is worth noting that *La finta giardiniera* would not have an entire tech week and several previews as most spoken drama productions in professional theaters do. Instead, this production would have two technical rehearsals, one piano dress, and one orchestra dress before opening night. To complicate matters further, the Main Stage would not be available at night because of the performances there as part of the City Opera's repertory schedule. Often, in other theaters, the ending time of a technical rehearsal is left open-ended to ensure that the production does not fall behind. Sometimes technical rehearsals can go on until the middle of the night.

No such luck at the New York City Opera. As a result, Robert Wierzel, the lighting designer, would have to build most of the lighting cues during the technical run-through, consulting with Lamos as time would allow. This lack of time also would be the reason that Lamos had to expect full performances out of his cast despite the flurry of technical activity. Lamos would demand that they be

completely focused and active even as they knew that their performances would not be the focal point of the next two rehearsals. Unfortunately, Lamos's expectations would not be met completely.

The first technical rehearsal on the Main Stage would begin with a flurry of activity. All were racing to wrap up the final preparations so the rehearsal could begin on time. Designers, sound and light technicians, property masters, multiple stage managers, and the wardrobe crew would be focused on their tasks. Collectively, everyone scurried here and there carrying lighting equipment, cables, fabric, props, and ponderous notebooks, calmly yet swiftly attacking their work with professionalism and assurance.

Lamos's final preparations included conferring with someone from the literary office about the synopsis in the program to which he wanted to make changes, checking with the props department about the number and size of the props ("the stage looks so bare"), and asking the set designer, Michael Yeargan, about a missing piece of artwork that had been used in the Florida production.⁷⁹

Before the rehearsal could begin in earnest, Lamos wanted to move all the chairs for the "patients" and Sandrina's therapeutic floral arrangements one foot to stage left. He checked with both Yeargan and Wierzel, the lighting designer, to see whether the move would disrupt either the set or lighting designs. Both affirmed that they saw no immediate problem with the move. Lamos then rose from his seat in the orchestra section and went to the stage to have the stage managers re-spike placements for the chairs and flowers.

⁷⁹ Yeargan replied that, "The crew thought it was cut for some reason."

While onstage, Lamos would also confirm and clarify with the cast some of the more recent blocking changes that they had established during the previous rehearsal. Those changes had affected especially the act 2 finale that included the reworked *commedia* section. After seeing that all the performers were relatively confident of their individual responsibilities, and with time being scarce, Lamos would return to his seat in the house and the first technical run on the Main Stage would soon begin.

Development: First Technical Rehearsal—Main Stage

“This is always the diciest part,” said Lamos referring to the supertitles that were displayed overhead during the overture. These titles would have to establish the entire production concept of this little-known opera set in a spa for patients with severe wounds of the heart. Lamos knew from his Florida production that the audience would have to embrace the concept from the beginning in order to keep them engaged for two-and-a-half hours. Moreover, what was also “dicey” was that some of the titles were not part of the original libretto, so the audience would be informed immediately that they were not on familiar ground. The audience, therefore, would be visually and intellectually challenged during the opera’s first several minutes to expand their conception of a “classic” and trust that the director’s vision would be both illuminating and entertaining.

While the opera was moving along at a good pace, Lamos made occasional comments about both the performers (“Physicalize this more, Lisa”)

and specific technical matters (“There’s no spot for Ramiro!”). At this juncture, however, he was much more focused on the overall design and stage picture. For instance, he wondered aloud whether “we should add more ‘stuff’ to the set like posters, bulletin boards, and charts to make the whole environment look more institutional.” Yeargan said, “Sure” and that they could discuss what specific props to add later. Also, Lamos was continually conferring with Yeargan from scene to scene about whether set pieces and props were in the right position and whether everything “looked good.” Other than some very minor details, Yeargan invariably responded, “Fine” or “Looks great.”

Occasionally, Lamos would have a question for the lighting designer, Wierzel. One specific moment was when Count Belfiore and Sandrina meet for the first time during a therapy session. Lamos asked, “Robert, can you localize this more so that I can focus on the two of them?” What was fascinating about this was not so much the question but rather Weirzel’s immediately changing the lighting during the run-through instead of making a note for a later rehearsal. In point of fact, there was no time for “later.” Wierzel was actually building cues during most of the arias in stark contrast to most technical rehearsals in spoken drama.

When he was not conferring with the designers, Lamos gave acting notes to Helfrich during the entire run. Often these notes would come as a result of his crying out a correction to a performer who had no chance of hearing him with the music playing as he sat twenty rows back in the house. Lamos said, for instance, “You need to engage more with them, Nick” (the Doctor), or “Not so

early, Belfiore,” or, with a regretful tone, “Haven’t I given you that note before?” All of this was dutifully picked up by Helfrich who would provide the transcript for the notes session or give them directly to the cast should there not be enough time for notes at the end of the rehearsal.

As during the first act, Lamos conferred with Yeargan from scene to scene in the second act regarding furniture placement, prop positions, and set dressing. It did not seem that Lamos was unsure about the positioning and visual appeal of the set. He simply had implicit trust in Yeargan as the expert in, as he termed it, “spatial aesthetics.” This issue of trust was also apparent concerning the most difficult and time-consuming part of the technical rehearsal that related to the set.

In fact, beyond Yeargan’s as the primary voice, Lamos asked the opinion of all the designers as well as Sam Helfrich about one crucial part of the technical production. During the zany *commedia* section of the second act just before the finale, a makeshift bridge dropped on stage allowing all the characters to be together for the finale. Previously, the cast had been sectioned off in pairs and threes as they tried desperately to find one another and reconcile with whomever they adored before going completely mad. The finale unifies them in misery, passion, and madness as they sing, “*Che caso funesto, / Che gran frenesia; / Più strana pazzia / Chi mai può trovar.*” (“What a dreadful event, / What great frenzy; / Surely no one could find / A stranger madness.”). For such an important and dramatic section of the opera, Lamos wanted to employ the “only spectacular [stage] effect in the opera.” During the run, the bridge dropped during an aria just before the finale so that it would be in place when the finale began. During the

finale, however, all were in agreement that the bridge should drop at a time that would prevent distracting the audience from Count Belfiore's aria. Yeargan noted that there was so much activity going on in the frenzy of the finale that the bridge being lowered at an effective time during the scene would not be obtrusive. Lamos agreed and made a note to find a dramatically effective moment during the finale to lower the bridge.

While he was on the subject of dramatic effectiveness, Lamos also mentioned to Wierzel that the lighting of the *commedia* section "needs to be much more theatrical and artificial." This comment highlighted one of the drawbacks of Lamos's having not decided firmly beforehand to do the finale with or without the *commedia* framework. Perhaps as a result of an earlier discussion, Wierzel had designed the scene as more realistic because he had not been informed about the *commedia* idea. Now he would have to alter the lighting for the finale because it currently did not match the artificiality of the stage action. Wierzel, however, was up to the task as he had proved the entire day by designing, refining, and enhancing the lighting as he went.

When the technical run came to a close, Lamos had time only to rework a particularly complicated piece of blocking. The scene involved the supers wheeling out Sandrina on a gurney for her to deliver her phantasmagoric aria involving monsters and other frightening hallucinations. After the supers were finished as orderlies placing Sandrina, they had to return as monsters that torment her relentlessly. Lamos, again, had limited time with the supers as they were committed to rehearsals for other operas in the season. Therefore, he used

the end of the tech to work with the supers on the Main Stage to confirm and adjust their blocking, provide more detailed instructions to them about playing the monsters, and work on the right timing for wheeling Sandrina into place to the music. Ideally, the supers would retain all of the new information for the subsequent rehearsals, but there is always danger in having blocking changes so close as these would be to opening night.

