

2013-04-22

The Many Hats of Robert Altman: A Life in Cinema

Daub, Peggy; Gomis, Melissa; Hallman, Phil

<https://hdl.handle.net/2027.42/110220>

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>

Downloaded from Deep Blue, University of Michigan's institutional repository

Opera in Chicago

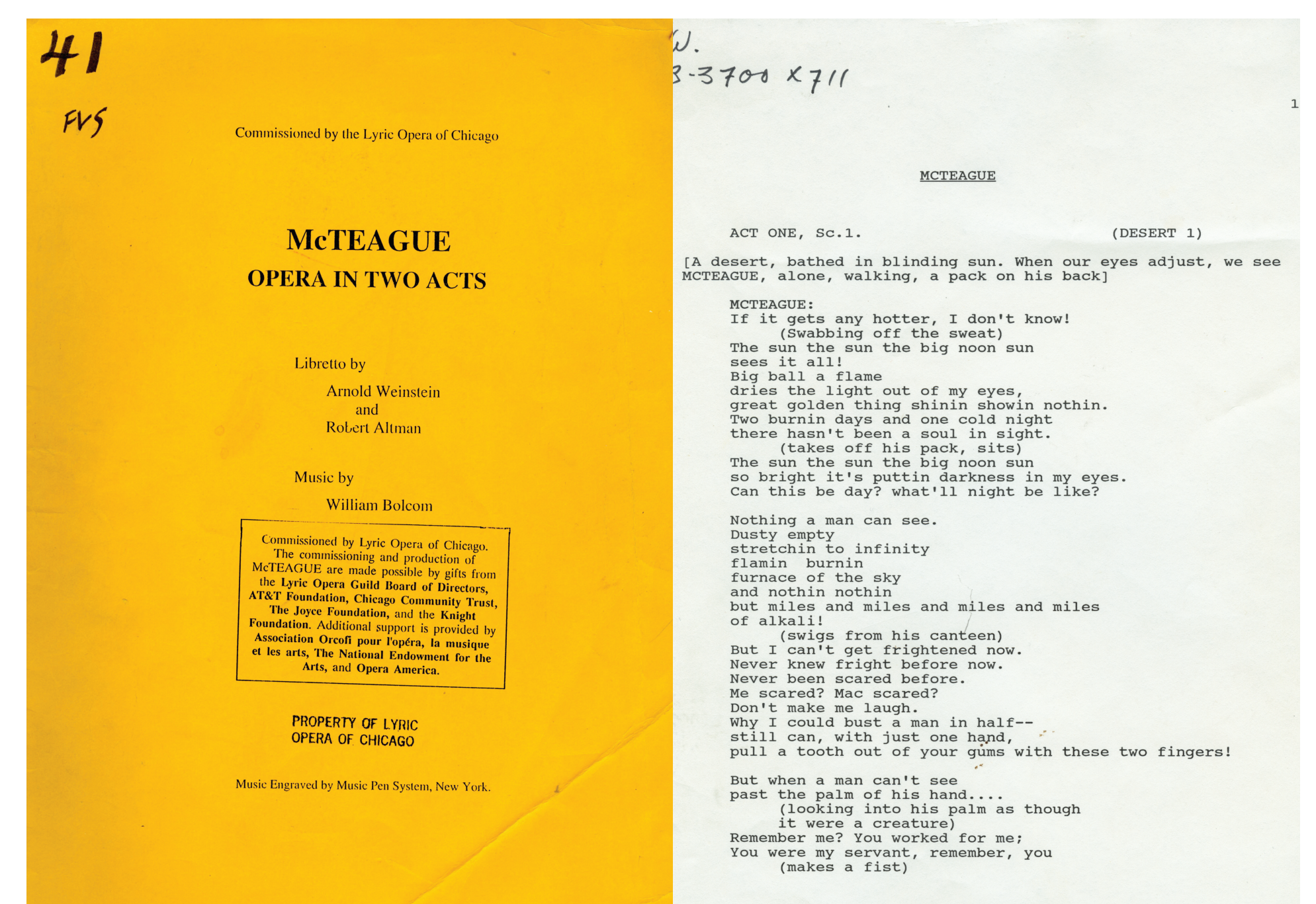
Robert and Kathryn Altman made lasting friendships among the University of Michigan faculty during their stay here in 1982. One of them was with the Pulitzer-Prize winning composer William Bolcom, who had been so impressed by Altman's work on *The Rake's Progress* that he invited the director to work with him on two operas: the drama *McTeague*, commissioned by the Lyric Opera of Chicago and premiered in 1992, and the comedy adapted from Altman's film *A Wedding* (1978) again for Chicago in 2004. In both cases Altman directed and was co-librettist with Arnold Weinstein.



Photograph, 1992, of the creators of the operas *McTeague* and *A Wedding*: (from left) Arnold Weinstein (librettist), William Bolcom (composer), and Robert Altman (director, co-librettist).

