

La Voix humaine
(The Human Voice)

1985

Thursday, June 19, 1985 8:00 PM

Saturday, June 21, 1985 8:00 PM

Tuesday, June 24, 1985 7:30 PM

Thursday, June 26, 1985 8:00 PM

Sunday, June 29, 1985 2:00 PM

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SUMMER SEASON 1986



La Voix humaine
The Medium

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San Francisco Opera

Terence A. McEwen, *General Director*

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La Voix humaine / The Medium

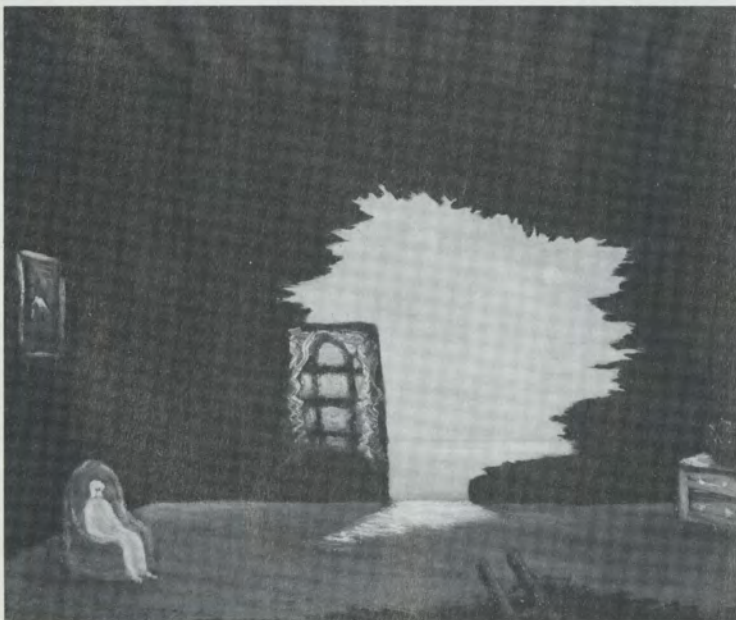
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COVER:

Matthew Barnes, 1880-1951
The Appointment, 1939-43
Oil on canvas, 19% x 23% in.

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Reid W. Dennis



Tully M. Friedman

From the Chairman of the Board and the President

It is a pleasure to welcome you to San Francisco Opera's 1986 Summer Season, a season that combines wonderful Italian repertory favorites with an exciting Company premiere and includes eagerly anticipated debuts by major international stars as well as return appearances of artists known and loved by our audience.

A season such as this, filled with wonderful melodies and gripping drama, would not be possible without the support of our loyal friends, and we are most pleased to acknowledge those who have made this summer's productions possible. Special thanks go to the Paul L. and Phyllis C. Wattis Foundation for underwriting the presentation of Menotti's *The Medium*, the first Menotti opera our Company has ever mounted. The Wattis Foundation has long been a special supporter of San Francisco Opera, having sponsored the 1983 American premiere of Tippett's *The Midsummer Marriage* in addition to a most generous 1984 challenge grant.

Three of our revival productions were underwritten at the time they were first performed: *Lucia di Lammermoor* was originally made possible through a gift from Cyril Magnin; our *Cavalleria Rusticana/Pagliacci* double bill was the result of a gift from the late James D. Robertson; and *La Voix humaine* came into being through the generosity of the San Francisco Foundation.

The 1986 presentation of *Cavalleria/*

Pagliacci is sponsored, in part, by a grant from the Koret Foundation.

We are also happy to acknowledge the American Express Company for providing funds for Supertitles being featured in our productions of *Il Trovatore* and *Cavalleria/Pagliacci*. The resounding popularity of Supertitles is a reminder of the role corporate funding can play in helping us reach new audiences.

Perhaps the best news we can share with you is the fact that the San Francisco Opera Association ended the 1985-86 fiscal year in the black, no small feat in the increasingly expensive business of mounting world-class opera. While being thankful to all who helped us meet this goal, and pleased with the results of our fundraising efforts, we cannot afford to slacken in those efforts. Our budget surplus was small, and the financial needs we face in the future will continue to mount.