Recapitulation

One model of a technical rehearsal schedule is laid out by Robert Cohen and John Harrop in their book, *Creative Play Direction*. The schedule they propose makes no claim to be unique or ideal; rather, it is offered as part of a guide to provide aspiring directors with “a checklist of practical directorial decisions which must be taken during the process of mounting a play”:

We must emphasize that technical rehearsals are for perfecting technical effects, and they must be run and rerun until the technician is completely sure in what he is doing...For a highly complex production the following series of technical rehearsals could be hypothesized:

1. First tech: no actors. Set all light and sound cues: volumes, intensities, timings, and durations. This could take up to two days. ...
2. Second tech: no actors. Rehearse all scene shifts as the stage manager calls them from the stage. Two to three hours.

3. Third tech: no actors. Run through all scene shifts, light, and sound cues. Stage manager calls cues from his console. About four hours.
4. Fourth tech: Run as for third tech but with actors. Four to five hours. (291)

Even the briefest glance at this schedule reveals how vastly different the situation was for the first technical rehearsal of *La finta giardiniera*. What Cohen and Harrop suggest as the final “Fourth tech” seems to match a description of Lamos’s first tech. Imagine Lamos’s delight if his first tech had been scheduled to “take up to two days” to “set all light and sound cues.”

Typically, the first technical rehearsal in a spoken drama is stop-and-go or cue-to-cue so that the director can observe the “looks” for each scene that the lighting designer has already worked out during a lighting rehearsal without actors, or “dry tech,” as it is called. The director and the designer discuss the aesthetics of the stage picture, make changes in levels or colors if necessary, and the rehearsal progresses to the next cue, skipping the intermediate dialogue. Unfortunately, Lamos and Wierzel had to forego standard procedure in this case.

If Lamos had not even seen the performers until the fourth tech as outlined above, it would have provided him with three technical rehearsals when he would not have had to worry about character development, meaningful relationships, precise diction, evocative physicality, smooth blocking, comedic timing, or thematic consistency. Instead, all of his energy could have been focused on “perfecting the technical effects” by collaborating with the designers

and their technical contributions. Finally, once the actors arrived, there would have been less pressure on them to produce a fully realized performance. They would have had more time to become familiar with the set, scene shifts, lighting, etc.

In fact, technical rehearsals in the theatre are frequently long and tedious for the actors. There is usually no fluidity, and it is rare that entire scenes are performed until full dress rehearsals. Consequently, the actors will “mark” the show and follow specific directions related to positioning, timing, and sightlines as the technical elements are layered over the acting refined in the rehearsal hall. The actors know, and are frequently reminded by the director, that their preparations should have been completed for the last run-through before the first technical rehearsal because the acting always suffers from the way technical rehearsals are structured. These rehearsals for the actors actually have a close resemblance to a movie set: long breaks between scenes, skipping dialogue, repetition upon repetition of lines for the accurate timing of lighting and sound cues, and observing the well-worn dictum to “hurry up and wait.” There was no waiting around for the performers on this day, and perhaps even less so for the director. “Multitasking” understates what Lamos was challenged with doing on this day, and it is praiseworthy that he and the company were able to achieve as much as they did under the circumstances.

Lamos and the design team had recently mounted the Florida production, but with a new stage, new blocking, and new cast members, they might as well have been starting from scratch. Typically, after some initial conversations,

directors and designers work in relative isolation with the look and feel of a production until all the elements have been brought together. The fusing of artistic visions, no matter how many prior design consultations, models of the set, lighting plots, and costume renderings there have been, will almost never produce a rendering onstage that needs no refining or a technical rehearsal that needs no significant time for implementing such changes. The common requirement for this process is time. And time is exactly what Lamos did not have.

What was perhaps most surprising is that no one reacted as if the rehearsal was conducted in any way other than what they had expected. Everyone from the backstage technicians to the performers onstage to the production team in the house worked with alacrity and focus, yet they did not behave as if they were panicked or grossly behind schedule. It all seemed eerily natural that the rehearsal would be a complete run-through including full performances from the actors, the lighting designer building cues, reworking the “only spectacular effect in the opera,” and reblocking the two most complicated scenes.

To put this first technical rehearsal in perspective, Cohen and Harrop are, again, instructive:

Some directors try to do a run-through in conjunction with a technical rehearsal. In our experience, this is disastrous. It is of no profit to the actors, whose rhythm is constantly being upset, and it wastes the technicians' time. Tech rehearsals are for technical

effects; if a director feels his production needs a run-through at this juncture, then his schedule has probably been wrong, and this is no time for it. (291)

Unfortunately, Lamos had to work with a schedule that, in retrospect, had “probably been wrong” as it allowed little room for error. This condition is unrealistic during technical rehearsals given that they are primarily for finding and fixing all the errors that arise.



Seventeenth Day: September 24, 2003

Exposition

The supers would again be the topic of conversation at the beginning of this rehearsal. To further solidify his concept of the cast of characters being patients, Lamos decided to have the supers, as orderlies, give each character medication in miniature Dixie cups soon after the curtain rose during the overture. While the cast and crew were busy in preparation for the full costume/piano dress, the production team had to discuss the details and implementation of the new opening with the supers. There would be more questions than answers.

For instance, when could they rehearse with the supers who were almost always committed to rehearse other operas in the repertory? Could they rehearse immediately after the piano dress? Exactly how much time would be needed for the set changeover for the evening performance? Could they

rehearse behind the curtain while the house was open? Could the musicians for the evening performance possibly tune at 8:05 to provide some added time for rehearsal? With so many questions around so many issues regarding scheduling, including imposing on other productions and multiple union concerns, a quick decision was made to table the discussion in order to move forward with the dress rehearsal.

Development: Full Costume Run with Piano

The “dress” in dress rehearsal was the operative word for this session. Almost all discussions that Lamos engaged in had to do with costumes. This made sense since this was the first time he was seeing all the costumes, the timing of costume changes, and the wigs. However, there were so many other unresolved technical issues that it was surprising that costumes so dominated discussions. One main issue that Lamos discussed with Candice Donnelly, the costume designer, was whether Lisa Saffer should wear the wig she currently had on or just style her own hair. Playing the titular character, Saffer could not afford to have the wig distract attention from her performance. Another discussion focused on how to make Ramiro look more “butch.” Sandra Piques Eddy, as a woman, had such dazzling good looks that Lamos and Donnelly needed to take steps to make her look more masculine.⁸⁰

⁸⁰ The character of Ramiro in this production was not the typical “pants” role where the audience suspends its disbelief that a woman is playing a man. Here, Ramiro reveals herself to be an actual woman at the end of the opera with a surprising strip down to her bra. This meant that Eddy and the costume designer had permission to overdo the masculine as Ramiro overcompensates to hide her female identity.

Moving from a masculine to a feminine frame of reference, Lamos was also concerned about Brenda Harris's beautiful wedding dress. He wondered whether it should look so fresh and glamorous. After all, the planned "wedding" between Arminda and Count Belfiore would not be occurring as in the Mozart libretto. The Doctor devised this wedding between the Count and Arminda for therapeutic purposes. Would the Doctor allow such a pristine wedding dress in his spa for such a purpose? Perhaps if the dress were distressed to make it look shoddy and ill-fitting, it would make more sense in the world of the production. This discussion was carried on as the run of the first act concluded.

The primary costume issue in the second act was hardly surprising. It was still shocking, however, to hear Lamos exclaim with opening night looming so close, "What did we all decide about the *commedia* costumes?!" At his prompting, all the designers conferred with him about his *commedia* idea. First, Lamos reiterated and clarified the idea. The device became clearer during the costume-run by virtue of the fact that the designers could see the idea in action onstage while Lamos explained his goals using the style. The pros and cons were weighed as each designer gave his or her response. In the end, of course, he knew he would have to make the final choice.⁸¹

As with the previous rehearsal, after the technical run was over, Lamos had the cast remain onstage to solve some blocking problems. The main one he chose to address was the final moment of the opera. This was the homage to *Waiting for Godot* in which Beckett concludes both acts in the same way. In

⁸¹ The discussion revealed just how much Lamos valued and trusted the theatrical sensibilities of the design team. He let his designers design rather than having them slavishly serve his vision. He was open to their comments even when their notions seemed to contradict his own.

