

## **Dancing 'Nessun dorma'**

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[The stage is set with a chair and table. There is a CD player. There are CDs, DVDs and other memorabilia of Pavarotti and opera around. The feel is domestic, intimate, haphazard. The chair and table are lit. Another light (yellow gel) passes beside the chair from down stage centre to upstage right]

I am Daniel Somerville and I would like to thank Dr Victoria Thoms for inviting me to participate in this panel, 'Acts of Salvage at the intersection of dance at literature'.

I will now attempt to perform an 'act of salvage'; an act of salvage that will use dance; or more specifically, the body composed in space, in movement (which may also be stillness) – which I consider to be a suitable definition of dance.

So while I will talk and even read from these notes, in a hybrid form of paper/performance, I will also be expressing certain elements of the argument using movement. There may therefore be elements that you will need to read in a way that requires engagement with the vocabulary of movement – more specifically a type of movement that I call Body Opera (Somerville: 2014). In addition you may be required to read the vocabulary of scenography; the semiotics of theatre. In as much as Heidegger (1956) tells us that a discussion of philosophy must be philosophical, a discussion of opera must, I suppose, engage all the senses, all the artistic disciplines that go to makeup that art-form of

opera. *Gesamtkunstwerk* as Wagner regarded it: music, architecture dance and poetry (1849).

Therefore, if I am to be operatic in my presentation, I make no apology if I, at times, bypass your cool intellects and appeal directly to your emotions, an element of opera that formed part of Catherine Clément's feminist critique of the art form (1988). I appear on a 'dance' panel of this comparative literature conference from the Performance Studies fringe of Opera Studies and in so doing perhaps make the provocation that we cannot study texts only as words on the page but in particular when talking about texts that are performed, we must also consider the mode of delivery and reception. A further provocation might be, if one of the primary modes of reception for opera is base emotion; can we not then also include our emotions in our research and analysis of operatic literature?

There may be tangents, slippages, incongruence – this is after all, opera we are talking about. Additionally, I invite you to play with your perspective. I invite you to join me in addressing opera as an 'opera queen', a positionality that I find enhances the operatic experience through drawing in one's own lived experience and all the joys of subjectivity that it embraces, and all the opportunity to read into the narrative presented by librettist and composer, your own narratives, layer upon layer. As Oscar Wilde said:

Sometimes when I listen to the overture to *Tannhäuser*, I seem indeed to see the comely knight treading delicately on the flower strewn grass, and to hear the voice of Venus calling to him from the caverned hill. But at other times it speaks to one of a thousand

different things, of myself it may be, and my own life, or of the lives of others whom one has loved and grown weary of loving, or of the passions that man has known, or of the passions that man has not known, and so has sought for. (Wilde: 1913, pp.144-5)

[Indicating to the table with CDs and memorabilia]

I return to the scenography, or 'architecture' by Wagner's reckoning, and point out that this *mise-en-scène* represents something of the opera queen as formulated by Wayne Koestenbaum (1993), who literally, 'wrote the book' on opera queens, in that it shows a collector, a categoriser, a fastidious cataloguer seeking out all kinds of vicarious contact with opera and its practitioners.

Before I continue, I suppose we must consider what it is that will be salvaged. What is it that we have lost? What ship has been wrecked, that we may go among its ruins and salvage what remains in order to reconfigure and understand it anew? The answer to that depends on whether one believes that Pavarotti, in singing 'Nessun dorma' metaphorically and literally to/til death, brought opera to millions of the uninitiated, or whether he dashed it mercilessly against the rock of commercialism. I think both are possible and may co-exist. I am neither purist nor reformer. I do not recognise this issue as such a simple binary, for like so many things, it is so much more complicated. I love Pavarotti and I made a performance called *Pavarotti and Me* (2015) which talks about that love, and I have adapted parts of that performance to help in this act of salvage.

If I must seek to answer a question through this performance then it is simply, can I aid you in salvaging a sense of the authentic literature that

lies beneath hearing 'Nessun dorma'? I don't mean, can I tell you the story, though I will do that, but can I restore something of the operatic authenticity of the moment of hearing the aria, by dancing to it?

[Addressing stage right]

Ladies and gentlemen. It is with great sadness that I announce that this evening's performance of *La traviata* is dedicated to the memory of maestro Luciano Pavarotti, who died yesterday.

