



Don't Let the

“O”

Word Keep You
Away

La Gran Scena Proves Opera Can Be Good AND Good for You

BY MARK CARTER

Imagine a 200-lb soprano tripping down castle steps while trilling like a canary. Envision a scene from Wagner's *Ride of the Valkyries* where the cast, while vying for the spotlight, are dressed in tacky ball gowns and wielding spears and boas. If you can picture either of these situations, then you have some idea of what La Gran Scena Opera is about. Burlesque? Definitely, but burlesque is only a part of their story. Even though this all-male company sings in falsettos and falsies, they have an appreciation and an understanding of what makes opera a compelling art form. Combining comedy and the sublime, these divas convulse their audiences with laughter and instill in them a feeling that opera can be loved and laughed at — at the same time.

Company creator and artistic director Ira Siff plays Vera Galup-Borszkh, whose wigs and makeup are reminiscent of Lucille Ball or our own Cherry Tarrt and Yolanda. An ageless character with a very long career, Vera is affectionately referred to as La Dementia. *Time* has described her performance as Bette Midler on Benzedrine. While the humor is ever-present, she has been known to make audiences fall into worshipful hushes at the beauty of the music. Her soprano voice is stratospheric, capable of amazing strength, and has been called ear-splitting by at least one writer.

I recently spoke with Siff about arias, applause, and architecture.

How would you describe what you do?

I do somewhere between a spoof of and a tribute to grand opera that reflects affectionately, but through a distorted mirror, what I grew up with when I was a kid living in New York City and going to the old Metropolitan Opera — a very grand and gilded palazzo, not the cheesy Lincoln Center.

One of the things I remember from last time I was at Lincoln Center was the gold leaf falling from the ceiling.

Well, that is the new place. Who needs it? That was the '60s, the worst period of architecture. Here we are, stuck with it — the worst kind of nightmare. They were all built at the wrong time. They managed to take very expensive ingredients, like redwoods from Africa and precious stone, and make it look like Formica and poured concrete. It's a mess. It was the period.

When I was a kid the old Met was a dingy-looking place outside, but inside, it was a golden horseshoe on 39th and Broadway. It was quite grand, with a lot of history. I began to go on the instigation of a high school friend, who literally dragged me to sit through a performance that starred a very young Joan Sutherland. I was completely swept away. I had never seen anything so dramatic or funny in my entire life. She was startling. Pandemonium broke loose when she finished.

The place just went bananas. This was a time before the now ubiquitous and extremely meaningless standing ovation that greets any performance penned by Andrew Lloyd Weber or even worse. This was a time when people responded for a reason — the reason not being because they just paid \$75 for a Broadway show and they'd better pat themselves on the back. They spontaneously responded to performances.



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