Lamos's production, the final action had the patients give the orderlies a shot in the neck with a huge hypodermic needle just as had been done to them at the end of the first act. The main spacing problem was that a large hospital bed was throwing the timing off for the orderlies to be drugged in time with the music just before the curtain fell. Also, when the orderlies moved in front of the bed to be drugged, they were too far downstage to clear the main curtain coming down at the end of the opera. The last thing that Lamos wanted was for the curtain to come down on the opera and have several orderlies still in view of the audience.

The simplest solution was to move the bed. Lamos knew, however, that moving the bed would drastically affect the lighting and blocking for the previous duet he had staged on the bed. Brenda Harris came up with an eleventh-hour solution by suggesting a way for the actors to surreptitiously move the bed just after the duet. By doing this, the lighting for the duet would not be affected and the orderlies would be able to hit their marks in time to crumble to the floor behind the falling curtain. The performers had time to try it once, and all were elated about how smoothly the change was executed. The cast was then dismissed to change out of their costumes and return for a quick notes session.

Even though it was clear during the run that Lamos had several crucial issues to discuss with the cast, he began by opening the floor to them instead, "Questions from you? Or problems that you need resolved?"⁸² The cast, not unexpectedly, focused on costume issues. There had been so many changes—

⁸² This was a very effective way to open the notes session. Lamos knew that the cast was feeling the same tension and pressure that he did, so he did not want to begin with a series of corrections or judgments on their performances. By having the cast speak first, Lamos allowed them to unpack some of their own nervous energy so that they would be in a better place to hear his notes.

both literal costume changes and conceptual changes—that the cast had had difficulty keeping up with them. They did not have time to enumerate all of the problems, but once someone identified an issue, it was quickly decided that they could probably solve most such issues on their own. Lamos was fine with this because he knew that they would better remember their own solutions rather than ones that he or the costume designer provided at this late stage.

Another note that was not necessarily a problem, but which did relate to costumes, was just how clothed should Matthew Chellis be when he stepped out of his sitz bath. The Doctor uses “hydrotherapy” on the *Podestà*, so Chellis had to take a bath on stage. He exited the bath during the scene, so how should he be costumed for this unique therapy? Lamos thought that Matt should be more clothed than he had been during the costume run. At first, Lamos did not remember why he had allowed Chellis to be clad only in small boxer shorts. Although, when he talked it out, he remembered that it had to do with the actor who had performed the same role for the original production in Florida. Lamos said that he “had more of a compulsion for nakedness” and that “he had more organic reasons” for being in such an unclothed state. Lamos now wanted to change the costume for Chellis to have more clothing on for his bath. Besides, Chellis was “doing so many wonderfully different things with the character” that he did not want to force the costume of a different actor onto him.

Lamos did not have much time to give acting notes, so he offered a general note and a few specific ones. The general note was that he wanted “more energy, craziness, wildness” and for the cast “not to be afraid of pushing

your madness further, even to the point of being somewhat uncomfortable.” He felt that the setting of the therapeutic spa gave them more license to access the madness and portray it with all the energy they could muster.

The two specific notes related to love rather than madness. First, Lamos directed the cast to gesture more overtly to the person they were in love with in the opening scene to help the audience “wade through the muddled libretto.” The second and final note Lamos had time to give was indicative of his feeling about the entire performance. He said, “The lovemaking is looking too real. It should have more of a frenetic unreality to it. The love is all wrong, all wrong, but you simply cannot help yourselves.”

Recapitulation:

For many directors, collaboration is at the core of both their profession and their working methodology. Lamos was no exception. Earlier in his directorial career, he had said:

I see each production that I do as a collaborative effort. Maybe it’s because I started out as an actor. A collaboration has to be a generous process, and it has to be a regenerative process. There is no collaboration if you come to the table and say, “I have this idea—and this is how you will assist me in presenting it.”

Collaboration is saying, “I understand certain potent feelings I have about the work, but I don’t understand everything.” And you listen to what others might feel about it. (Bartow 189)

Lamos had offered this reply in an interview in which he was asked to discuss people with whom he experienced “the most creative working relationships” (Bartow 189). With one exception, Lamos listed only the names of designers in response to the question. He did not discuss actors, playwrights, managing or artistic directors, conductors, or any other artistic colleague (Bartow 189). This is not to suggest that Lamos did not have fruitful and fulfilling artistic collaborations with the professions listed; but it was revealing that Lamos first mentioned designers. They, especially on this hectic day, seemed to nourish and reassure him about his choices, his vision, and the entire production.

Immediately after the full dress rehearsal began, he was completely focused on the designers, especially Candice Donnelly since this was the first run with full costumes. With so many conceptual challenges and uncertainties throughout the rehearsal process, *La finta giardiniera* in particular fit his statement that he often has “certain potent feelings” about a work without “understand[ing] everything.” Furthermore, this lack of certainty was most evident when he admitted that he had discussed his worries with others more on this production than for any other he had worked on. This was quite an admission from a director who had run a Tony-award winning regional theatre for seventeen years and subsequently directed of dozens of plays and operas from Broadway to the Metropolitan Opera. Nothing was clearer regarding Lamos’s frame of mind on this day than when he called out exasperatingly, “What did we all decide about the *commedia* costumes?”⁸³

⁸³ It is not astonishing that Lamos presented this crucial question to the designers during final rehearsals, but he was so much more intense in his consultations with them and projected a stronger need for support

The *commedia* issue had been dogging Lamos for weeks, and he was still uncertain, on the day before the Final Orchestra Dress Rehearsal, whether he would commit to the style becoming the dominant theatrical device of the second half of the opera. His uncertainty owed to the common scenarios where directors have an inspired and spontaneous impulse just what a production needs and then spend hours, days, or even weeks wrestling to make the idea come to fruition as flawlessly as it did in their mind. In the first few rehearsals, they are absolutely sure it will work, but soon it becomes evident that something is wrong. Often, what is wrong is not clear and directors will sometimes spend the rest of the rehearsal process forcing the idea to work.

The *commedia* idea was proving difficult to realize, which is why Lamos had to turn to his design team for a last-moment solution. Moreover, the phrasing of his appeal to them should not be overlooked. He said, “What have we all decided...?” [Emphasis mine]. On the surface, the “we” follows most directorial methods of inclusion rather than exclusion of multiple voices in the creative process. This particular “we,” however, had a quality of democratization that, at this point in the process, might prove counterproductive to the hierarchical structure of decision-making. The question itself implied that Lamos was sharing his position instead of owning it. And for Lamos not to have a firm grasp of what the decision about *commedia* might be so close to the final rehearsal was indicative of the doubts he had about what promised to be one of the most crucial elements in the production. Lamos’s not making the decision

than he was probably used to. The success of the production seemed to hang in the balance of their collaborations.

about the *commedia* section, let alone not even knowing what the earlier decision had been (“What did we all decide...?”), revealed a remarkable reliance on his design team.

In this instance, his dependence on the designers seemed to be problematic, but, on the whole, it is not necessarily an undesirable condition for working relationships in the theatre. While collaboration is often praised as an ideal that all directors are wise to embrace, in practice, each director will establish the level of collaboration desired. Many of them will lean toward a more authoritative style while others employ a more democratic style. Most directors begin somewhere in the middle and shift back and forth during a rehearsal process depending on the situation.