We are counting on all of you in the San Francisco Opera family to help us stay on the right financial track. If you have assisted us in the past, we need and encourage your continued support. If you have not yet joined us in our on-going quest for artistic excellence with financial stability, now is the best time you could choose for doing so. Our continued success depends on you.

Reid W. Dennis, Chairman
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General Director's Message

The first Summer Season after our 1985 *Ring* is a time to enjoy, digest, and dream of the future. The *Ring* confirmed our position as one of the leading opera companies of the world. This summer, we will try to balance that Teutonic influence with three popular Italian works and one unusual French-American evening. Also this summer, we will introduce you to some remarkable young performers.

Where is our Company going? I believe no opera company can achieve the constant progress necessary to vital artistic improvement without firm convictions—and dreams. The emergence of superior-quality American artists from our Opera Center has made me believe very deeply that we can develop into the kind of opera company Arturo Toscanini dreamed about in Milan in 1921: an ensemble company, with stars. While this may seem a contradiction in terms, it best describes a company with a defined base of artists, grown and nurtured in our own atmosphere, with the addition of a number of the world-traveling stars who lend opera its special glamour. I am not proposing that our

Opera Center graduates sing only supporting roles. I am suggesting that they mix, shoulder to shoulder, with international stars, both as their equals, and as their support. The 1985 Fall Season and this year's Summer and Fall Seasons show steps in that direction.

It is my firm belief that our Company, already respected world-wide, can be made into one that will also be *envied* world-wide; a place where our audiences can have the deep satisfaction of following brilliant careers from their very beginnings until their subsequent integration into the international opera scene.

We all know opera is the most expensive and complicated of all art forms. It is also an exotic creation, one that needs regular infusions of style and spirit from every possible artistic background. This, we aim to provide.

Welcome to the 1986 Summer Season!

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read "J. M. Scherl".

San Francisco Opera

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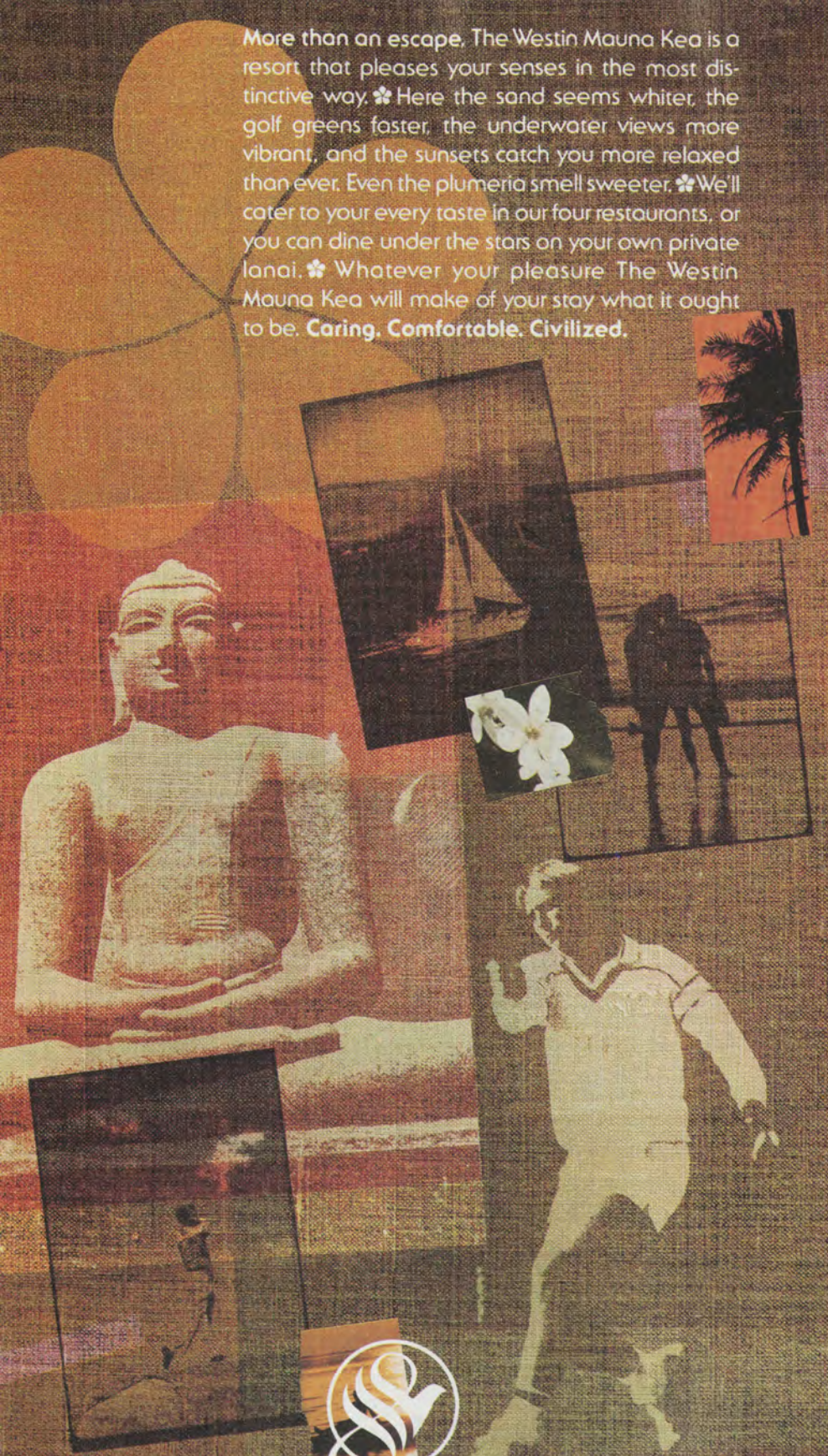
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On Tuesday, September 2, 1986, at 7:30 p.m., a most extraordinary San Francisco Opera event will take place at the Oakland Coliseum Arena: the Silver Jubilee Concert, featuring Dame Joan Sutherland and Luciano Pavarotti. The San Francisco Opera Orchestra will be under the direction of Maestro Richard Bonyngé.

