
FEATURE ARTICLE

BAWDY HOUSES, CATHEDRALS AND EVERYTHING BETWEEN

BY JEFF COUNTS



Quips about opera are as abundant, cruel and glorious as the beloved characters who populate the stage itself. And why not? Whether you've attended often or never, opera is one of those larger-than-life topics that everyone gets to have an opinion about. So, go ahead. Have your fun. Many others have. Take this famous *bon mot* as an example:

“The opera...is to music what a bawdy house is to a cathedral.”

~ H. L. MENCKEN

Interesting. And what about the multitude of unconfirmed wits since the mid-1800s (including Molière) who have been credited with first calling opera “the most expensive of all noises”? It is perhaps possible to unpack their point, even while withholding approval of its flippancy, but what was Mencken trying to say? By confining opera in the moral and intellectual constraints of a “bawdy house,” was he actually branding it the “cheapest” of all noises? Whatever his intentions, Mencken made it perfectly clear in other, even more uncharitable comments that he was simply not a fan of the art form. That’s fine. He was not a fan of a great many things, so his antipathy is both easy to reconcile and easy to dismiss. Because it’s wrong. Consider this contrasting quote about opera from one of its most celebrated practitioners:

“An opera begins long before the curtain goes up and ends long after it has come down. It starts in my imagination, it becomes my life, and it stays part of my life long after I’ve left the opera house.”

~ MARIA CALLAS

Much better. Callas knew something Mencken was unwilling to consider—that opera exists to make manifest those elements of human life that defy common language. Our most recognizable traits as a species, the good and the bad, ring so much more clearly through the crystalline distillation of song.

And the grandest stories we tell ourselves about our triumphs and struggles deserve nothing less than that breadth of spectacle only opera can provide. As Callas implied, no clock or four-walled structure should be able to contain it. It may be expensive. It may even be noisy. But it is also necessary, now more than ever.

Callas’ observation about the staying power of theatrical music was put to the ultimate test these last two years. We all “left the opera house” in March 2020 and are only just now fully returning in many places. The devastating impact of shutdowns on the performing arts is still being measured, but few disciplines had as much on the line as opera. Companies in every budget category were forced to experiment with video and non-traditional live presentations in an ever-widening array of safe (often outdoor) locations and the tough but important lessons learned during this survival phase will hopefully outlive their need. It’s good to remember, however, that while signature events like Chicago Lyric Opera’s “Drive-Through” *Götterdämmerung* and our own Maestro Runnicles’ parking garage production of *Das Rheingold* at Deutsche Oper Berlin represented exciting creative departures for those organizations, there are artists who have been exploring alternate venues for years.

Stage Director David Lefkowich and his Minneapolis-based Out of the Box Opera have presented works in a boxing gym, a skating rink, a flour mill, a sewing machine factory and a renovated condo building. Only Mencken’s brothels and churches appear to be missing from this adventurous list. Lefkowich, who returns to GTMF to direct our semi-staged *La Bohème* this summer, believes unpredictable settings like these can expand the emotional effectiveness of opera in fascinating ways, despite the fact that they might lack the technical capabilities of a proper opera house. Though maybe not as far from the box as a flour mill, Walk Festival Hall is a unique and special space, perfect for a fresh approach to a classic drama like *La Bohème*.



Photo: Dan Norman, Out of the Box Opera

“I am a huge proponent of taking opera ‘out of the box’ literally and bringing it to extraordinary locations. I love creating opera in traditional spaces as well, but there is an excitement and an upended expectation for the audience that is unmatched when the opera is free from the opera house and allowed to exist in a new space. That excitement is something that is essential to a successful operatic performance. Many of the operas presented today have been performed for over 100 years and there is a certain comfort that comes from seeing something familiar and traditional. But when the opera is newly contextualized in an unexpected way, it is as if the audience is witnessing it for the first time. That sense of discovery for the audience makes for a truly thrilling and unique experience.”

~ DAVID LEFKOWICH



With those enthusiastic sentiments, Lefkowich draws our attention to a couple of very important aspects of operatic presentation—context and expectation. These are the twin dragons every “out of the box” opera production must slay. Audiences over time have grown accustomed to convention, especially with titles like *La Bohème*, and can be quite rigid in the face of locational innovation. *Bohème* is the story of a group of young artists who must navigate love and poverty in Paris and we opera lovers not only “expect” the plot to unfold into the standard mid-19th century aesthetic, we assume we can’t properly “contextualize” it without the comfortably opulent framework of the theater. The opera house is the time machine (and place machine) we have been conditioned to trust most, but as David Lefkowich clearly knows, narratives like *Bohème* absolutely can succeed elsewhere. Will it work here though? Our Music Director remembers well when the idea first occurred to him.

“Even as my journey with GTMF had hardly begun, I was visited by the Furies. The Operatic Furies. Opera at the Grand Teton Music Festival? Yes! ‘But what would it take?’, they asked. ‘Busman’s holiday notwithstanding, dear Maestro, initiate us!’, they said. So be it. But with which opera should we begin this grand project? Perhaps the arguably greatest opera ever written? The opera to which we can all relate? It is simply inconceivable, a world without *La Bohème*. ‘It will take a proverbial village’, I told them, ‘to pull it off’. *Allora, ci cominciamo!*”

~ SIR DONALD RUNNICLES

Let’s get started, indeed! From props to costumes to lights to scenery, the proverbial village has been assembled in Teton Village, and Walk Festival Hall will be transformed in August to tell this most timeless of tales. Across oceans and centuries, GTMF patrons will be able to visit Paris in winter this summer with the help of key technological upgrades and the proven, adaptable creativity of Mr. Lefkowich. Most importantly, the Festival Orchestra and a world-class cast of singers, under the baton of our Music Director, will take full advantage of the immersive acoustical intimacy of our stage. *La Bohème* is a heartbreaking saga of human compassion and proof that important journeys can begin with something as simple as a candle, or a spark of inspiration.

The longstanding vision of Maestro Runnicles to bring opera to Jackson Hole reflects a belief that the art form is not only for everyONE, but also the kind of expressive dialect that can thrive anyWHERE. Especially here. And, honestly, who knows this better than he? With all the vaulted volume of a cathedral, the rough and ready flexibility of a bawdy house and the limitless opportunity of everything between, Walk Festival Hall is more than up to the challenge of presenting grand opera. Grumpy old H. L. Mencken might not have liked it, but what did he know?

Join us on August 26 and 27 and see it all come together for the very first time. A new annual tradition begins now...



Photo: Tim Gurczak