[Indicating to the right]

There is not a singer here who doesn't in some way owe a debt of gratitude to Pavarotti and in this country in particular we remember his philanthropic work with refugees from the Angolan crisis. There will be a minute silence before the overture.

[Facing the audience. Press play on the CD player, the prelude of *La traviata* (1983) plays.]

That was the announcement that I heard on 7<sup>th</sup> September 2007 at the National Theatre of Namibia in Windhoek. I had co-directed a production of Verdi's *La traviata* (1853) and it was the first night; already a special occasion because this was the first fully staged opera in the country since independence in 1990. So the auditorium was already filled with politicians, local celebrities and dignitaries. Pavarotti's death seemed to make the occasion even more special. His spirit seemed to enter all the singers. It was a magnificent performance. I have seen Pavarotti three times live: I saw him first at Joan Sutherland's farewell appearance as a guest in *Die Fledermaus* (1874) at Covent Garden in

1990. They sang 'Parigi, o cara' from *La traviata*. Next I saw him in 1995, again at Covent Garden, in a production of *Un ballo in maschera* (1858) – there was a moment where he was singing a duet with the soprano, Deborah Voigt, and half way through he just left the stage (presumably to get a glass of water or have a sit down) and emerged again when it was his time to sing, such was his power and ego. Finally, I saw him at a rugby stadium in Pretoria, South Africa in 2005 at the beginning of his farewell tour. He sang old favourites, Neopolitan songs, plenty of high Cs, and of course 'Nessun dorma'. Even then he was showing signs of ill health. It was pancreatic cancer that would claim his life in 2007. I had seen him three times but I never felt so close to him as I did that night in Windhoek. Like an operatic Santa Claus he travelled the globe that night, visiting opera houses in the far flung corners of the earth where similar announcements were made worldwide. The influence of this singer on the world of opera simply cannot be overstated.

Not least because he gave us this image of the opera singer.

[Showing the audience the cover of a CD – Pavarotti in tux and holding his arms out]

The rotund tuxedoed tenor, arms outstretched. If evidence is needed that this image became, not only the surrogate signifier for tenors, but also for all opera, one need look no further than his many imitators on *X-Factor* or *Britain's Got Talent* but also not forgetting the 'Go-Compare-dot-com' adverts.

I study operatic movement. I look at how singing in opera causes the body to be moved. When I run workshops I usually start by inviting someone to volunteer to 'be' like an opera singer. This exercise is derived from a similar one in Butoh workshops that I have attended where our teacher may ask us to move like zombies. The typical B-movie movement ensues [demonstrate] and is abolished so that we may then seriously investigate the embodiment of death, nothingness and re-animation.

Invariably my opera workshop participant will stand like this!

[Standing feet together arms raised above the head]

[Gradually readjusting and demonstrating]

When in actual fact a singer would never stand like this. They would have feet apart to give a steady base. Shoulders do not stretch out with the arms but are held back so as to keep the chest and throat open. Even when reaching forward the shoulders travel back. Arms rarely go above the head as it disturbs the breathing capacity. Similarly the arms are held away from the body so as not to crush the lungs. All effort is made in fact to maintain the instrument from pelvic floor to larynx, even when moving. The body is not bent here [at the waist] but here [at the pelvis] so as not to reduce the lung capacity. And leaning forward and back, travelling across the horizontal plain is all achieved through this movement [travelling at the pelvis] which means the arms become not only a kind of counterbalance mechanism but also a mode of expression all of their own, inclined towards tracing the arc of the music. Turning or

indicating behind becomes like this [absence gesture]. The absence gesture. (Somerville: 2014)

There is an inherent artificiality to the movement of singers inspired by the inherent artificiality of their breathing. Finally also, as Shea (1915) described, there is a sense of deferred completion. Each gesture or movement is achieved piece by piece allowing the body to be motionless (not disturbing the instrument) and always in some form of motion as each completion of movement is deferred from one part of the body to another. This date is significant because even though we may think of Puccini's operas as 'verismo' (lifelike) this is more a reference to subject matter, characterisation and musical adaptability to psychological drama, than performance style. Realism in acting, that had relatively recently become established in theatre, had not yet become common in opera. So what we saw on stage at the early performances of Puccini's works was still a relatively stylised movement vocabulary, remnants of which still persist in opera performance despite the efforts of some directors (often from theatre) to excise it.