Ideally, collaboration is most open at the beginning of the conceptual process and narrows toward the end of rehearsals, for, eventually, decisions must be made. Even if Lamos was now calling on the collective during at the end of the process, the situation did show his commitment to collaboration and his faith in his design team. His years of experience working with them—and for decades in set designer Michael Yeargan’s case—had fostered a trust that was implicit. Lamos’s working relationship with his designers on *La finta giardiniera* is evoked by director JoAnne Akalaitis when she describes the qualities of a good designer:

A strong designer is one who enters the world of the play, who gets lost in the play, who is willing to meander through a lot of mazes. I feel that good directors are designers and good designers are

directors—the two occupations are really knitted occupations...It's never "This is what I want to do. You go design it." It's "What are we going to do?" These are people who are deeply involved in the soul of the theatre. (Bartow 16)

Akalaitis's question, "What are we going to do?" sounds familiar.



Eighteenth Day: September 25, 2003

Exposition

Before the full Orchestra Dress would begin, Lamos would not spend any time on notes or in trying to correct problems. He wanted to allow the cast and crew to focus exclusively on this crucial rehearsal. He also might have been hesitant to risk delays owing to the presence of the full orchestra that would be making their first appearance in the rehearsal process. There were about to be many more people in the theatre who were contractually obligated to begin and end at a certain time.

The presence of the full orchestra would provide an energetic lift to the preparations, but that would not continue for very long when the beginning of the run did not go very well. Many problems for Lamos and the production team would have to be sorted out quickly with only one more rehearsal before the opening. Lamos would be careful not to bring his frustrations to the cast when he checked in with them during the intermission.

Performers often have an entirely different list of priorities during final dress rehearsals. Typically, they will try to block out anything that does not directly have to do with their performance so as to focus more on their own character and their fellow players. If the cast can successfully block out what is superfluous to their own performances, then they feel freer to enjoy the entire performance more. However, there is nothing superfluous for a director, which is why Lamos would be so uncharacteristically glum for most of the rehearsal. His spirits would be temporarily lifted at the end of the day, however, after an encouraging meeting with Managing and Artistic Director of New York City Opera, Paul Kellogg, also in attendance for the dress rehearsal.

Development: Full Orchestra Dress

Unfortunately for Lamos and the production team, the first five minutes of the opera were not inspiring, and he did not conceal his agitation. Several factors contributed to the problems on stage. One super was missing, and this threw off the timing of much of the opening business and blocking. The performers did not seem to be implementing the few acting notes Lamos had given them in the previous rehearsals. There were also several mistakes with the spotlight, and this hardly served the confusing plotline.

Things did not improve much as the performance progressed, and this was exemplified during Lamos's favorite aria in the opera, Sandrina's "*Tortorella*" ("turtle dove") song. The coordination of the stage action with the music was off. One wheel on the bed was clamped shut so it was being pushed onstage like a

wayward shopping cart. The sheets were preset in the wrong position so the bed looked sloppy. And the orderlies forgot to execute Lamos's note to stop and sneer at Sandrina before leaving as a way of adding menace to the scene.

These issues seemed to leave Lamos uncharacteristically inexpressive during the rest of the act. One thing that was absolutely a constant in the rehearsal process was Lamos's expressiveness, whether positive or negative. Now he became more passive than he had been since the first rehearsal. This was why it was so noteworthy when, during the intermission break, he went backstage and was all smiles and offered comments like "Good job" and other words of encouragement to the cast. Perhaps he did not want to infect the cast with his frustrations, especially since most of his issues had nothing to do with them. They appreciated his kind words and actually seemed as though they were having a good time during the run despite their exhaustion.

Lamos was not the only one to be so unhappy, however. Michael Yeargan was deeply disappointed about the lack of finishing touches on the set so close to opening. He could not understand why more work had not been done between rehearsals and even stated that the set in its current condition "looked simply hideous." This prompted Lamos to consider making a drastic conceptual change to the set. He asked Yeargan if he thought they should "distress" the set before opening. That way, if the crew did not have the time to make the set look as polished and well-appointed as originally intended, the "hideousness" would appear to be a deliberate choice. Yeargan appreciated the motive behind the

idea, but was not ready to commit to the change until he had talked to more people.

There were still costume changes being discussed during the run, but the costumes were not the primary concern with so many other aspects of the production in disarray. The most significant costume issue actually had to do with the wigs. Since the *commedia* concept had finally been given the go-ahead, along with the cast's resolving their own quick-change problems, Lamos and costume designer Donnelly shifted their attention to the visual effectiveness of the many wigs worn. At first, Lamos did not like the wigs and told the cast not to wear them for the first act. When Donnelly checked with Lamos during the intermission, neither of them seemed assured of a solution. To help resolve the situation, Lamos instructed the cast to wear the wigs during the second act and determined to make a final decision by the end of the day.

Lamos continued to be relatively quiet during the second act, only giving a few notes to Helfrich now and then. Something that did cause him to speak out had to do with a particularly complex and evocative lighting effect that included a projection of the hospital bed on the upstage wall of the set. The bed would need to be placed just right to make the projection work. When it happened that the bed was not positioned correctly, the stagehands tried to move the bed during the run to save the effect. Unfortunately, no one was able to move the bed to the correct mark in time for the lighting cue. Lamos threw up his hands and said forlornly, "Yesterday we had such a striking lighting effect, and now it just looks stupid."

All in all, this was not an impressive late rehearsal for *La finta giardiniera*. What may have added to Lamos's woes was that Paul Kellogg, the Managing and Artistic Director of City Opera of New York, was in attendance. Lamos appreciated his presence, but with so many flaws in the run, Lamos was probably upset when the production did not achieve his original goals of a deeper psychological examination of the characters. After the run, he had a brief meeting with Kellogg to discuss the condition of the production. Actually, Kellogg was unperturbed by most of the issues that had disturbed Lamos, but had some specific notes he felt would be advisable for Lamos to consider.

First, Kellogg thought that the onstage lovemaking was a bit too libidinous and perhaps could be toned down. This included the spanking, strangling, and other S&M activities. Second, Kellogg thought that the first act was "too busy." With so many love triangles and hidden identities, the stage action confused more than clarified. This included the many first act lighting cues that needed to be cleaner. Lastly, Kellogg liked the idea of the Beckett-inspired bit with the hypodermic syringes, but he could not see them since they were clear plastic and blended into the white of the spa and the orderlies' costumes. After the meeting, Lamos reported Kellogg's concerns back to the production team. He ended the rehearsal by saying "I think it's worth adjusting those things."

Recapitulation

Anthony Tommasini, chief music critic of *The New York Times*, has detailed what were Paul Kellogg's major accomplishments during his tenure at City Opera in an article about Kellogg's retirement:

Few leaders of performing-arts institutions have been as effective at defining and carrying out a company mission...At the City Opera...you will see excitingly gifted younger singers, particularly Americans: committed artists who care about acting and typically look like the characters they are portraying...At the City Opera under Mr. Kellogg, buffs have been treated to engrossing productions of rewarding lesser known works...[which] played to enthusiastic audiences, usually in updated and fanciful productions and offering consistently appealing and sometimes splendid casts. ("Innovator")

The production of *La finta giardiniera* epitomized Kellogg's "company mission" in the way it was "updated and fanciful," "lesser known," and included "excitingly young singers" who were "committed artists who care about acting." Mark Lamos had been hired by Kellogg specifically to help fulfill the company mission by delivering an original and provocative production, but it was not clear by the end of the penultimate rehearsal whether the director had succeeded in realizing the production he had in mind. What would help Lamos achieve his goals and thus reflect the company mission was centered on the discussion between Kellogg and Lamos and the swiftness with which Lamos could implement the suggestions from the Artistic Director.