Subscribers to San Francisco Opera's Summer and Fall Seasons have already been alerted to this once-in-a-lifetime event, celebrating the 25th anniversary of Joan Sutherland's San Francisco Opera debut and of Pavarotti's first operatic appearance, in a performance of *La Bohème* in Reggio Emilia.

The evening will include a long list of arias and duets by Verdi and Donizetti and will be highlighted by a number of show-stopping pieces that have helped in making these incomparable artists familiar and beloved around the world.

For more information, call the San Francisco Opera Box Office at (415) 864-3330.



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Terence A. McEwen, *General Director*

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1986 Summer Season

Opening Night

Saturday, May 24, 8:00

Il Trovatore Verdi
Dimitrova*, Zajic, Patterson*; Bonisolli,
Carroli (May 24, 29; June 3,6), Zanca-
naro (June 12, 15, 18), Skinner, Peder-
son, Petersen, Anderson
Meltzer/Guttman/Skalicki

Tuesday, May 27, 8:00

Lucia di Lammermoor Donizetti
Rolandi*, Mazurowski*; McCauley,
Elvira, Sfiris**, Harper, De Haan*
Cillario/Farruggio/Toms/Munn

This production was originally made possible through a gift from Cyril Magnin.

Thursday, May 29, 7:30

Il Trovatore Verdi

Saturday, May 31, 8:00

Lucia di Lammermoor Donizetti

Sunday, June 1, 2:00

Cavalleria Rusticana Mascagni
Cossotto, Cowdrick, Young*; Mauro,
Cappuccilli*

and

Pagliacci Leoncavallo
Soviero; Mauro, Cappuccilli, Gordon,
Malis
Guadagno/Calábria/Ponnelle/Munn

These productions were originally made possible through a gift from the late James D. Robertson.

The 1986 presentation of Cavalleria/Pagliacci is sponsored, in part, by a grant from the Koret Foundation.

