

Serving the Production

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Every production is a collaboration, but none more so than a new production, when the physical production may, literally, be built around the singers. While such an experience offers a wonderful creative opportunity for all involved, it can also involve more trial and error, as the members of the creative team test their ideas in the rehearsal room and onstage.

Soprano Lisa Saffer says, "Being in a new production is a huge joy, and for me, much easier. It is about the conversation, about creating something. A revival, at its best, can be that to some degree, but it tends to be about getting it up. The great thing about new productions is that you're really part of a team; working on something, figuring it out, doing the rewarding and necessary work of making music and theater."

In a revival, where sets and costumes come out of storage, the designer may be no more than a name in the program. In a new production, they are more often active participants in the rehearsal process. "You need to be involved," says designer Carol Bailey. "In rehearsal, the designers may see things before anyone else. If there's a four-foot-tall wall, they're not going to be able to swing their legs over that." She notes that while the director and conductor are looking at the performance, she can keep an eye on practical problems that may be caused by set and costumes. Recently, she designed the world premiere of Poul Ruders' *Kafka's Trial* at Royal Danish Opera. "In *Kafka's Trial*, some of the staging turned out to be literally impossible, so we came up with the idea of having doubles on the stage. It was a brand-new piece, so nobody really knew what would happen."

Like most designers, Bailey focuses her attention on the singer even before rehearsals begin. "Usually I try to get hold of photos or measurements to start with, so you're not totally miscasting. If I can, I see them in a production so I can see how they move." She also speaks with the director to find out what kinds of movement might be done in costume. In a recent production of *Don Giovanni*, director Francisco Negrin knew that Elvira would be required to climb up and down a ladder, so Bailey took that into account. Company staff can be important collaborators, especially if they are familiar with the singers. "For my recent experience with Royal Danish

Opera, the woman at the shop sat down with me and we cast the chorus according to what people looked like. They also had a very good idea of who could do quick changes easily."

Director Lillian Groag always incorporates cast into her preliminary conceptual thinking: "There are productions I would never attempt with certain people," she says, citing her recent *La fanciulla del West* at Glimmerglass Opera, which required a lot of movement on an uneven set: "I would never do that production with people who were not comfortable with their bodies. Or costumes — I try to pick a period that will suit the bodies given."

There are times when, despite the best intentions of everyone involved, singers are asked to do (or wear) something they feel compromises their performance. In that situation, says Saffer, "My initial way of dealing is straightforward but nice. There are certain places where nothing will happen unless you jump up and down and scream. But it's really all about conversations, how to make it work for me and everyone else. I don't feel like it's my job to have a fit. Sometimes I recognize that you have to. If something isn't safe, absolutely. But mostly I try not to let it get to that."

Groag is happy to collaborate with singers, but notes that collaboration requires work of both parties. "If they've done their homework, I'm delighted. If they're open and intelligent and have ideas about telling the story, nothing pleases me more. But they can't just say, 'I don't look good in blue.' It has to be in service of the whole, not a specific person." She says singers should "know costumes and period, what looks good on you and why. I was doing a *Cosi* in period, but there are many decades in the 18th century. I called up the Dorabella and the Fiordiligi and said, 'Which 18th century lines look good on you?' They were annoyed that I called! I e-mail singers and ask what looks good on them . . . and most of the time I don't get an answer."

While many directors share Groag's collaborative spirit, there are plenty of stories of singers who found themselves in productions that, to put it mildly, didn't work for them. Can or should singers attempt to avoid such productions by asking in advance about the concept?



Emily Pulley with (left to right) Aaron St. Clair Nicholson, John Glover, and Luke Grooms in Glimmerglass Opera's 2004 production of *La fanciulla del West*. Photo by George Mott.



Roger Honeywell and Emily Pulley in Glimmerglass Opera's 2004 production of *La fanciulla del West*. Photo by George Mott.

“I don’t do that, because I’ve almost never run across a production I thought was completely unworkable,” says Saffer. “Where I draw the line usually is not about the physical production. There have been some challenging ideas, but part of my job is to help that work, no matter what it is. I’m not so much of a control freak in terms of production stuff. The company hires a certain director, and I have to figure out how to live in that world.”

There are some things that Saffer wants to know before entering a new production. “I do ask my colleagues about the conductor and director, and I will pay attention to the amount of time scheduled for rehearsal. Rehearsal times are shorter and shorter. I have not yet gotten to a point where I’ve said I won’t do it, but the shorter rehearsal times take an enormous toll on singers, especially a certain kind. I like to make an integrated physical, musical, theatrical performance. That takes time and repetition. People have described me as being theatrical, but it’s mostly because I rehearse my butt off. I know what I have to do to make it look spontaneous and real. It seems really prosaic and boring, but that’s what makes it good.”