"A WEDDING"
 PROLOGUE: In limbo,
 (Rita Billingsley, wedding organizer, in spotlight is holding whiskey bottle and a glass demonstrating how to pour a drink. She sings)
 RITA: Now remember, you of the bartending crew: One drink consists of a jigger and a half; now that's not one jigger and that's not two that's one and a half jiggers per drink no matter who!
 (She picks up a double glass)
 Now if someone insists on a double, this is what you do: go right ahead and give him a double, but a double consists of two single jiggers, not one and a half jiggers times two.
 And this above all: no one, but no one, may pour his -- or her -- own drink. That's the bartenders' job.
 (She shows bottle of Bloody Mary Mix)
 Not Bloody Mary Mix! Oh no, Rita Billingsley is organizing here, and everything is freshly mixed -- I don't believe it! Where are the flowers? They should have been done hours ago. And do up your dress, my dear, this isn't a circus, this is -- A WEDDING.
 [LIGHTS BLAST UP ON:]

First page of the book for the opera *A Wedding*, 2004.



Cover and page one for the libretto of the opera *McTeague*, 1992.

Chicago Tribune

SECTION 5

TEMPO

LYRIC OPERA'S 'A WEDDING'

Wedded bliss

William Bolcom brings Robert Altman's nuptial tale to sparkling life

Opera review: Cast delights in comedy of manners

Altman's original 'A Wedding' no success

By John von Rhein

The blue-blooded Slams of Lake Forest have just married off their son, a randy military-school cadet, to the bubbleheaded daughter of Snooks Brenner, the nouveau riche owner of a Louisville trucking company. The bride's people drip vulgarity. The groom's relatives are snooty hypocrites. It's only a matter of time before the families' dirty little secrets threaten the bonds of unwholly matrimony.

That was the plot outline of director Robert Altman's satiric film, "A Wedding," which audiences found diffuse and chaotic when it was released in 1978. The prospects that a failed movie would succeed as an opera 26 years later did not appear good.

But composer William Bolcom recognized the material's potential as the basis for a modern "Marriage of Figaro," a grand comedy of manners that could capitalize on the resources of a major opera company.

With Altman back onboard as director, "A Wedding" has been greatly improved and exuberantly reborn as a two-act operatic entertainment. Quipped with a smart and witty libretto by Arnold Weinstein and Altman, Bolcom's third commissioned opera from Lyric Opera of Chicago had its world premiere Saturday night at the Civic Opera House in a lavish production that honored the company's golden jubilee season.

The 16 principal roles were strongly filled by such stalwarts of the roster as Catherine Malfitano, Jerry Hadley, Patricia Riley, Timothy Nolen and Mark S. Doss. Conductor Dennis Russell Davies, a longtime champion of Bolcom's music, kept the orchestra perking along buoyantly.

The performers and artistic team drew a prolonged ovation from a packed house that included some 30 members of the national and international press.

But it was Bolcom, looking bemused and elated, who emerged as the evening's conquering hero.

The opera, like the movie, piles plotlines and characters atop one another like the layers of

Robert Altman's 1978 ensemble comedy-drama had weak reviews and weaker box office, but it was — in retrospect — groundbreaking. Set at a suburban Chicago upper-crust wedding reception — where a Southern nouveau riche clan, the Brenners, is marrying into a Chicago brood, the Corvells, "A Wedding" is a blending of old money and gangsters.

And despite the 46-member cast, it's a personal film. Altman was the child ring-bearer at a family wedding, which he said inspired much of the movie. "A Wedding" may have a low critical reputation, but it has always been one of my favorite Altman's, packed with life, color and witty criticism about the rich. Almost as much as "M*A*S*H," "Nashville" and "Short Cuts," it's one of the great Altman ensemble pieces — one of those movies in which he keeps dozens of balls and characters juggling, with keen eyes, fast hands and bemused relish.

If you do happen to find a copy of the out-of-print film, look closely. According to the Internet Movie Database, future Steppenwolf Theatre stars John Malkovich, Joan Allen, Laurie Metcalf and Terry Kinney were extras.

Michael Wilmington

PLEASE SEE OPERA, PAGE 6

Review of the opera *A Wedding* from the Chicago Tribune, December 2004. While noting that the film in 1978 left audiences confused, the reviewer John von Rhein found it was "exuberantly reborn as a two-act operatic entertainment."

"Almost as much as M*A*S*H, Nashville, and ShortCuts, it's one of the great Altman ensemble pieces — one of those movies in which he keeps dozens of balls and characters juggling with keen eyes, fast hands and bemused relish."

"The prospects that a failed movie would succeed as an opera 26 years later did not appear good. But composer Bolcom recognized the material's potential as the basis for a modern "Marriage of Figaro," a grand comedy of manners that could capitalize on the resources of a major opera company."

"Robert Altman's 1978 ensemble comedy-drama had weak reviews and weaker box office, but it was — in retrospect — groundbreaking."