[Play 'Celeste Aïda']

Now the problem for me with Pavarotti was that he was the epitome of the 'park and bark' singer. He did nothing to disturb the vocal production. He hardly moved at all. He did everything to preserve the precious instrument. You'd be lucky if you got as much as this [move left hand at elbow to the left]. But there is a lot going on in the face [make facial gestures]. Which often seemed more concerned with the effort of singing rather than characterisation; but which again may remind us of

Butoh and its use of the face as a part of the body which we may consider to be dancing.

Now as a person who studies movement I have to acknowledge that there is a great deal going on in the internal musculature. Additionally, knowing that subsequent singers have found strategies for singing and moving, I can approach a piece with Pavarotti singing and, rather than do an impression of the maestro, I can allow my body to move according to the corporeal restrictions I have described above and by listening to his breathing and support – this is the essence of what Body Opera offers.

Now I wanted to play this aria from *Aïda* (1989), to illustrate Pavarotti's incredible *dimunendo*. This requires great breath control – pumping the air consistently across the vocal chords while reducing the support in the diaphragm.

[Sitting]

That recording was made in 1974. Long before Pavarotti would reach his peak of popular fame by singing 'Nessun dorma' as the theme tune for Italia90, the world cup football. He would bring opera to millions in a way that had not previously been possible. I remember being at my hairdresser while he spoke about football and listening to football fans pass by singing opera. It was as though the world were turned upside down if you imagined, as I did, that opera and hairdressing were the realm of queens and football an immovable marker for heterosexuality.

[Putting on CD of *Atalanta*]



Pavarotti learned to breath from Joan Sutherland. Sutherland was the subject of a piece I made during my doctoral research. The idea that someone might give you your breath [pause] well that to me, that speaks of love. All through my PhD my relationship suffered. I always imagined that come the end of the process there was a work that I was going to make and it was going to be about love. It was going to be for my partner – who unfortunately didn't survive my PhD (but this is not revenge art, I promise). And I was going to use this piece of music, 'Care selve' from Handel's *Atalanta* (1974), because this always reminded me of love. In it Pavarotti doesn't do the famous *diminuendo* that I just illustrated, instead he lets himself run out of breath. He takes the voice right to the edge. It is risky and beautiful. Like love.

'Blessed woods, I come in search of my love'

If you are asking at this point what any of this has to do with 'Nessun dorma' and salvage, indulge me, I'm giving you the context and methodology before we dive into the task at hand. You now know how and why I move the way I do, when I dance. Listen to the voice in 1974, young, agile, risk-taking, you'll never hear it, in my opinion, so pure and perfect. He may have been famous for pumping out high Cs at Italia90 and *The Three Tenors* concerts – but I need you to know that he could really sing, that he was an artist. My *love dance* has become a dance of loss, absence and the incomplete gesture.

[Dance to 'Care selve' but fade half way]

And now to *Turandot* (1926). I leave it to scholars of comparative literature to fully unravel and present the journey of the text reportedly

from 12<sup>th</sup> Century Persian poet Nizami's *Seven Beauties* to subsequent European versions. What is clear is that despite its Chinese fairytale setting, an authentic Chinese origin is nowhere claimed. The story has always perhaps been guilty of a certain degree of exoticism and 'othering'. The version that Puccini and his librettists Giuseppe Adami and Renato Simone were working from was Carlo Gozzi's, 1762, *commedia dell'arte* play of *Turandot*. This is significant, because although Puccini's interest was likely piqued by Schiller's 1801 adaptation of the tale, it was the thoroughly Italian conventions of *commedia* that he and his creative team were to adapt, with all its satirical, parodic, comi-tragic conventions and highly codified movement style.

If we return to 1990 and the world cup football in Italy, we can see that opera, and what's more an opera based on a peculiarly Italian theatrical form, was an obvious option for showcasing Italian pride – a great Italian singer (and football fan), singing opera, based on *commedia* – so what if the story was set in China? A greater emphasis could be placed on its Italian-ness and on the theme of victory that the aria 'Nessun dorma' evokes.

