

. . . Sing at the Met

By Dolora Zajick '76 (music), '78M.A.

Aficionados of classic vocal performance have a love for the Metropolitan Opera at New York City's Lincoln Center. It is one of the premier performing arts venues in the world, and for a talented vocalist theatrically presenting a coveted role, its stage is akin to playing in the Super Bowl. Mezzo-soprano Dolora Zajick, a University of Nevada, Reno graduate who can reach in full voice the high F notes of Mozart's Queen of the Night aria in The Magic Flute, talks about the unique experience.

What does it feel like to sing Amneris at the Met? Once while singing this role in *Aida* there, I heard a collective audible gasp from the audience. I assumed I had made some sort of mistake and, thinking I had done something wrong, concentrated more on what I was doing. Meanwhile the prompter was desperately trying to get my attention. The audience gasped again, and the prompter looked frantic, so I concentrated even harder. It turned out that the set had caught on fire, and a stagehand was putting out the fire from behind the chorus in time to the music. It made the *National Lampoon*.

Such is the real stuff of a performance.

When I prepare the day of a performance, there is no time to think of one's famous predecessors. I do consider and study what they have done artistically when I am learning a new role, but the day of a performance I laze about all morning, then go to the theater three hours before to warm up.

When performing there is no time for fear, and it is all about concentration. There is no time to dwell on a past moment because all concentration is on the present. When most singers enter the stage, there is a surge of adrenaline similar to what professional athletes experience, a moment of fear that fades, but leaves the body functioning at a higher level than normal. Because of that, many



Zajick performing *Aida*.

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Opera is craft as well as an art. When a singer looks at a theater, they don't think of a theater as hallowed with grand traditions. I am more likely to be thinking about acoustics. Are there dead or hot spots on stage? Does the set reflect the sound or does it absorb it, and how does the orchestra balance with the singing in this setting? Singers are more likely to be thinking technically, so that they can create

that magic for the audience.

One doesn't tend to notice any details that don't have anything to do with the performance. All concentration is on the things that can interfere with a performance. Does my costume and makeup suit my character? Is there a weak link in the cast that must be compensated for? Are the props in order? Am I properly warmed up? What do I do if the horses in *Aida* happen to poop on stage, or the tenor's wig catches on fire.

Any company that uses large animals such as horses and elephants in *Aida* runs into the poop problem. The Met solved it by having the Egyptian royal pooper scooper, a supernumerary dressed as an Egyptian with a long-handled dust pan and a broom.

Many things can go wrong. The conductor gets a cramp in his arm, the trumpet makes a big blooper, or worse yet, a singer falls into the prompter box or has a cold, the soprano has canceled, the first cover has the flu, the second cover breaks her leg and the replacement has had no rehearsal. Other things can happen, too. No one can find the tenor because he's hiding in the dressing room shower with a towel over his head. The baritone has become competitive and is upstaging everything you do. The soprano has decided to sing all her ensemble notes one-fourth beat longer than the cutoff, when everyone else has stopped singing. Even the props can do unexpected things.

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I was once singing the witch in *Rusalka* at the Met. I had a mechanical cat attached to my shoulder that had a tail that twitched back and forth, and a head that rolled from side to side with glowing eyes. At one point I would hit the cat's head with a big wooden spoon I was using to mix things into a cauldron to create a spell. One night I hit the head too hard and it fell off, and I had to finish the scene with a headless cat with its tail still swishing back and forth. I had no idea what to do with the head, so I shrugged my shoulders and threw it into the cauldron with all the other things. I managed to not to break the spell, and the audience thought it was part of the comedy.

The pros learn to cover such incidents. Film has the wonderful option of editing such things. Live opera does not have that safety

net. It is one of the elements of live performance, and as a singer, I've also learned to think on my feet.

Usually it all ends well with the audience having no clue of the drama going on. Sometimes the audience notices, especially when a singer has to cancel halfway through a performance.

After the performance is finished, the singers take their final bows. Until that moment, there is no time to think of the audience. Usually things go right. Nobody is booed. But once a crazy fan threw a flower with a stem wrapped in tin foil to give him better aim.

It didn't hit the concert master in the head, but landed at my feet.

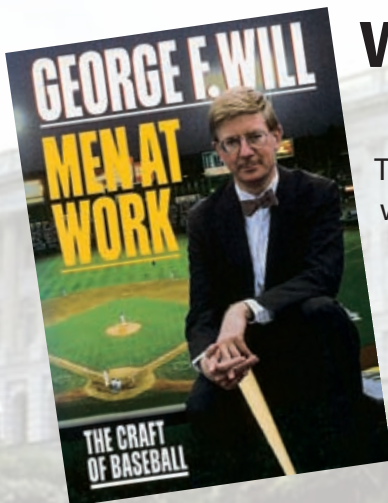
I take my bow and the crowd braves. Sometimes we can create magic, but for every magical performance, there is a performance where things go wrong, and it is our job to keep the illusion going. That is what usually goes through the mind of an opera singer during a performance. If we do our jobs well, the audience experiences the mystique. We experience the audience response when it is all done, and have the satisfaction of a job well done. **N**

Zajick, an Oregon native who was raised in Nevada, received vocal training from the late University music professor Ted Puffer, founder and longtime artistic director for Nevada Opera. She joined the opera company's chorus when she was a premed student at Nevada and gained international renown after her performance as Azucena in Il Trovatore with the San Francisco Opera.

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