For Groag, the work in the rehearsal room is the key. “You learn the role at home; you rehearse the performance. You know the ink on the paper, but the performance is what must be rehearsed. I can put a production around anybody, but I’m interested in individual performance. I’m interested in singer input. I want to make sure that when singers are putting a piece into their voice, it’s so important to actually know what they’re saying, word for word. Knowing the word tells the voice where to sit. The libretto is everything — for certain pieces more than others. Certainly in Mozart and the 19th century. If you have a b natural on the word ‘love’, it is not the same as if the word is ‘hate’. Not all sounds have to be pretty. Singers are taught to put notes into their bodies. They need to put roles into their mouths.”

They also need to put clothes on their bodies, and this can be a particularly sensitive part of the process. For singers who have reservations about what they’re asked to wear, Bailey offers the following advice: “Have the mindset of a collaborator, building a whole new world. Understand that the costume designer is your advocate. I think it’s a courageous act for a performer to go out and perform. I get so much pleasure from seeing that and supporting that. Know that the costume designer is trying to make you look good. If you look good, the designer looks good. It is a totally collaborative thing. Just as you work with the director in the rehearsal room to flesh out and find the character, the same thing is possible in the costume fitting.”

While Bailey tries to be accommodating, she notes that if a singer says, “I don’t like it,” she can’t be much help. “That’s very generic. Try to be clear about what your reservations are. If it’s something the director and I feel really strongly about, I say, ‘Could we just try it?’ If it’s not



Lisa Saffer and Richard Coxon in English National Opera's production of *Lulu*.



Lisa Saffer in English National Opera's production of *Lulu*. Photo by Laurie Lewis.

working, we'll figure something out. The problem comes when someone doesn't feel they're being listened to, if they feel it's not a collaboration. You hear terrible stories about divas, but I haven't had that many problems."

If there are issues, continues Bailey, "I think it's best to bring it up head on. Don't wait until the costume is made and there is no time to fix it. The thing that's most important is to bring it up when you're calm. Different designers respond in different ways. Bring it up in the form of a conversation rather than a mandate. When everyone is calm, more information gets passed along. If you find yourself getting upset, say, 'I'm getting a little uptight. Would it be OK if we talked at lunch?' Just say, 'I'm feeling nervous, and I'd like your help.' That way, it's clear that it's not some whim, the fact that you feel you look bad in brown. You could ask to bring it into the rehearsal room to try it. Or do the motion you're having trouble with in the dressing room. That's something I always ask people to do."

"I'm usually asked to be extremely active on stage, so in fittings I'm always sitting down and rolling on the ground," says Saffer. She enjoys collaborating with designers, and sometimes uses her knowledge of her own body and her character to offer suggestions. "If my character is supposed to be sexy, or very young, if there's something in the costume that doesn't make my body look as good as possible, I may say, 'What about the hem? On my short legs, it may be better to have it here.'"

There are many personalities in opera, and not all of them are collaborative, Groag notes. "There are directors who do puppet opera. You know that within two or three days of rehearsal. If they're good, you can throw yourself into their arms, try to understand where the thinking came from, then do your thinking along those lines. If they're intelligent, it can be very interesting. And the experiences last only a month. Once in a while, you do get a fool, and you have to practice defensive acting. You know what your body does on stage. Make sure you protect yourself by knowing enough about the role and the piece and how your role fits in. If you know everything the words are saying, and you deliver with laser-beam concentration,

there is not a director who's going to get in your way. I think even the shabbiest and most lackluster revival can be made to have an incredible punch. Focus an aria and the audience won't be able to take their eyes off you. Stardom is all about stage energy and self-assurance. There is a glint in the eye of a star-like performer, and that only happens if you've done your work."

Obviously, a singer should come to rehearsal with words and music learned. How much additional research is helpful? For Saffer, it depends on the piece. "Sometimes homework can be the wrong thing because the production will put the character in a completely different place. I do try to find out as much as I can. Sometimes it's not very literal. When I did my first Cleopatra, I read as much as I could, but in the end it's funny little things like seeing a picture of her on a coin. She was not attractive, which is completely fascinating. It means the whole idea of her compellingness and attractiveness, this woman who was not really a physical beauty, becomes incredibly interesting."

For Groag, ongoing and far-flung investigation is a crucial part of working in opera. "Bring what you already know, and come to find out what you don't. I do. I learn from singers every day. I hope I don't know *Bohème* so well in 20 years that I don't have something to learn. What you know, you know. Come ready to learn some more. And read everything. Do read 19th century literature. Do know that Mimi is not a virgin. If you're doing *Ariadne*, know mythology. Know poetry. Know music, not just opera. Read about the period. Who else sang the role? When and why was it written? What are the traditions? What is a good tradition? What are the differences between a Callas, or Price, or Tebaldi Leonora? Know everything there is to know. What do you know personally? Why are you doing it? We know it's pretty music. Why are you singing it? Is it a great role, with big high notes? I end up with people who have no frame of reference. Even if you only sing Rossini, know the *Ring*. Have that knowledge of the medium and the art."

"In the end, there's this thing that's larger than all of us — the production," says Bailey. ♦