[But] The story of *Turandot* is set in China, and while Puccini made some attempts, syncretic rather than intercultural, to bring some Chinese authenticity to the work through his use of musical motifs from Chinese music tradition, rather than generic 'oriental' colour, it is, none-the-less, unavoidably European and guilty of a degree of exoticism. We may wince at the inevitable 'yellow-face' that this infers as we remember that Puccini was writing for Occidental singers from the outset – but

there may be some redemption then in the tradition of white face that accompanied *commedia*. While characterisation may well be formulated differently to a *commedia* presentation, the opera was still, we may surmise through our understanding of the 'operatic' aspects of movement I have offered above, and in *Body Opera: In Search of the Operatic in the Performance of the Body* (Somerville: 2014), a highly stylised event. Furthermore, Gozzi's play does already playfully parody its own tendency towards exoticism when the *commedia* character of Pantalone admits to the emperor that he is not of Chinese origin (Nicholson: 1979).

What I am arguing is that parody and self-effacement may be the tools via which we can forgive *Turandot* its clumsy treatment of a mythical China born of Persian and European fantasy. [Pause] So, furthermore perhaps we can forgive those whose association with 'Nessun dorma' is more closely bound to football or to the trope of the tuxedoed tenor. These images, after all, excise the uncomfortable exotic implications of the work. So to salvage an authentic operatic rendering of 'Nessun dorma' I must go playfully but respectfully into a world of dressing up and make-believe.

[Dressing in a ragged cloak and Asian hat]

I am not trying to appear Chinese but rather I am trying to salvage the operatic-ness of this literature and to embrace and celebrate all the incredulousness inherent in opera.

{in the yellow light} I need you to imagine a fairytale Peking, an ancient Peking; dusty, wooden houses. Princess Turandot doesn't like men, she

tells us how a female ancestor had been abducted and she is reluctant to marry. Princes come from far and wide, and are entranced by her beauty, but have to solve three riddles if they are to win her. All fail and their heads are on display. Calaf arrives, a prince dressed as a pauper, with his father and their loyal slave Liu, all in disguise, fleeing persecution. He sees Turandot and falls in love, and despite the protestations of all, he sounds the gong to show his intent to face the riddles. Much to Turandot's dismay, he solves them. So he sets Turandot a task – if she can discover his name by dawn his life is forfeit.

Turandot orders that no-one should sleep and that if the name of the stranger is not discovered then she will put many more to death.

'Nessun dorma' translates into English as 'no-one sleeps'. The words 'nessun dorma' echo around the city and into this picture wanders Calaf who picks up the words of the frightened citizens of Peking and sings the aria.

[Play 'Nessun dorma' and dance]

As you can hear, the ending of the aria in the opera is not the climactic resolution we hear in the chart topping hit. The music merges back into the atmosphere of the night from which it grew. So we are left at the end of this performance with a very unspectacular anti-climax. This, however, was approximately the moment where Puccini left off writing his unfinished final work before dying. Sketches of the rest of the opera were completed by Franco Alfano. At the premier of the work in 1926 Toscanini put down his baton at this point and reportedly said something along the lines of 'and here the Maestro died'. Subsequent

performances were given in full and here we find the climactic ending, filled in by Alfano, we so desire. Here is love. There are a few things to consider. Pavarotti, at the end of his career, used his fame to raise money for refugees through his cross-over concerts, *Pavarotti and Friends*. Love. Puccini, having written many female characters who die for, or because of, a man, ends his output with a female character who is strong and powerful but who lives and is redeemed by love. (Liu regrettably, does die, taking Calaf's name to her grave, it should be noted.) Everything about the end of *Turandot* is for me somehow connected to love.

Am I the love sick prince willing to face anything for love, or am I the hardened princess, too afraid to love? Am I the diva or the tenor? If the opera queen is more likely to identify as the soprano, what relation am I to the tenor? I desire both and embody both. This music may be past, present or future in my relation to love.

[Playing the end of *Turandot* speaking over the music]

Dawn has arrived and the princess does not know the name of the stranger. Calaf goes to her and just before dawn tells her his name and kisses her, putting his life in her hands. The people are gathered, they sing the praises of Turandot – she will live for ten thousand years.

There she is, Joan Sutherland. She sings, 'I know the name of the stranger ... his name is ... love.'

[The love dance merges with the dance of 'Nessun dorma' ... ending in the absence gesture and a collapse, with blackout.] END

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