

## VII

*Straniero! No tentar la fortuna!*

*Fremdling! Versuche nicht das Glück!*

*Stranger, don't push your luck!*

*But friend! we come too late. Indeed the gods live,*

*But over our heads up there in a different world.*

*They act there, ceaselessly, and seem scarcely to notice*

*Whether we live – so much do these gods shield us.*

*For a weak vessel cannot always handle them;*

*Only at times can Man bear divine fullness.*

*Life, then, is the Dream of them. But ••distraction*

*Helps, as does slumber, and neediness and night make  
strong,*

*Until heroes enough are grown in the cradle of bronze,*

*In power of their hearts, as once, are like the gods.*

*Then they shall return in thunder. Meanwhile to me it often  
seems*

*Better to sleep, being so without companions,*

*Waiting so, and what to do and what to say all this while,*

*I do not know, and what use poets in a ••lacking/ bleak/  
needy time.*

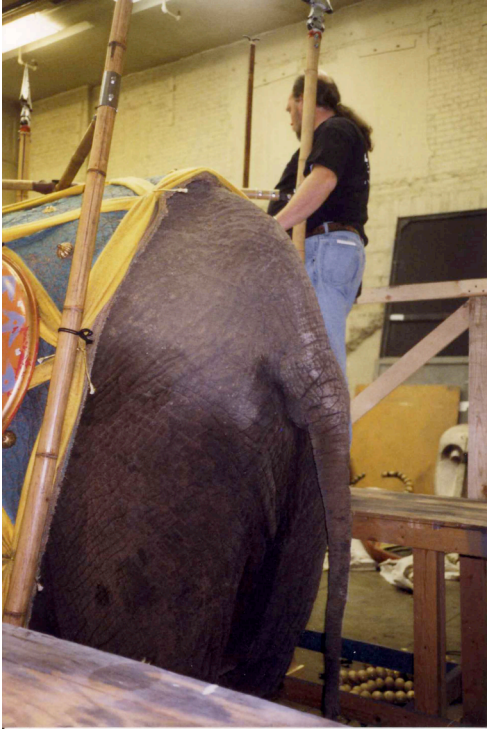
*But you say that they are like the holy priests of the God of  
wine,*

*Who traveled from land to land in holy night.*

*“Brod und Wein,” VII*

## MOONLIGHTING IN *TURANDOT*

pic after 7 BW and before 7a



Aida-elephant-south loqual



Aida shovel lo qual  
Requiem; Aida shovel; prof pic of elephant shit

## VII • STRANIERO! NO TENTAR LA FORTUNA!

The ice princess, Turandot, seeks revenge for her ancestor who was raped and murdered in cold blood by a deceitful stranger.

Portland Opera promotional post card

As I prepared for the stage, the transformation in my appearance extended even to my glasses. I have worn glasses much longer than I have had a beard, but the ancient Chinese, masses or otherwise, did not have prepaid optometry coverage. So when we got to the staging rehearsals for the big "riddle" scene, which is to Turandot what the triumphal march scene is to Aida, I tried moving about and watching the conductor with my glasses off, and saw that I would not have to get contact lenses. So I avoided yet another rueful-comic confrontation with my distant past, when the need to wear glasses, diagnosed when I was seven, likely confirmed me in my path toward intellectuality. But that's hindsight, which is the only way I've ever been 20-20. My first reaction to being told I would be a "four-eyes" was severe: I seriously considered cutting off my ears. Contact lenses in adolescence did give me the hope (false, alas) of regaining normalcy and even conquering some ice-princesses in my high-school realm.

After I survived the first staging rehearsal without my specs I then checked whether I could also perform without needing (or causing) spectacles in the "moonrise" part of the gigantic one-scene first act. There I would have to hobble-scurry (or "slither," as the stage director put it) up and down a flight of stairs that had no railing, which for the visually challenged was more dangerous than the riddle scene. There some heavy scenery pieces had to move off-stage swiftly, right when we had to march on just as

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quickly. But the people backstage knew how to direct the traffic. Going onstage, although we had to move quickly and nearly on each other's heels, at least gave me someone nearby to "guide" on, as we old high-school band players said when we marched in street parades.

"Guiding," in the sense of managing a marching band, is a skill that requires particular talent from the trombonist (myself again, in yet another musical avatar). One must manage the slide, glance quickly to the right, and then, also quickly and without lowering the constantly moving slide, check the pavement a few paces ahead to see what the horses of the local sheriff's posse may have left behind. Here I offer an expression of pity to Fred, thou French-horn player friend and basketball buddy of my youth. When French-horn players march in parades, they must hold their instruments high and horizontal. They cannot see anything anywhere close before them at foot-level. So I saw Fred's feet, clad in shoes of powder-white glory, lift and fall as he unknowingly stomped into a pile of fresh horse-turds. I do not know whether I would have chosen to warn him, had I actually been able to. It would likely have done no good anyway, and we trombonists snickered about Fred's misfortune with our usual gross glee.

Years later the shit was almost on the other foot. My entrance as part of the sub-chorus of Ethiopian war prisoners in that triumphal Aïda march scene a few years before had been much more complicated than the one in the *Turandot* "riddle" scene. This is another elephant near-disaster tale. The elephant, borrowed from a wildlife park, first lumbered

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ponderously across the stage with the victorious Egyptian soldiers. Then she was to circle backstage to return to her backstage costuming stall for a quick drop-down change of harness and ornaments. The frugal opera management was getting double-duty out of her, and besides, two elephants can really crowd up a backstage. We prisoners, dressed in rags and wearing dark body makeup, stood nearby, held captive by a huge heavy net, and I without my glasses, of course. We would have a few seconds to get hitched to her harness before she made her second entrance, seeming to drag us. The front man, two people ahead of me and, so to speak, nearly jowl by cheek to the elephant, held a quick-release catch on the cable.

This time a half-berserk pachyderm was not the problem. On her first trip across the stage she left – as I could just barely see from my position and without my specs – an immense, steaming, and no doubt warm pile – right where, within less than a minute, I had been choreographed and thoroughly rehearsed to be kneeling, barefoot, and begging for mercy in sweet but plaintive Italian tones. Afterward the opera would offer professionally-shot 8-by-10 glossy color photos of that scene – among others, too, of course. I don't need one. I was there.

In confrontations with humans I am too much a deliberator, too concerned about feelings and decorum – a coward, if you will. Other emergencies I generally handle quickly and well. If a child's cut forehead or a dirty diaper does not shake your nerve or turn you pale, neither will elephant poop, especially not if you are wearing dark body makeup. In what cannot have been more than a few

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seconds, and in some way that did not involve any stages of reasoned deliberation, I resolved that I would uphold my artistic integrity and maintain my stage identity as an elderly Ethiopian prisoner: I would kneel barefoot in that pile. But only a few seconds later, at most, my heroism turned out to be unnecessary. In ancient Egyptian janitorial costume, with a cart that looked rather like a miniature chariot, but using a poorly disguised aluminum snow-shovel, a stagehand who had long since been detailed for that eventuality zoomed across the stage, scooped away the pile, and left me what appeared a spotless spot to kneel on. But I still glowed with pride at the sacrifice I had been prepared to make for the arts and – I felt it so personally – for Verdi.

A few years later I learned what, when you're doing Verdi, sacrifice really means. ♪