The spirited discussions between the director of a production and the Artistic Director of a company are not often the focus in analyzing the craft of directing. The popular image of the director as the final arbiter with complete control of a production is rarely accurate, so it is surprising that input of the Artistic Director is rarely considered in evaluating a production. Critics hardly ever mention the Artistic Director in a review, and that person does not often receive the awards and accolades, or, conversely, the pans and jeers for individual productions. Despite this, it would be folly to suggest that the Artistic Director's role is of minimal importance to what makes its way onto the stage. In fact, Lamos was counting on Kellogg to give him a response to the production within a broader context. Lamos admitted, "One stops seeing the forest for the trees on a piece like this *La finta*, and so the Artistic Director can provide perspective."

What is this perspective that Lamos and other directors often lose sight of? One answer is that the Artistic Director must see the production within the context of the season, perhaps even several seasons, when he attempts to respond to and shape a given production. Zelda Fichandler, longtime Artistic Director and Co-Founder of The Arena Stage in Washington, D.C. provided a glimpse into the broader perspective an Artistic Director:

The whole notion of an institution is the continuing dialogue with the audience. In an institution, you can't just have a series of dots. You have to connect them. It's a relationship in the most profound

way between the body of the theatre and the body of the audience...It's a long locus. (Bartow 110)

The "long locus" is precisely what Lamos knew he was lacking from his being so engrossed with the details of the production. He had been hired to have a narrower focus that included, on this day, problems with the missing supernumerary, the forgotten acting notes, the many spotlight mistakes, the sloppy "*Tortorella*" aria, the "simply hideous" set, the ineffective wigs, and the "stupid" lighting effects. With this long list of things to remedy, it is no wonder that Lamos was thankful that Kellogg was there to provide a more objective response to the production. Equipped with a different perspective, Kellogg provided Lamos with suggestions that were, not surprisingly, quite different from the director's about what the production most needed. Kellogg focused instead on how the lighting and the stage action were too busy and did not clearly tell the story, how the sexual content might be inappropriate, and how one of the cleverest bits of the production was unclear.

Kellogg's notes reflected the perspective of one who has the audience in mind in a more profound way than the director did. Assuredly, any effective director has the audience in mind as well during the entire rehearsal process. That director, however, can engage the audience for only one production before they move on to the next job. An Artistic Director has a substantially more complex and nuanced relationship with the public. Fichandler has also addressed this relationship by saying:

A person who runs a theater has to be in tune with what people are thinking about even though they can't name it. We have to address the subconscious or the preconscious of the audience. We have to be *of* them, but we have to be ahead of them in the perception of the world around us and the world that is inside of them. (Bartow 110)

Fichandler's account offers insight as to why Lamos was so grateful for Kellogg's suggestions. Kellogg's focus chiefly on larger issues like the clarity of the story and the appropriateness of the content allowed Lamos to keep his mind on details such as the specific acting notes and the technical lapses. This valuable partnership was reflected in Lamos's comment: "I never feel compromised by Paul." Furthermore, Lamos had Kellogg in mind when he offered his definitive thought about the role of the Artistic Director: "A good Artistic Director or Producer is often the guiding light. If you trust such a person's perceptions, even if they differ from yours, their words and criticism can be an enormous help" (*La finta questions*).



Nineteenth Day: September 26, 2003

Exposition

Typically, a director's job is complete by the end of the Final Dress Rehearsal. In most cases, the stage manager oversees the actual performance

run of a production. As the director's hold on the production relaxes bit by bit, the stage manager takes on more and more responsibility.

Mark Lamos entered the Main Stage auditorium knowing that his job was nearing completion. He would show none of the morose quality of the previous day and returned to his more jocular self. He would go backstage to give hugs all around to the cast, wishing them a "Good show" and offering other words of appreciation for their effort. Soon after, Lamos would make his way to his seat in the house, exchange a few pleasantries with the other members of the production team, and wait patiently for the stage manager to give the first cue to begin the Final Dress Rehearsal.

Development: Final Dress Rehearsal

During the run, Lamos had few notes to give other than some general comments like, "More slowly," and "Turn and look," and "Too much make-up." He appeared to be subduing his temptation to give more notes. He may have wanted to sit back and enjoy the work that he had created. Of course, he was irritated by some specific elements like the "*Tortorella*" song that still did not go as he envisioned, and he expressed this by saying, "Jesus, I can never get the opening to this aria right!" On the whole, however, he was able to relax and have as much fun as the cast was having onstage.

During the intermission, there was an interesting discussion about an article in that day's *New York Times* previewing the production. Lamos said that music critic Anthony Tommasini had not liked his previous production of the

opera which had been a more traditional, eighteenth-century production at Glimmerglass. Now, he continued, Tommasini made it seem as if he thought the former production had been “sweetly amusing” and “psychologically resonant” and that Lamos might have ruined those qualities by setting it in a therapeutic spa (Tommasini, “Second Thoughts”). To add insult to injury, Lisa Saffer was pictured in the preview in her lovely eighteenth-century garden-girl costume from a previous production at Garsington Opera in England. The photograph would be completely misleading in light of the reconceptualized production. Lamos could only lament, “You just can’t win, can you?”

He seemed to enjoy the second act as much as the first, despite some obvious spotlight miscues and other minor technical problems. He did not want to battle anymore. This was a day to celebrate. The mood was also uplifted by the presence of both Kellogg and Robin Thompson, the Associate Artistic Director, who exchanged whispered notes that seemed mostly positive. In particular, Kellogg’s previous note about the clear syringes had been heeded and today they were a bright cerulean blue. This added color made the finale work beautifully when the opera concluded with a hilarious crash of bodies falling to the floor in perfect timing with the curtain and Mozart’s final chord.

The cast met with Lamos in the lobby after they were out of costume and make-up. He knew he was not going to give them many notes. He chose to summarize his comments with a few choice words:

This opera is a *dramma giocoso*. Play more the ‘*dramma*’ than the ‘*giocoso*.’ The humor takes care of itself. We can never forget that

there are real emotions here. If you get laughs or if you don't get laughs does not matter as much as us caring about you for two-and-a-half hours.

Reminding the cast that *La finta giardiniera* was a *dramma giocoso* brought Lamos full circle, since it was this feature of the opera that had inspired this production in the first place. He had wanted to explore the intersection where comedy and tragedy meet. Perhaps he would agree with Romanian director, Ion Caramitru, who said:

There has always been a balance between fighting and comedy in our culture and so the two masks of the theatre belong to our life...

That's probably the definition of theatre: to play both parts, both sides of the human being. (Delgado and Heritage 58)

While a definition of directing still remains elusive for many, Caramitru's definition of theatre is apt and persuasive. The theatre has been and likely always will be a communal activity where "both sides" of human beings are presented in all their richness and complexity.



Chapter 7

Conclusion

While the focus of this study has been largely on process rather than product, a brief examination of the performances of Mark Lamos's production of *La finta giardiniera* is in order to complete the discussion of the anatomy of directing opera. The craft of directing opera is tested most rigorously in rehearsal, but performances must also be considered since they represent the culmination of the director's work. Furthermore, because Lamos chose to reimagine the setting, characters, and text of *La finta giardiniera*, it is worth considering the responses not only to the performances but to Lamos's revisionist approach to directing opera for the future. Controversy abounds when the subject of updating classic works arises, and considering Lamos and his production within this context can shed light on whether his directorial vision was viable and worthy.

Success?

When considering the performance of *La finta giardiniera*, one is tempted to consider first whether Lamos's production was a "success." This presents myriad problems because the definition of success for any production is complex

and multi-layered. For whom, for instance, was the production a success? The audience? The critics? The administration of New York City Opera? The artists themselves? Was the production a commercial success or an artistic success, or both? These are only a few of the questions one might consider when evaluating the success of any production, opera or otherwise.