Tuesday, June 3, 8:00

Il Trovatore Verdi

Wednesday, June 4, 7:30

Cavalleria Rusticana Mascagni
and

Pagliacci Leoncavallo

Thursday, June 5, 7:30

Lucia di Lammermoor Donizetti

Friday, June 6, 8:00

Il Trovatore Verdi

Saturday, June 7, 8:00

Cavalleria Rusticana Mascagni
and

Pagliacci Leoncavallo

Sunday, June 8, 2:00

Lucia di Lammermoor Donizetti

Tuesday, June 10, 8:00

Cavalleria Rusticana Mascagni
and

Pagliacci Leoncavallo

Wednesday, June 11, 7:30

Lucia di Lammermoor Donizetti

Thursday, June 12, 8:00

Il Trovatore Verdi

Friday, June 13, 8:00

Cavalleria Rusticana Mascagni
and

Pagliacci Leoncavallo

Sunday, June 15, 2:00

Il Trovatore Verdi

Tuesday, June 17, 7:30

Cavalleria Rusticana Mascagni
and

Pagliacci Leoncavallo

Wednesday, June 18, 7:30

Il Trovatore Verdi

Thursday, June 19, 8:00

La Voix humaine Poulenc
Armstrong*
Johnson/Zambello/Joël/Halmen/Munn
and

San Francisco Opera Premiere
The Medium Menotti

Crespin, Chen, Patterson, Cowdrick;
Pederson, Loca*
Kaltenbach**/Thamin**/Pagano*/
Arhelger

The production of La Voix humaine was originally made possible through a grant from the San Francisco Foundation.

The presentation of The Medium is made possible through the generosity of the Paul L. and Phyllis C. Wattis Foundation.

Friday, June 20, 8:00

Lucia di Lammermoor Donizetti

Saturday, June 21, 8:00

La Voix humaine Poulenc
and

The Medium Menotti

Sunday, June 22, 1:00

Cavalleria Rusticana Mascagni
and

Pagliacci Leoncavallo

Tuesday, June 24, 7:30

La Voix humaine Poulenc
and

The Medium Menotti

Wednesday, June 25, 8:00

Lucia di Lammermoor Donizetti

Thursday, June 26, 8:00

La Voix humaine Poulenc
and

The Medium Menotti

Sunday, June 29, 2:00

La Voix humaine Poulenc
and

The Medium Menotti

**American opera debut

*San Francisco Opera debut

All San Francisco Opera 1986 Summer Season productions provided with Supertitles. Supertitles for Il Trovatore, Cavalleria Rusticana and Pagliacci provided through a grant from American Express Company via the San Francisco Opera Guild.

Repertoire, casts and dates subject to change.

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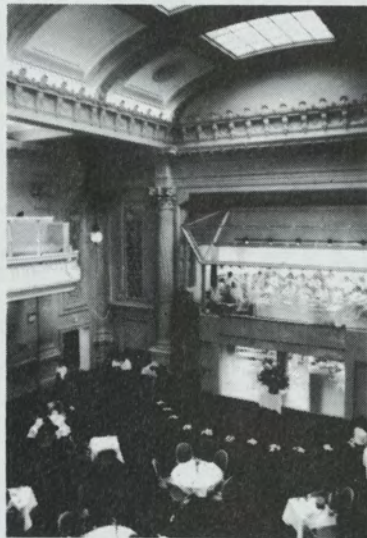


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LA VOIX HUMAINE:

A QUESTION OF LOVE

By JOHN ARDOIN

Francis Poulenc's one-act, one-character opera is a setting of a play by Jean Cocteau written in pre-war Paris. Its facts are simple. In a small, dimly-lighted bedroom, a woman dressed in a nightgown holds a lengthy (forty-five minutes) phone conversation with her lover. Their affair has obviously been a close, sharing one and has gone on for a long while. It is now at its end. We never meet him but get to know something of him through the woman's words and how she deals with him. It is also clear that it is he that has brought their liaison to an end in order to marry another. The woman is just as clearly still deeply in love with him.

La Voix humaine is one of the few operas cast in the form of a monologue; another that springs to mind is Schönberg's expressionistic *Erwartung*, also for soprano, and also about love lost, but in quite a different way. In a very real sense, as Janet Flanner has pointed out in a telling commentary on the work, *La Voix humaine* is an extended duet between "a heart-broken woman and a telephone, the up-to-date *deus ex machina* . . . continued on p.24

Magda Olivero as The Woman in San Francisco Opera's first staging of Poulenc's *La Voix humaine*, 1979.



