

Finale

By Azuma Atsuko

In the 30 years of my career on stage, I came across many memorable events which have stayed with me. Colón Theatre in Buenos Aires, which I mentioned in the previous article, for one, offered me a spiritual transformation.

Upon finishing my season at New York's Metropolitan Opera House, I flew to Vienna, Austria. During the flight, I kept wondering what it was that allowed me to sing with such power. Once I arrived, I went to the Bristol, the hotel I always stayed at. There, I stayed in the suite reserved for the prima donna of the National Theater—a room fashioned in the style that reminds one of the stage scene in Strauss' *Der Rosenkavalier*. This put me in the mood of a super prima donna, which again was something incomprehensible. All I could think of was that the Viennese had put me under the spell of some magic.

Since December 11, 1971 (my birthday), I performed in Vienna several times a year as a regular and performing there was like home for me. That year, for *Madame Butterfly* we had a very powerful combination with Anton Guadagno as the conductor and the famous tenor Gianni Raimondi in the role of Pinkerton. In this traditional city where people welcomed musicians with open arms, I could feel strongly that they truly had a deep appreciation for music. To me, Vienna was definitely one of my favorite cities and once again we were received warmly.

Bitter and sweet memories

That autumn, I was to head back to New York again. This time, for the season opening October 25, I was to perform in Leoncavallo's *I Pagliacci* as the young woman Nedda—a role rarely given to Asians. Although for the season between 1971 and 1972 I became accustomed to living in New York, this time I was very nervous, probably due

to the fact that instead of wearing *Butterfly's* costume, I was to put on Nedda's outfit. Besides, joining me for practice every day was Anna Moffo, Luchina Amara and several other young substitute singers. Practicing together with so many people was a very stressful experience. I was still young and immature but thought of myself as a veteran, and still I got worked up practicing every day with the famous tenor Richard Tucker and the baritone Sheril Milnes.

As opening day was approaching, I remember going to a nearby supermarket to buy a small carton of milk. I came back to the hotel and drank it all, it tasted especially good. I remember thinking to myself, wow, what a full-bodied milk. I didn't think much of it afterwards, and then ...

A while later, I had to keep going to the toilet. What happened? The "milk" I drank was half-and-half—a mixture of equal parts of milk and cream. The following morning during practice, I had to keep running to the toilet as I did the night before. There in the toilet, I heard the true voice of the young singers.

"Say, if it wasn't for that Asian singer, we all could have been singing, right?"

"Exactly."

"Well, at least that is a Gypsy role, which suits her very well. Just imagine if she got to play the lead for *La Traviata* or *Don Carlos'* Elizabetha, it would be a most ridiculous thing, wouldn't it?"

Those words, which cut into my heart like a knife, remain vividly in my ears until today.

After this incident, it was with a most dampened mood that I performed in front of an audience. At the wing of the stage, riding inside the covered wagon, I waited for my turn. Somehow, the wagon seemed so very high and I got very nervous. Meanwhile, at the front of the stage, singing along with the wonderful sounds of the orchestra was

Milnes, who, with his splendid voice, performed the prologue. At that time, Mr. Tucker held my hand tightly, encouraging me with the words "Bocca al lupo." ("Let's hang in there.") I remember being surprised that the hands of this super star were colder than mine.

With encouragement, I managed to get through the performance without problems. To change for the second act, I went to the temporary tent setup at the back of the stage as the Metropolitan Opera House was so huge I wouldn't have time to make it to my dressing room to change for the second act. At that very moment, Richard Tucker, as Canio, was singing the aria for the scene "Pagliacci, dress yourself."

The meaning of the aria went something like this: "Pagliacci, people laugh at you and you make a clown of yourself in front of them. Yet no one knows how you are really feeling inside." The act continued on, and we were just about to reach the climax of the scene when Canio, overcome by jealousy and lost between reality and fantasy, killed his beloved wife Nedda. I, playing Nedda, was killed by Canio, who then held me close to his chest. At that time, I remember I felt Tucker's heart beating irregularly. A few months later, Tucker had a heart attack on stage and never made it back alive.

For this season Mr. Zeffirelli directed the show and it was especially hard on the singers (who had to move around a lot while singing and were often out of breath). Yet, in terms of lighting and stage facilities, I thought the stage was possibly the best I'd ever experienced.

After the season, I joined the spring tour of the Metropolitan Opera House and performed as Nedda around the country. Thanks to this tour, I was able to have some fantastic times at welcoming parties in American homes. Meanwhile, looking at the thrifty European lifestyle and the lives of everyday Japanese who were not



blessed with much luxury even with their trade balance being in the black, I couldn't help but realize that America was indeed a rich, affluent nation. Yet at the same time, I also could not help but wonder whether, as global people, it was fair that only some could afford to turn on their air conditioners or heaters full blast in spacious houses and be so wasteful with petroleum.

Shortly after I returned to Milano, the entire country was swept with a sudden rise in crime and a siege to drive off foreign artists. I was also troubled by the education of my 8-year-old daughter, not to mention that at the time, I had just lost my mentor. Suddenly I was overwhelmed by a desire to return to Japan. I think I was afraid that if I continued to live overseas, I would end up like a piece of driftwood.

Coming home

So, after experiencing so many international stages, I returned to Japan. That was roughly 10 years ago. For someone who was used to singing at extravagant opera houses, performing with people in Japanese circles was a perplexing experience. At the spacious theaters in foreign countries, everything was divided into sections: costume, makeup, props, wigs, etc. which were taken care of by people in between jobs. Because these people would care for the prima donna, all she had to do was to get herself psyched up for her role.

Japan was an entirely different story. Here, they didn't have a permanent national theater; when there was a performance, people had to pay to rent the theater. What's more, artists must also

help sell tickets. General practice also was usually held one day before opening day, whereby artists had to go to the wig section and be fitted in a corner of the corridor. Likewise, they barely have enough time to have their costumes adjusted before going out for actual performance. Worse yet, in between performances, relatives and friends came and went freely to chitchat with singers. At the beginning, I thought I was going crazy. Somehow, with much endurance, I managed to get through the performances okay. Now that I think of it, 30 years ago, Japan wasn't blessed with an opera boom like we have today. The reality was, we had to explain to the masses what opera was all about.

Luckily, our dreams are being realized and in the fall of 1997, the Second National Theater (temporary name) is to be opened. While this is something that material-

ized after repeated meetings, as of now, plans for the building of such theaters are currently limited to Tokyo. I hope that more and more national theaters can be built in regional areas as well. Now with Japan's economy growing and Japanese people gaining in affluence, I sincerely hope that this becomes an opportunity for greater promotion of artistic culture which, as we all know, is the driving force behind the nurturing of the food for thought.

(Last in a six-part series)

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