

# VIII

*Dímmí íl míó nome*

Nenne mir meinen Namen

Tell me my name

*••Verily, some time ago (it seems long to us),  
They who had blessed our lives all ascended again,  
When the Father turned his face from Mankind  
And deep sorrow spread over the Earth.  
There did so appear at long last a quiet Spirit, divinely  
Consoling, announcing the end of the Day and then vanish-  
ing.  
But the heavenly host ••  
...Thus we too remember the gods, who once  
Were here and will return at the right time;  
Thus, too, do the singers chant so solemnly the god of wine,  
And their praise, not vainly conceived, resounds to the An-  
cient One.*

“Brod und Wein,” VII-VIII

## MOONLIGHTING IN *TURANDOT*

pic after BW 8 and before 8a journal

sticks; low stairs (but those are in postlude)

## VIII • DIMMI IL MIO NOME

You're doing a great job of being grief-stricken. You just have to do it quicker.

Portland Opera stage director

Late in the staging rehearsals I got myself appointed to carry a threatening stick in the torture scene. I also managed to be placed, with some space around me well away from the wings on stage right, where my family and friends would be able to pick me out again if they had missed me on my stage-left tower in Act I or in the anonymous march and crowd scene in Act II. Although the score says that we are to be "ferociously menacing with daggers" ("con ferocia minacciando con pugnali" – I just can't get enough of those beautiful Italian phrases), I was very proud of my stick, and wielding that was sufficient challenge. During early staging a fellow bass not only fell off a roof and banged his head during his day job shingling houses, but also got a cut forehead when a palace guard mismanaged a staff.

Those staves came into dangerous play again as our production's way of solving an old artistic problem: how to get a corpse off stage. Liù seizes a dagger from a careless guard (another delicate staging tactic – how to make him inattentive without appearing downright stupid). She stabs herself (facing stage left, dagger plunging between her torso and upstage arm, of course). Aria finished, and with no diminution of vocal power from her wound, she dies.

It is not good enough for our staging team simply to have the corpse carried off, as Shakespeare has Hamlet "lug the guts" after he stabs Polonius, who has been spy-

## MOONLIGHTING IN *TURANDOT*

ing from behind the arras. Instead, four guards must lay two of their staves across two others, sprawl the body over the two cross-staves, one placed under her bent knees and with her arms draped back over the other one, under her back, in what is doubtless intentionally a crucifixion pose. Then all four must lift the contraption, absolutely evenly, each at the end of one of the two staves supporting the cross-staves. While Calaf and Timur mourn, and the old blind king grasps Liù's hand and stumbles along, they must trudge off, still perfectly synchronized with each other.

But it can't drag. Puccini did die after he killed off Liù. *Turandot* may be the end of Italian Grand Opera. Danto has tried to tell us that art is dead. But Alfano completed this opera, and we're still putting it on. So after Liù dies, ten measures (or no more than 44 seconds) after stabbing herself, there are not quite five minutes of stage time to load up the body and get it off stage, along with Turandot herself, still up on her wheeled tower. We the chorus, all sixty or more of us, go off last, fifteen or so to each of the four wing passages, still singing our dirge. We can't appear to hurry, but we also have to carry our sticks and pull our wheeled staircases off with us, without causing traffic jams. And yet we have only ten measures, less than sixty seconds, to do that, because right after we're gone – the score makes it clear there is no change of scene – Calaf is going to charge at Turandot fortissimo with his "Princess of Death, Princess of Ice" tirade and then kiss her and make everything all right in the end. If we make him wait to start singing he'll look very silly.

## VIII • DIMMI IL MIO NOME

The corpse-bearers cannot afford any lost time or any mistakes. I think of the end of the Marlene Dietrich dance-hall parody in Blazing Saddles, or the corpse that will not stay a corpse (because it is not a corpse, you see) in A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum. One slip of the foot, even a tilt that allows a cross-staff to slide along a support-staff, all of them round and smooth-surfaced, and we have a dropped, suddenly probably re-animated corpse, or at the very least an evident, un-corpse-like grasp at an arm or staff.

Not for me, that job, though they do it flawlessly each time. Handling my stick is challenge enough for me, and I do know my limitations. The two farces with the elephants are funny, in themselves and also because I did nothing to cause them. It brings me far more shudders than chuckles to recall how, in the grand public dress rehearsal of Aïda years ago, I headed in the wrong direction when the brass choir was told to clear the backstage. The bumbling German professor, with the baritone horn and most certainly not in costume, came within a few feet from bumping out on-stage right when Aïda and Radames, sealed in a tomb and starving, were nearing the climax of their final duet. Later I had a severe case of the shakes, though people told me that the stage-hands would surely have tackled me in time.

On the afternoon of November 3, before the first dress rehearsal, I shaved and was beardless for the first time in more than twenty years. "Weird, Dad," my daughters said, but I had expected to look far more creased and jowly. ♪