SCHERL

THE MEDIUM: A QUESTION OF FAITH

By JOHN ARDOIN

Threading their way through the operas by Gian Carlo Menotti are two large themes: faith and love. One may dominate the other from opera to opera, but aspects of these two primal emotions are never far from the surface of his music dramas, and they are often the poles from which a story is hung.

Menotti has investigated both the sacred and secular sides of the question of faith, as he has the luminous and dark sides of love. And though love exerts a strong pull in the case of *The Medium*, it is the need to believe in something or someone that motivates the action of this amazing, renewing work.

Here we do not find faith expressed as simplistically as was the case in his *buffa* opera *Amelia Goes to the Ball*. There the question was one of Amelia's childlike assumption that no matter what the chaos in her personal life, she would attend the first ball of the season. Nor is it the searing faith of Annina, the Saint of Blecker Street, and her unshakable belief that she would become Christ's bride.

Rather, *The Medium* concerns itself with those who accept what they cannot see (Madame Flora's clients) and Madame Flora's inability to do the same. Since Menotti has frequently made art out of life and out of his own feelings and experiences, the temptation is always great to look for autobiographical strains in his operas. He has said in the writing of *The Saint of Blecker Street* he was both Michele the doubter and Annina the believer. "Perhaps I am even Madame Flora, why not?" he has added.

This observation is not as cryptic as it might at first seem. Menotti, born in Italy, was raised a Catholic, but at the age of sixteen broke away from the church. "The intense and incandescent faith which nourished my childhood and adolescence," he has said, "has seared my soul forever. I've lost my faith, but it is a loss that has left me uneasy. I often feel like a runaway who suddenly finds himself wondering if he has not left home too rashly or too soon.

"A certain nostalgia for my years of grace is, I believe, the knowledge that faith cannot be attained, but can only be given by God as an act of grace. But alas, or fortunately, depending on how you look at it, my mind is much too rational to abandon itself to faith. I am a would-be Voltaire yearning to be Tolstoy, and it is this very duality in my character, this inner conflict, which I have tried to express in some of my operas, first with *The Medium*."

continued on p.45



Régine Crespin as Madame Flora in the Paris production of *The Medium*.

John Ardoin is music critic of The Dallas Morning News and author of *The Stages of Menotti and The Callas Legacy*. He is currently completing a study of the art of conductor Wilhelm Furtwängler.

A question of love
continued from p.22

APPICTORIAL



Francis Poulenc, 1899-1963.

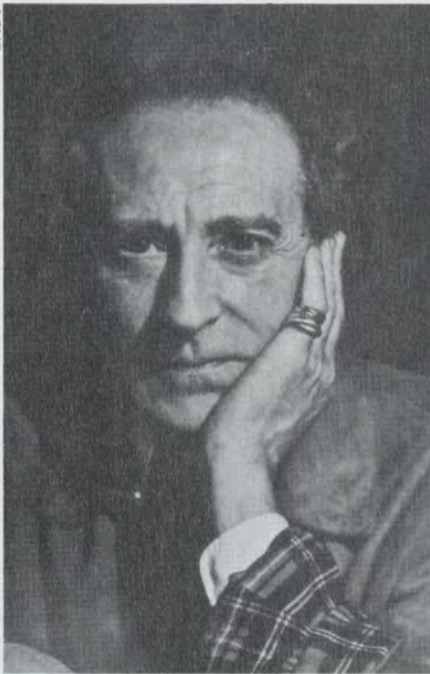
"What Poulenc has written is poignant music for a victim, music that has the quick insistent rhythm of a heartbeat, and produces a sense of physical anguish whenever her voice [the woman or *elle*] leaps an octave in pain or memory, with the orchestral score rushing upward to parallel her emotions in a jangling of violins and breathy woodwinds, or filling her silences when she listens."

To Poulenc's biographer, Henri Hell, "the structure of Cocteau's play aided the composer: underneath its rhapsodic surface the monologue is ordered with strictness . . . It is a series of sequences or rather of 'phases.' There is the phase of remembrance, the phase of the lie, the phase of the dog who misses his master, the phase of the attempted suicide . . . Poulenc has translated each of these phases into as many 'musical segments,' each with a personality of its own.