Divided Opinions

Critics are the most obvious choice to be sounded out about the success of Lamos's work since they serve as arbiters of artistic taste for their readership. The challenge of determining the success of Lamos's production is evident when weighing the critical reactions to his *La finta giardiniera*. Evaluations of the production ranged widely: from the angry Anne Midgette of *The New York Times* writing, "There is something infuriating about such a blatant waste of time: the performers' and the audience's" (3), to Frederick M. Winship of *UPI* writing tepidly that the production was "jarring at first" but "clever enough" and "acceptable," to Bradley Bambarger of *The Star-Ledger* who wrote that the production was "an inspired [and] pitch-perfect comic production" and that few operas "made an audience laugh out loud as genuinely as this '*Giardiniera*'" (21).

Primarily, what was so "infuriating" to Anne Midgette was her inability to care about or sympathize with any of the characters as a result of Lamos's setting the opera in an asylum. She wrote that, "It is very hard to form any attachment to characters in an already slender plot when they are all shown to be unpleasant and crazy" (3). This was, unfortunately, exactly the opposite intention

that Lamos had for choosing his setting. His repeated remarks to the cast not to forget the dark undertones and to play the *dramma* more than the *giocoso* demonstrated that he expected the asylum setting to elicit greater sympathy rather than less. By reframing the goofier antics of the characters in the libretto within the context of an asylum, Lamos hoped that audiences would better appreciate the characters' manic states instead of accepting their madness more casually in a typically *buffa* world. Midgette, for one, was disturbed by the whole enterprise since the characters' "funny moments, their agonies, their worries are here all merely symptoms, laughed at rather than sympathized with" (3). In direct contrast to the sentiments Lamos expressed about the seriousness of his directorial concept, Midgette closed her review disdainfully: "If [Lamos] finds '*Finta*' as silly as he made it seem here, one wonders why he bothered to do it at all" (3).

Agreeing with Midgette about Lamos's missteps, though for different reasons, was Stacey Kors writing for *Newsday*. The title of her review leaves no doubt about her reaction to the production: "Meddling With Mozart: City Opera errs with revisionist '*finta*.'" Kors's main argument was that Lamos had imposed his directorial vision on an opera that did not need his help to be effective and enjoyable. She wrote that the production was "heavy-handed" and that the concept "ultimately creates more problems than it resolves" (42). Kors admitted that the libretto was "poorly written," but felt that Mozart's music more than compensates for this fact and provides a dramaturgy all its own to create sympathetic and complex characterizations. She wrote that in the asylum

setting, “Mozart’s most empathic music moments are rendered irrelevant when uttered by the overwrought and insane” and that the “differences in melodic complexity between the opera’s different social castes are lost entirely” (42). Kors was hardly writing as a purist, but she believed that the choices Lamos made had obscured rather than illuminated Mozart’s sublime music. By stating that Lamos “obliterated the opera’s main premise” and that his “revisionist approach” ultimately produced an “irrational production,” Kors seems to have joined those who would argue against any director’s “meddling with Mozart.” Her final complaint was that if only Lamos had gotten out of the way, “Mozart lovers would know if *La finta* can stand on its own” (42).

Letting *La finta giardiniera* stand on its own would have been precisely the wrong approach, according to other critics more favorable to Lamos’s production. Heidi Waleson of *The Wall Street Journal* went so far as to write: “Directorial license in classic operatic works can be mere ego exercise, but in the case of Mozart’s *La finta giardiniera*...it’s essential” (10). Waleson welcomed wholeheartedly Lamos’s directorial license and wrote that the production “provided a witty framework for this sketchy story” (10). Contrary to Stacey Kors who thought that Lamos had rendered Mozart’s complex music irrelevant by setting it in an asylum, Waleson noted that, “The more musically sophisticated Act II...was an extended hallucination, complete with...clown costumes and some animal masks, which fit the music perfectly” (10).

Adam Baer of *The New York Sun* agreed that Mozart’s “sparkling teenage work with a weak, silly libretto” benefitted from Lamos’s “high-concept creativity”

and produced “a fun display of postmodern adaptation” (17). Baer was careful to note that Lamos’s production concept “reigns for reasons of narrative, not money” (17). All too often, directors will embark upon “high-concept” productions because their budget cannot absorb the full regalia of period sets and costumes. This is why it was significant when Baer argued that Lamos’s concept had enriched the narrative and was not merely the result of a financial decision. Baer thought that Lamos’s concept augmented the narrative because the production “laughs at the piece itself” and, specifically, “the stage action and puns reek of sarcasm leveraged at our therapy obsessed culture” (17). He applauded both the singers and the director as “open-minded artists who update classic motives without pretension, a quintessentially Mozartian technique” (17).

The most impressed critic was Bradley Bambarger, who also praised the production: “Lamos worked wonders by taking cues from the libretto, in which a mismatched group of lovers constantly refer to their hapless passions as driving them around the bend” (21). Since the characters mention madness so often, Bambarger thought that “this production’s new *mise-en-scène*...resolves at a stroke the too-daft aspects of the original story” (21). Bambarger also commented, as had Waleson and in contradiction to Kors, that the setting and the performances drew out the complexity of Mozart’s music: “The septet made for an adorable comic troupe, each member bringing out the layers in the levity by matching sly gestures with loaded turns of phrase” (21). As much as Lamos had struggled with the production concept in rehearsal, Bambarger appreciated his goal to add deeper and more troubling layers to the characters. Bambarger

equally valued Lamos's central theme, which had been emphasized throughout the rehearsal process: "If love wounds you, it will also heal you'...While hardly a revelation, City Opera's way with it will have you wondering how history could hide this small marvel" (21).

United Focus

There would be no consensus among the critics as to the success of Mark Lamos's production of *La finta giardiniera*. It is likely that the audience was also equally divided about the value of the production. Indeed, a broad spectrum of reactions was represented in the reviews, but what united all of them was that they focused on Lamos's production concept. His altering the time, physical setting, and text of Mozart's original opera created a conversation piece that was both cheered and jeered.

In identifying a new context for the opera, the critical reaction to the production seemed to say as much about the reviewers as the production itself. Critics and audiences often come to a performance with pre-conceived notions about updating or reimagining classic works. As the reviews demonstrated, these notions are difficult to leave in the lobby. When one review is titled, "Meddling with Mozart" and another claims that it is "essential" to meddle with him, the reviewers disclosed their own opinions about the merits of updating classic works in general.

This is hardly a surprise since the topic of updating and "deconstructing" a work has been controversial for some time. The fact that Lamos chose to

embark upon a new, reimagined production almost surely colored the opinions of some before the production even opened. The most influential publication, *The New York Times*, published a preview that highlighted the trepidation of its author, Anthony Tommasini:

One hopes that [Lamos's] serious and sensitive approach to the work will remain in the City Opera production, though the company reports that he has rethought the work extensively. Instead of setting it in an actual garden, Mr. Lamos and the set designer Michael Yeargan have placed the action in a quasi-madhouse. Madcap antics in a madhouse? We'll have to see. ("Second Thoughts")

What everyone did "see" was a production that sharply divided the critics between those who panned and those who praised Lamos's work.

