

“La jeunesse qui n’a qu’un temps” (Youth, which has but one season)¹

When I was a child in small-town Ontario, we had a collection of records from the *Reader’s Digest*. My favourite of the nine records was labeled ‘an introduction to the opera’; it promised *La bohème* on one side, and *Carmen* on the other. I played it repeatedly, scratched it no doubt, and pretty much spoiled it for everyone else in the house. With unusual kindness – or perhaps disinterest – no one broke my bubble by explaining that real opera involved singing, rather than stirring orchestral suites! That came as quite a surprise when I was soon given a recording of excerpts from *Don Giovanni* (in German, as I still sing it to myself), and a not very good but much-prized recording of *La bohème*.

I learned the famous arias, after a fashion, sitting close to the speaker, and I imagined the action. ‘Imagined’ is the right word: since there was no text on the sleeve, I had only the cover illustration to suggest the story (rather like some of the illustrations in the family bible). Some moments in the opera were exceptionally vivid to me, like the narration of Rodolfo in Act 3 (‘Mimi è tanto malata’) leading to the astonishingly characterized trio and quartet (I cannot remember what I thought was going on there, but it was serious and I could tell they were not of one mind). I certainly knew Mimi was dead when Rodolfo cried out her name over those reckless chords, and I cried then as I have every time I have seen it since.

Another moment that demanded my attention was the duet for Rodolfo and Marcello at the beginning of Act 4. I reckoned that these guys weren’t happy, and that the girls were not around, but I cannot remember what I made of their unembarrassed, schmaltzy, regretful outburst. When I managed

to get the text from the public library (a search that was treated with some suspicion by Madam Librarian), that was the first part for which I sought translation.

**O Mimi, tu piú non torni,
o giorni belli,
piccole mani, odorosi capelli,
collo di neve...
Ah, Mimi, mia breve gioventú!**

**(O Mimi, you’ll never return,
oh lovely days,
Tiny hands, scented hair,
snow-white neck...
Ah, Mimi, my brief youth!)**

I was asked to direct a production of *La bohème* in Canada once, but the dates did not work out (and it was one of those North American specials billed as a new production though most of it came from another city), and when the request came I felt a special tingle, recalling the moment when I heard that duet, knowing what it meant – understanding inasmuch as I could, the feeling of these bourgeois boys (playing without much talent at bohemianism before returning to middle class provincial lives²) when they thought of the girls in whom they invested their ideals, their selfish and fantastic youth, these

²“Well, I say that neither of us should think about such creatures; that we weren’t created and put on earth just to sacrifice our existence to some vulgar Manon; and that Chevalier Desgrieux, so handsome, true and poetic, only escapes absurdity by his youth and cherished illusions. At twenty, he may follow his mistress to remote islands without ceasing to be interesting, but at 25 he would have shown Manon the door, and quite right too.”

¹ Henri Murger, *Scènes de la Vie de Bohème*

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girls who were scarcely real to them and yet more vivid than all of their lives since, girls long dead or otherwise lost.

When I figured I would take my chance with ETO's new *Bohème* (wanting to be sure this one would not be translated to Berlin or Buffalo or even Shoreditch), I knew that it would be a big challenge, not least because there are so many certain, often fiercely-held expectations of this opera. I countered this anxiety with the strong memory of my own first feelings when I heard it, the authenticity of which I could not doubt.

I wanted to work with a designer closer than I to the days of youth depicted in the piece. We agreed from the start that we wanted to make a production that looked like a memory, with that dream-like vividness that does not fill the whole frame with detail. When you tell your dreams, or your memories, you describe images, and somehow you fill in the space between the images with who you are, or who you think you were. (I guess this will be different soon; young people now have so much documentation that they shan't be able to recreate themselves with much artifice!) We decided the garret should feel like a garret, with

**Design image for *La bohème*,
by Florence de Maré**



a painful pitch, that it might include a fantastic (but accurate) photographic prop that was only there for a week but somehow defined the space in memory, that it should be dominated by reflection, introspection, that it should have not many objects because their specific shape and character is gone from the memory. You might say 'we ate bread and herring' without ever really seeing the exact bread or the number of herring in your memory.

Is this confusing? It certainly has been a discipline, in the creation of a design. *Would you remember that? What would you recall of the moment she appeared, of the moment she died, of the last time we were all together?* These are the questions we have asked each other for about a year now. We tried not to fill in the blanks with props and patterns, with illustration; we tried to make an opera true to recollection, to a memory painful, brilliant, unreliable, defining, to those short seasons when two lads who were postponing their inevitable bourgeois choices brushed richly with two working girls who had little choice, and one girl died. In those seasons the lads thought themselves artists, the girls dressed up the fact that they had to give their bodies to 'protectors' in order to survive.

There was snow, wasn't there? The show of the puppeteers was our story, wasn't it? The moon shone as it never has since, didn't it? Didn't everyone in the street stop to look at her? Wasn't there a bonnet, and a shoe, and isn't it true we never paid our rent? Introduced to Mimi by a doe-eyed Rodolfo, Marcello comments dryly:

**O bella età d'inganni e d'utopie –
si crede, si spera, e tutto bella
appare...**

**(O sweet age of deceptions
and utopias – one believes, one
hopes, and all seems beautiful...)**

When he goes on to say that 'love is sweeter than honey', poor Schaunard (whose bewildering story of the English gentleman he met, and to whom he gave lessons until the parrot died (!), invites interpretation) counters 'honey or vinegar, depending on one's taste'. In this opera, the appealing depiction of youthful love

always has the tart aftertaste of lost love. Even the sweetest, most ennobling thoughts and feelings catch in the throat as they are recollected for a moment and then recede.

I hope you will not find your expectations insulted by our effort to portray in image and action what we have heard, thought, felt – in my case, over many years since straining to understand what moved me so much in the scratchy, ecstatic noise coming from the speaker – in *La bohème*. We did make some practical choices, especially about Act 2, inasmuch as we were committed to offering as many young children as possible their first experience of opera on our stages, but really we don't regard touring as an imperative for 'less' – just as a guide for intelligent choices.

Whatever else, we have not tried to fool anyone, or join the dots between these four brief scenes of shared youth. We may have given some attention to what people would actually have had to do to earn a crust, or to the disparity between the choices available to men and women; it was not with the intention of teaching a lesson, however, but only to see how the characters might reasonably inhabit these little, unforgettable scenes, responding to unreasonable cold or hunger, lust, hope, kindness or betrayal, to the death of a sweet girl.

Photo: Ed van der Elsen