"But the work as a whole—from the first measures—is bathed in an atmosphere of anguish, lyric and intense (the very same which underlies the text of Cocteau). From the start certain themes are introduced which one finds again later, which gives the work its special coloring and unity." So imaginative and exacting was Poulenc's setting of Cocteau's words that the poet was able to say, "My dear Francis, you have settled, once and for all, the way to *speak* my text."

As we participate in this drama—for

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Jean Cocteau, 1889-1963.

Poulenc and Cocteau establish a closeness between the stage and the audience that amounts to peeking through a keyhole—our sympathies are patently manipulated in favor of *elle* (we never learn her name). But Poulenc, in notes for the opera's production, tells us that she is young and elegant. "This is not a play," he has written, "about an aging woman abandoned by her lover."

Inescapable in creating a mental image of her are the poignant photographs made at the world premiere in 1959 at the Paris Opéra-Comique in which the part of the woman was taken by Poulenc's favorite soprano Denise Duval. Looking at them one is struck by the well-groomed look of her even in a

Denise Duval as *The Woman* in the Paris world premiere of *La Voix humaine*.

LIPNITZKI



rumpled robe and the unforgettable impression made by her big, expressive, searching eyes. This is a woman of high quality, who may not love wisely but who loves well.

From that striking face with its quixotic smile, and from Cocteau's words and Poulenc's music we come to know her intimately. It is quickly apparent at the outset of the opera that she cannot bring herself to believe that all is really lost. She desperately hopes that the relationship can be saved. In the course of her conversation with her lover she evokes their past life together, she lies, she tries to deny to herself the reality of their break, she grasps at the faintest encouragement from him that he might still care, she suffers, she loses control, she cries and finally she is calm and resolute.

The pathetic thing that binds us to her sadness is the hope we share with her throughout the opera that perhaps something can be salvaged if she can only talk long enough and lovingly enough. That shred of hope she clings to accounts for the air of nervous anticipation that rages through her when the curtain rises and she paces about her bedroom waiting for his call.

When the phone rings (a high-pitched, repeated note played by a xylophone), she answers it greedily, but it is a wrong number. Her anxiety gives way to brittle impatience; she is short with the woman on the other end and hangs up. Immediately the phone rings again. It is the same wrong number. With the third ring, there is no doubt who has called. The woman's voice and the orchestra are suffused with an enveloping warmth as she asks, "C'est toi?"

At first the talk is low-keyed and



Les Six (plus one) in 1957: (standing, l. to r.) Francis Poulenc, Germaine Tailleferre, Georges Auric and Louis Durey; (seated, l. to r.) Arthur Honegger, Jean Cocteau and Darius Milhaud.

restrained, more a conversation between two acquaintances than two lovers. It is all very civilized and careful, as if both are bending over backwards not to injure the other or create further discomfort. "Careful," she seems to be saying to herself, "Go slowly." In the name of love, she tells a series of white lies: she has just come in from dinner with a friend, and is still dressed in the red dress and the black hat he always liked so much. He makes her guess where he is, as the conversation turns more intimate and less awkward.

"You have your sleeves rolled back a little . . . In your left hand? The receiver. And fountain pen in your right. You are drawing on the blotter, hearts and profiles and stars. Ah! you smile. I have eyes tucked away inside my ears . . ." Encouraged, she goes a precarious step further: "Oh darling, I'm no longer used to sleeping alone. I do not dare any more to turn on the light in my dressing room. Last night, there I was suddenly face to face with an old woman . . . with hair so white, and a face full of wrinkles . . ." He pays her the little compliment she had been fishing for but only half believed would be forthcoming. "You are too kind . . . But, *chéri*, a face that everyone envies—that is the worst of all . . . I preferred it when you said 'Funny face!'"

Unexpectedly, they are cut off. She immediately dials his home number only to find out that he is not there. He, too,

has been lying. In a few moments, he calls her back. There is a strained silence as she softly begins to cry. His lie somehow makes it easier now to tell the truth: she had no visit from a friend, she has had no dinner, she is in her nightgown and robe. The evening has been spent praying he would call. She was about to take a taxi and walk underneath the windows of his house when the phone rang.