The Debate

Since determining the success of Lamos's production of *La finta giardiniera* is problematic given such divided opinions, perhaps it is better to shift the attention to answering Anne Midgette's question of why Lamos bothered to direct the production at all. Is the mere exercise of directing a production intended to reshape a work of art worthy in itself, despite the results? This question approaches the core of the debate regarding updating classic works. Principally, the debate hinges on the tension between authorial intent and

directorial imposition. English director Jonathan Miller frames the debate with precision:

On the one hand, there is the existing notion that there is some sort of canonical version, the original version, the version which most realizes the playwright's intention. And on the other, the notion that there is no such thing as a playwright's intention, that there is no such thing as a standard canonical formal meaning in a text, and that these texts constantly renew themselves under the pressure of interpretation, which allows there to be almost anything and the text is taken as an unstructured thing altogether. (Delgado and Heritage 163)

There are fierce proponents on both sides. The view that the director's role is to fulfill the author's intention is given support by American director Terry McCabe, who wrote a polemic on the subject that filled an entire book, *Misdirecting the Play: An Argument Against Contemporary Theatre*. Early in the book, McCabe is clear in his purpose:

The premise of this book is simple: directing that seeks to control the text, instead of subordinating itself to the text, is bad directing. I believe the director's job is to tell the playwright's story as clearly and as interestingly as possible. Period. (16)

The view that there is no way to know the intention of the author and that the text serves as a foundation to interpret and explore is defended with equal passion by Peter Sellars. When challenged by the longtime theatre critic of *The Guardian*,

Michael Billington, to reconcile an obligation to the author while expressing what is current to an audience, Sellars responded:

I'm unwilling to make the presumption that I know what the person who wrote this had in mind...Anybody that tells you they know what Shakespeare meant is lying. I'm sorry...I don't want anybody to announce to me what Mozart intended. Intentions are a dangerous thing. We lie to ourselves about our own intentions. For God's sake what do any of us intend when we do anything? (Delgado and Heritage 231)

Whether a director can know definitively the intention of Shakespeare or Mozart or any other author or composer may be the wrong question to pose when considering the value of Lamos's production. Instead, why not consider sources far more reliable, which are the intentions Lamos expressed at the first company meeting and in his rehearsals? Since the rehearsal record does exist in this dissertation, the production itself does not need to serve as the only determinant of the director's intention. The rehearsal log reveals Lamos's motivations throughout the rehearsal process, and these ought to be considered. Typically, critics assume directorial intentions on the basis of their seeing a production, and, indeed, the production should still serve as a way to evaluate the culmination of the director's work. The critical record, however, is so divided with regard to Lamos's *La finta giardiniera* that it is worth reexamining his expressed intentions to gain a better understanding of the value of his artistic efforts.

Taking Both Sides

Lamos always maintained that the inception of his vision for came as a result of listening to the music again and again after he had directed a more conventional production of the opera. For Lamos, Mozart's music was always the inspiration, and not some deconstructionist theory he wanted to try out on the work. He heeded a warning offered by director William Ball in his book *A Sense of Direction*: "It doesn't work imposing your will on a production and then having to live with the results. Eventually, you'll look at it and say, 'Oh, what a mess. It is all filled with me and I hate it'" (21). By concentrating on Mozart, Lamos heard the music revealing darker tones of madness and a chaotic energy of emotion that could anchor the production. By reframing the opera in an asylum, Lamos supposed that the audience would be able to hear a darker quality in the music in a more profound way. Similarly to the way Mozart expressed both the comic and the serious in this *dramma giocoso*, Lamos embraced both sides of the debate about authorial intent *versus* directorial imposition.

Lamos's production offered a third option because he honored Mozart at the same time he meddled with him. The music, as an expression of Mozart's authorial intention, was always the foundation of Lamos's production concept, yet modern costumes, the added text, and the new setting were imposed upon the opera as well. Lamos seemed to agree with Jonathan Miller who claimed that either extreme of the debate "seem[s] to me to be a misunderstanding of what the nature of a text is" (Delgado and Heritage 163). Lamos knew that Mozart's

intentions would be filtered through his own impressions of the music, and this ran against McCabe's opinion that the director's proper role is to express only the author's intention. At the same time, Lamos did ground his primary decisions on what he firmly believed to have been Mozart's intentions, which challenged Sellars's view that one cannot truly know the intentions of anyone including ourselves. In the end, Lamos's approach to *La finta giardiniera* was consistent with Jonathan Miller's definition of his own directorial approach: "I'm in control of what I feel to be the text, and at the same time controlled by it" (Delgado and Heritage 164).

Working within this duality is why Lamos bothered to direct this production, to answer Anne Midgette. The exhilaration and the stress of being in control of Mozart's music at the same time as being controlled by it was the *raison d'être* of Lamos's work. This is what makes any director's contribution valuable beyond anyone's notion of success or failure. Directing is the doing, the exploring, the expanding of the artistic landscape itself. Directing lives so much more in the present moment of creation than in looking back to revel in success or wallow in failure. After directing for sixty years, Peter Brook has commented on this in a recent interview:

I'm very grateful, always, when something goes well...but success and praise and all that means nothing. What means something isn't in the past. Each adventure is different...It is the actual life of the present that means something...the moment when it is actually unfolding. (Brook, *Charlie Rose*)

Nothing can be more indicative of Lamos's focus on the present than the fact that he missed opening night because he had to move on to the next job. He said that his work ended after the Final Dress Rehearsal. The production no longer belonged to him. It belonged to the audience, the critics, and the artists on and off the stage. He knew that the success of the production would not lie in whether he had accurately interpreted Mozart's intentions or whether his interpretation had been an imposition on the opera. The success came from his and other's gratification from engaging in artistic exercise, in the joy of artistic collaboration, and in deep commitment to value the artistic process.

Lamos remained above the fray of the debate as he refused to be defined by either side. It seems appropriate, therefore, to allow him the last word on the subject:

Every interpretation is at once an imposition and an illumination. I even think that when one is standing in front of a canvas in a museum, one's eyes are already interpreting and reinterpreting the artist's vision. Seeking personal answers. Seeking private negotiations. So there is no such thing as *the* one way. I feel as if a text...is simply the first step on a road of many, many negotiations that will end with a group known as an audience, a thousand pairs of eyes and ears, receiving and transmitting ways of making a personal imposition on and connection to the work. That's the unique aspect of all art. Probably of all existence. (He laughs) (Lamos, Personal interview)

Two More Weeks?

A final way of assessing Lamos's work is to move beyond the notion of success or failure entirely, beyond Lamos's imposition on or illumination of Mozart, and beyond the matter of his responsibility in working on a classic, if obscure, opera to speculate what might have been had Lamos had more time. Time was seldom on his side, so it is worth weighing what choices he might have made had he been granted the two weeks that Constantine Stanislavski said all directors yearn for no matter how long the rehearsal process might be (Clurman 90).

Since Lamos had frequently been most effective working with the cast when drawing most directly on his theatre background, the most obvious choice for one of the two weeks could have been spent in extensive "table talk." In spoken drama, the director and the actors frequently spend the first few days to a week focusing exclusively on the text and how it aligns with a production concept, especially if the production is to be more experimental in nature. The actors are sometimes even discouraged from learning their lines during this time, and Harold Clurman has explained why:

We virtually forbade our actors to learn their lines prior to rehearsals....actors learning the text by heart apart from actual work at rehearsal fixes preconceptions and hardens readings into set molds so that receptivity to their fellow players' impulses is

impaired. The actors, under these circumstances, hardly listen to one another, and something mechanical in the acting results. (94)

Even though it likely would have been catastrophic had Lamos asked the singers not to learn their music in advance of rehearsals, it is also likely that the cast did come to the first rehearsal with “fixe[d] preconceptions” and “set molds” about their characters. This is probably why so many members of the cast had such ongoing difficulties with the production concept. Had they been given the opportunity to ask questions and hash out as many details as possible during table talk, a foundation might have been established so that the cast, and Lamos himself, would not have struggled so much during rehearsals. It was not surprising that the performers had many questions, but the precious time that Lamos used trying to resolve arguments with himself was unexpected and strenuous.

Lamos and the cast spent so much time trying to get their bearings in the dual worlds of Mozart and the asylum that the creative flow of many rehearsals was inhibited. Questions like, “Do we know each other?,” or “What is real for my character, and what is not real?,” or “Do we know where we are?” stimulated long discussions that may have been fruitful, but which interrupted the more prosaic business of blocking, pacing, and polishing. If all the time spent on these discussions had been frontloaded to table talk rehearsals, Lamos and the cast might not have felt the pressure of time so acutely as they did throughout.

