

Prima Donna in Her Prime

By Azuma Atsuko

When I received the telegram from the Metropolitan Opera House to perform in New York, I was simply elated. Come to think of it, the telegram arrived nine years after my initial debut in Europe.

On December 30, 1972, I became the first Japanese to perform on the stage of the newly renovated Metropolitan Opera House. At the time, this was made a very big deal of at home and NHK promptly aired an evening news show about me. In order to make time for rehearsals, about one month before

the opening I moved to the Salisburg Hotel located diagonally in front of Carnegie Hall.

Everyday, in between rehearsals, I enjoyed myself shopping. At times, I took a peek or two at the deluxe boutiques on Fifth Avenue. I had such fun. And what was all this talk about practice? After all, I had sung *Madama Butterfly* several hundred times. I had enough experience to teach the staff how to sit and how to bow. But, no matter how many times one has performed, if the theater, the co-star and

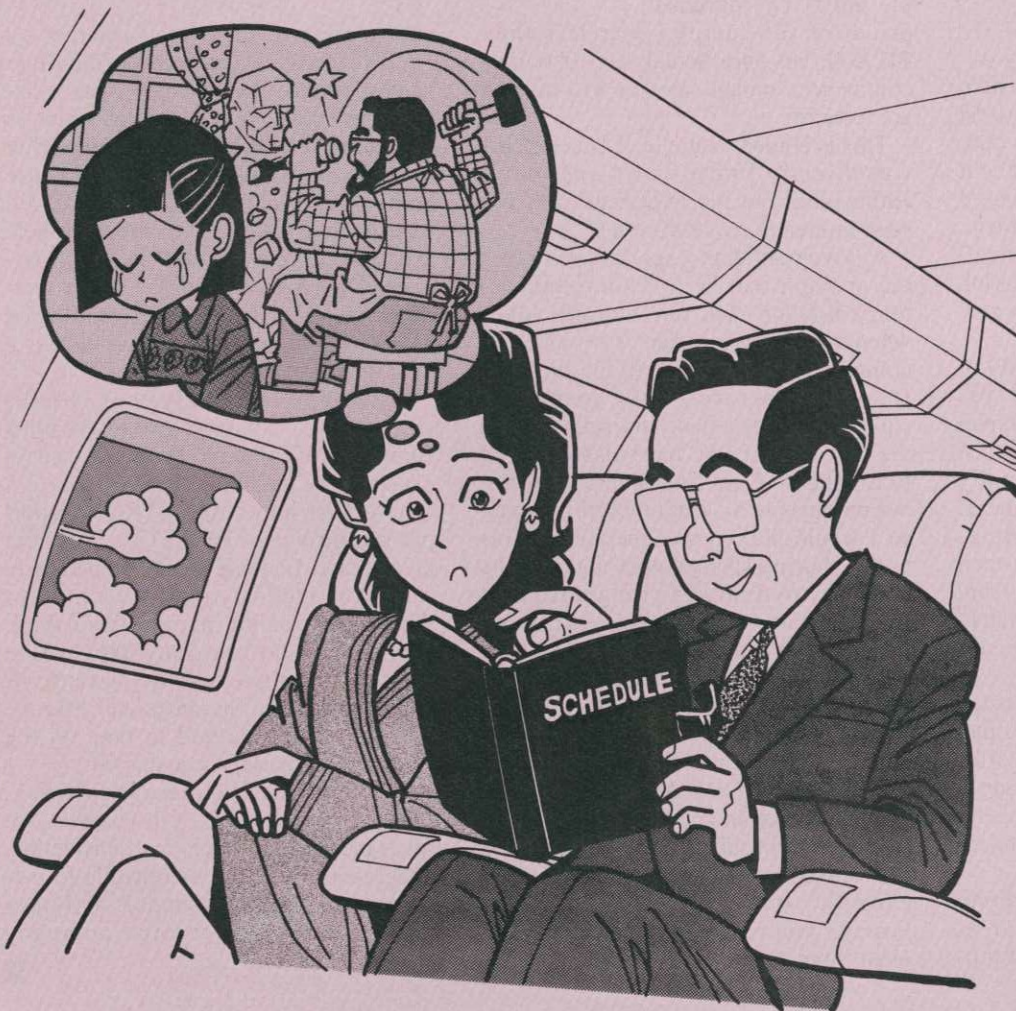
the cast are different, one has to practice over and over again the way you would a new opera. And each time we did this, the entire staff had to practice again and again as if it were a real stage performance.

On opening day, wearing a beautiful, original costume (a magnificently embroidered piece ordered from Japan for the small Licia Albanese), I made my appearance as the *Butterfly* in a genuine Japanese-style Nagasaki house. That's just what one would expect of the Metropolitan Opera House. I had never seen any theater spend such money on building stage props.

The theater was very large. And looking from the stage, the lights seemed extremely bright, giving one a wonderful sense of splendor. Since I was the first Japanese to use the stage, Ushiba Nobuhiko, the Japanese ambassador to the U.S. and Nakagawa Toru, Japan's ambassador to the United Nations, both came. I lost count of how many boxes of red roses were delivered to my dressing room.