She plays another card, offers another proof of her love. Will it be a trump? The evening before, she couldn't sleep and instead of a single sleeping pill, she took twelve "to sleep without a dream." But she woke during the night, her body "cold and light," and her heart "no longer beating." With her last ounce of strength she called her friend Martha. "I lacked the courage to die alone." Now she has only the phone, "that wire that connects me with *us*," with which she sleeps. It is the single link left to her of what used to be.

They talk of the dog they bought and raised together. "He won't let me touch him . . . In fact, he almost bit me . . . He loves you, he doesn't see you any more and so he thinks it is my fault." Suddenly she realizes that though they are talking as they always talked, there is no hope, and she painfully stifles a cry of sorrow. When she is finally able to speak once again, it is with the sadness of the reality of the situation. "When we still saw one

another . . . just a look could change everything. But what with this telephone between us, what is done is done . . . Don't worry. No one ever tries to kill himself twice . . . Can you see me buying a revolver?"

He obviously doesn't believe her, and she tries to reassure him. "Where would I find the strength to think up a lie at this moment, my poor darling . . . There are circumstances where a lie might be useful . . . if, for example, you were not at home, and were to tell me . . . Your voice sounds angry. I meant only to say that if you told me a lie out of kindness . . . it would only cause me to love you more." At this moment, they are again disconnected. Cradling the phone in her arms, she sobs over and over, almost like a chant, "Dear God, make him call me back. Dear God, make him call me back."

He does for a final time, and little by little she recovers her emotional equilibrium. As she talks, she slowly winds the telephone cord around her neck. She falters only when he tells her he is going to Marseilles. She pitifully asks him not to stay at the little hotel where they always stayed together. He promises, and she thanks him gratefully. "You are so good. I love you. I was about to say, out of habit, 'I'll see you soon' . . . I'll be brave. Let's make an end. Go on. Hang up! Hang up quickly! I love you, I love you . . . love you."

At the time of its world premiere in 1959, Clarendon, the critic of *Le Figaro*, termed the opera "A miracle of emotion and of truth. The music has 'sensitized' the text: like a magic glass it reflects while enlarging the thoughts of the heroine, aggravates her sorrow, foretells her reflexes, mirrors her confusion . . . All this without noise, without 'effects,' with a moderation which is the golden rule of tragedy . . . How many musicians, since Debussy, have spoken a language so moving and so effective, so discreet, so passionate, so contemporary?"

Though *La Voix humaine* is first of all an intensely human document about the frailty and transitory nature of love, as a theatrical creation it achieves a good deal more. Cocteau put it best when he noted, "Thanks to Francis Poulenc . . . my play has acquired the mysterious power of the Greek, Chinese, Japanese theaters where a truth greater than truth transcends life and raises realism to the height of style." ■



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KARAN ARMSTRONG

Currently a permanent guest artist with the Vienna State Opera, the Deutsche Oper Berlin and the Stuttgart State Opera, soprano **Karan Armstrong** makes her San Francisco Opera debut as the Woman in Poulenc's *La Voix humaine*, a role she performed in a film that was telecast nationally in 1979. After touring as soloist with the Roger Wagner Chorale, she participated in the 1965 Merola Opera Program and was the winner of the Florence Bruce Award in that year's San Francisco Opera Auditions. She returned for Spring Opera Theater productions of *The Italian Girl in Algiers* (1966) and *La Rondine* (1969), in which she portrayed Elvira and Lisette, respectively. She made a triumphant 1969 New York City Opera debut in *Le Coq d'Or*, returning to star in productions of *The Abduction from the Seraglio* and *L'Heure Espagnole*. She performed with the opera companies of Santa Fe, Milwaukee, Houston and Omaha, and appeared in numerous Metropolitan Opera productions. After appearing in the title role of the 1976 Strasbourg production of *Salome*, which was televised in France, she became closely identified with that role, performing it in Munich, Stuttgart, Berlin, Vienna, Hamburg, Frankfurt, Paris, Oslo and Toulouse, as well as in San Antonio, Texas, while touring with the Deutsche Oper Berlin. She has scored important successes in the world's major opera