Moreover, when Lamos reflected on the production, he mentioned why his discussions with this cast had distinguished the production from his previous work in opera:

Actually, *La finta* proved a very different experience from any I've had so far in an opera company. I was much more open to discussing the concept with the performers and the staff than I usually am. Sometimes this proves daunting and disturbing for performers who want an Iron Captain at the helm, but I care not, since I like exploring the work with intelligent performers. ("*La finta* questions")

Engaging and necessary as the discussions may have been, they took valuable time and could have been equally enlivening and perhaps more beneficial if they had come during the first rehearsal or two. By resolving the primary concerns about the production concept earlier in the process, Lamos could have used remaining time to clarify and deepen his thematic ideas.

Lamos might also have used Stanislavski's second extra week during the final days of rehearsal. Ideally, in both theatre and opera, a production is in its best shape in terms of acting values, character relationships, and clarity of purpose by the rehearsal just before the technical rehearsals commence. As helpful as the design elements can be, actors and directors are often initially distracted by the technical apparatus of sets, lights, costumes, props, etc. They are sometimes dazed by how all these large elements invade the subtle and close personal work completed in the intimacy of the rehearsal hall. This is why

it is essential for the production to be made as solid as possible before moving it into a larger space amid the turmoil of introducing the technical elements.

The restrictions of time did not allow Lamos to feel confident when the production moved into technical rehearsals. Furthermore, those rehearsals felt rushed as the lighting designer built cues, the set designer lamented an incomplete set, and the costume designer did not know which costumes to provide for act 2. An extra week might have allowed the production a dry tech for the lighting designer to build cues without the performers being present, more set dressing time to complete the designer's vision, and more time to fit and work in the detailed *commedia* costumes for act 2.

Lamos would have been part of all this work to ensure that the technical aspects of the production were consistent with his ideas of the opera. Instead, during technical rehearsals, Lamos was still deciding about the *commedia* section, reblocking scenes with the rarely seen supernumeraries, and complaining to no one in particular about the acting notes the performers were not implementing. One or two weeks would have allowed Lamos more opportunities to resolve these issues and focus more exclusively on exploring how love can cause havoc in our lives at the same time it heals our deepest wounds.

Back to Reality

Lamos did not have two more weeks, nor should he have. It is crucial to remember that Stanislavski was speaking of this extra time in an ideal world. He

is also pointing to the perennially unfinished nature of art itself. Artists are rarely completely satisfied with their work. This is partly why they try to stay in the present moment as Peter Brook recommends, and why they move on to the next project carrying the benefit of prior experience with them.

Lamos would have welcomed extra time, but he, as well as some critics and the production team, rarely if ever expressed a feeling that the production needed more time to be effective. In fact, once all was said and done, Lamos said that he “had no afterthoughts about the production” (“*La finta* questions”). If this was the case, it is more revealing about his directorial process to consider again his last words to the cast after Final Dress before moving on to his next job the same day. Essentially, he told them not to fixate on anything extraneous to their primary job of creating a sympathetic connection with the audience. He emphasized that, “We can never forget that there are real emotions here.” The worries about the new framework set up in the prologue, the right balance between humor and pathos, the added character of the Doctor, or the rocky technical rehearsals did not “matter as much as us caring about you for two-and-a half hours.”

Live theatre and opera never shed the challenge of creating an emotional symbiosis between the performers and the audience. Lamos’s last note to the cast was to remind them that their primary job was and always will be to entice the audience into caring about their characters. Russian director, Lev Dodin, explains why this is so:

The main task of the theatre is to give spectators the possibility of experiencing emotional upheaval....Human beings need this. They need to empathize with others and, in so doing, they learn to feel for themselves. This is very important because we increasingly seem not to know how to feel for others...There isn't a single person who isn't afraid of what life can bring. We are simply conditioned to hide it. The more we hide it, the less human we become. We have to open our humanness. The theatre opens it when spectators experience deep emotions, which they do when the actors experience them too. The heart and soul are trained like this. (Shevtsova and Innes 46)

A View From a Bridge

When a production serves as a bridge between artists and audience, there is the possibility for revelation, discussion, and transformation. The same possibilities hold true when a bridge is built between two art forms that are at once the same and different, namely, in this case, opera and spoken drama. The goals of engaging, entertaining, educating, and stimulating audiences are the same in both forms, yet the means and devices employed to achieve these goals are quite different. This is probably the reason why practitioners and scholars in both fields remain largely uninformed about each other's work. More recently, stage directors have crossed the bridge between these worlds the most often. How they function in spoken drama has been copiously documented, while how

they function in the world of opera has not.⁸⁴ This study can serve as a model for bridging opera and spoken drama to begin a conversation that includes artists, scholars, and even patrons.

One theme that must be considered is the way Lamos viewed singers as actors rather than as musical instruments. No matter how much the music dominates the genre, Lamos constantly reminded the cast that they were portraying characters with objectives and emotions that needed to be translated to the audience as fully as the expert delivery of the score. Lamos also provided an ultimate challenge in character development by having each singer play two roles at once, the asylum patient and the Mozart character. The singers had to plumb the depths of psychosis to devise a completely new character both independent from and modeled on the character in the original opera. For some performers, this challenge was thrilling and for others it was daunting. This fact was evident throughout the rehearsal process, and it can offer another useful theme for a discussion of the finer points of opera directing between actors and singers.

As much as Lamos and the production may have benefitted from his treatment of the singers as actors, his production concept expected much from performers seasoned by the limited repertory of canonical operas. In retrospect, Lamos's attraction to a "freely associative" production caused problems for

⁸⁴ David Levin is one opera scholar who has filled the gap with his book, *Unsettling Opera*. Levin has written that the recent shift toward scholarly work on stage production in opera has long been absent from opera studies: "Until quite recently, the intellectual nimbleness with which musicologists conceptualized the instability of opera's musical text had only rarely extended to its performance text" (3). Levin's book deftly examines how several "performance texts" can equally inform and transform opera studies. While his work focuses on the finished productions of several opera directors, the opera director's process remains largely unexplored. This is partly why I have made it the focus of this study.

singers who were more comfortable with the definitions of character provided in the score. The acting this production required involved a tremendous amount of trust and risk-taking on the part of the cast, and Lamos had difficulty eliciting both. Only one or two exercises, typically used in play rehearsals, to establish the freedom to experiment as well as the freedom to risk might have allowed the cast to shed any inhibitions and more fully embrace Lamos's production concept.

This study also provides material for opera scholars to witness how a revisionist concept was formulated, rehearsed, and received. This effort to expand musicological considerations into the realm of production can foster fresh discussions among scholars of both theatre and opera. Without a comprehensive examination of Lamos's process to mount *La finta giardiniera*, one might have to accept on faith, for example, the musicological evaluation of Hermann Abert that, in this immature opera, Mozart wrote "not entire parts but only individual arias" (331). This may well be what the musical score suggests to a musicologist, but it might seem reductive to a theatre scholar who believes that the formulation of a character can be equally determined by the work of a director and a singer. Abert writes that Mozart was not yet dramaturgically capable of composing a complete character, yet Sandrina, the garden-girl, must be portrayed onstage as completely as possible despite the perceived limitations of the score. Lamos and Lisa Saffer had to overcome these limitations, and using this record to determine how they accomplished this can show to musicologists that a composition of character is both musical and behavioral.

The synthesis of music and behavior, singing and acting, musicology and stage production are the raw materials for building a bridge that illuminates, reimagines, and celebrates opera and theatre. This study of an opera director at work, logged in one setting yet widely contextualized and analyzed in light of important directors in both opera and theatre, can intertwine the aesthetic, scholarly, and civic aspirations of each. Once this partnership is engaged more thoroughly, then all can admire the breathtaking view from a bridge of new possibilities.

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