The performance was a great success and I immediately received a contract for the 1974-75 season. This time, it was for seven performances and I had to prepare myself. The main roles included Nedda for *I Pagliacci*, *Madama Butterfly*, and Mimi for *La Boheme*. In addition, my contract also stipulated that I was to cover such parts as Zerlina in *Don Giovanni*, Juliet for Gounod's *Romeo and Juliet*, and Norina for *Don Pasquale*.

Meanwhile, between my last stage show as *Madama Butterfly* for the Metropolitan Opera House in 1973 and my



next performance in *I Pagliacci* for the season to commence in October 1974, I had to go on a world tour. My daughter, who was three at the time, seeing the huge trunk I used for traveling, cried, "Mama, please don't go." I had to leave the house with her staring very disappointedly.

Although my husband was a sculptor and worked most of the time at home, I am sure he had quite a time managing the household chores all by himself with our young daughter. Still, I kept receiving different contracts. I was simply a robot operated by my manager to travel from one place to another. From Hamburg I traveled to Dresden, from Munich to former East and West Berlin, from Los Angeles to Barcelona, from Nice to Brescia, from Dublin to Bremen, and from Buenos Aires to Vienna. What's more, many theaters in these countries did not call on me just once, but sometimes two or three times.

Bloody Iris

At the Gran Teatro del Liceo in Barcelona, Spain, I played the lead for *Iris* by Mascagni. Little did I know I was to end up a bloody Iris. In the first act, Iris is kidnapped. During this performance, I was raised up by the dancers who hurriedly retreated to the left side of the stage. However, because they did this with so much vigor, my head bumped accidentally into a metal rod used to pull the curtain. My forehead was hit so hard that the skin broke and I started to bleed heavily.

Since this happened in between the first and the second acts, I was taken immediately to the stage doctor. Because there was no way for the theater to call for a replacement Iris on such short notice, no matter what happened I had to finish my performance until the bitter end. He wrapped my head with a bandage and placed the wig back on and I was able to keep cool and finished my role. Although, I must add, toward the end of the second act, when I was singing a very intense aria, blood started to flow down my forehead. And when I faced down, it

quickly dripped on to the stage, adding a most awesome, dynamic twist to my performance. Thanks to this wound, the performance was a great success. Until today, this Iris of Barcelona is still left on my forehead.

Another incident took place on May 12, 1974, when I sang *La Boheme* in Bremen, West Germany. At the time, José Carreras, who played Rodolfo, was the co-star to my Mimi. Naturally the theater was a full house and the performance a big success. There was, however, yet another scenario.

After we finished singing a duet in the first act, the audience was very excited and we were to go right into the second act without a break. I was supposed to enter the stage with Carreras together hand-in-hand, but he was nowhere to be found. At the last minute, when he failed to show up, I was forced to return on stage by myself. And guess what happened? Carreras appeared from the opposite side of the stage and started apologizing with his hands up. Later, he casually commented that he lost his way when he went to the toilet. Being a guest performer, he was unfamiliar with the theater. But what a happy-go-lucky fellow. Luckily, none of the audience questioned why Mimi and Rodolfo came on stage from separate wings. This sort of incident becomes pretty common after you have been in this business for awhile.

After the Bremen incident, I was to prepare myself again for another season at Colón Theatre in Buenos Aires. For the new season, opening day was set for June 5. Because it would have meant being away from my little girl for another month or more, I decided to take Arisa with me this time. However, when we arrived we were taken aback by the everyday demonstrations against the autocracy of President Perón. On the street, in front of the square, there was a very unsettled feeling in the air.

Finally, the night of the opening came. I dressed Arisa for the part of the child Dolore, and put on her a wig of golden strains. Just as we were getting ready for our turn, suddenly a

group of police officers made their way to the room. "We just received a report saying that a bomb has been planted in the theater. We are here to do some investigation." With that, they started looking around the dressing room, and soon they focused their attention on an octagonal trunk. When they asked if they could open it, I said yes. Then, with trembling hands, they carefully opened it. Unveiled in front of their eyes was a beautiful Japanese wig and pieces of golden and silver hair pieces. They were all relieved at the sight of this and, after apologizing for the intrusion, left together.

This disturbance shortly before the performance, however, left me very unsettled. Thinking that this could very well be my last performance, I gave it my best throughout the entire show. Just when I was about to reach the climax in my aria, I put a dagger to my throat, pretending to kill myself. At this time, Arisa suddenly came to me and said, "Mama, don't die" and started crying. To her, the stage performance and reality had all been fused into one. That was the moment when I became seized by the spell of stage magic. Suddenly, I felt I was inside an orange capsule where the sky and earth were connected by a myriad of lights and my voice just came out spontaneously. It was as though I was not the one who was singing, I was but a medium and somebody else was singing. It was such a miraculous feeling.

When I came back to myself, I realized the entire audience was on its feet and their applause was like thunder. I was so choked with feelings for this somebody who had made this possible for me that I bowed deeply to express for my gratitude. And from there, I was to travel to Vienna for my next performance.

(Fifth in a six-part series)

Azuma Atsuko made her debut as an opera singer at the Reggio Emilia Municipal Theater in 1963, and then had a 20-year stage career as a prima donna in Berlin, Vienna, New York, Munich, Hamburg, Buenos Aires, Moscow, etc.