houses, most notably as Elsa in *Lohengrin* at the Bayreuth Festival (filmed for television and released on records); as Tosca in Venice; as Mélisande at the Paris Opera; as Lulu at Covent Garden; as Marie in *Wozzeck* in Zurich and Amsterdam; as the Marschallin in Stuttgart; as Cassandre in *Les Troyens* at the Hamburg State Opera; in triumphant, sold-out performances of Schönberg's *Erwartung* in Vienna; and as Marie/Marietta in Korngold's *Die Tote Stadt* at the Deutsche Oper Berlin, a portrayal that was applauded in Los Angeles during the Berlin company's recent tour. Miss Armstrong's future engagements include appearances as the Marschallin in Hamburg, Stuttgart and Berlin; the title role of Strauss' *Die Frau ohne Schatten* in Berlin and Stuttgart; and *Salome*, *Die Tote Stadt* and *Erwartung* in Vienna. She is also a highly praised recitalist and concert singer, having numerous concert and recital tours across America to her credit. She will soon record *Erwartung*, and Henze's *Die Bassariden*, along with a disc of Korngold lieder.

Renowned French singer **Régine Crespin** is Madame Flora in *The Medium*, a role she has performed to great acclaim at the Théâtre Musical de Paris (Châtelet), in Nice, and with the Opera Company of Philadelphia. Her most recent local appearance was in the title role of *La Grande Duchesse de Gérolstein* during the 1983 Fall Season, and she was also seen here in 1982 as Mme. de Croissy in Poulenc's *Dialogues of the Carmelites*. Born in Marseilles, she studied at the Paris Conservatoire and made her professional debut as Elsa in *Lohengrin*, the vehicle of her 1951 Paris Opera debut. During the next few years she appeared with numerous French opera companies as Leonora in *Il Trovatore*, Desdemona in *Otello*, Sieglinde in *Die Walküre*, Salomé in *Hérodiade*, Leonore in *Fidelio*, and her first Marschallin in *Der Rosenkavalier*. She sang the role of Mme. Lidoine in the 1957 French world premiere of *Dialogues of the Carmelites*, made her triumphant Italian debut at La Scala in Pizzetti's *Fedra* and bowed at the Vienna Staatsoper as Sieglinde. The next



RÉGINE CRESPIN

few years saw her as the Marschallin at Glyndebourne, the Berlin State Opera, at Buenos Aires and at Covent Garden. By 1961 she was widely regarded as the foremost French opera singer of her generation, and her embodiment of authentic French singing style has set the standard for our time. Between 1958 and 1962, she was Sieglinde and Kundry in *Parsifal* at the Bayreuth Festival, the second French singer in this century to have appeared there. In 1962 she made her American opera debut as Tosca at the Lyric Opera of Chicago, and bowed at the Metropolitan Opera as the Marschallin. She made her San Francisco Opera debut in 1966 as Elisabeth in *Tannhäuser*, and San Francisco audiences have since been privileged to hear her in four of her most famous roles: The Marschallin (1967); Didon and Cassandre in *Les Troyens* (1966 and '68) and Sieglinde (1968; also in Los Angeles in '69). She also appeared here as Tosca (1970) and as Santuzza in *Cavalleria Rusticana* (1976). Her extensive discography includes complete recordings of Offenbach's *La Périchole*, *La Vie Parisienne* and *La Grande Duchesse de Gérolstein*, *Tosca*, *Damnation of Faust*, *Iphigénie en Tauride*, as well as a critically acclaimed *Rosenkavalier* with Sir Georg Solti, with whom she has also recorded Sieglinde; Brünnhilde in *Die Walküre* under Karajan, with whom she opened the first Easter Festival at Salzburg; *Dialogues of the Carmelites*;

continued on p.31

ill/Honkanen



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The production of *La Voix humaine* was originally made possible through a grant from the San Francisco Foundation.

Opera in one act by FRANCIS POULENC

Text by JEAN COCTEAU

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La Voix humaine

(in French)

Conductor
James Johnson

Production
Nicolas Joël

Stage Director
Francesca Zambello

Designer
Pet Halmen

Lighting Designer
Thomas J. Munn

Lighting Supervisor
Joan Arhelger

Musical Preparation
Susanna Lemberskaya

Robert Morrison
Philip Eisenberg

Prompter
Philip Eisenberg

Assistant Stage Director
Laurie Feldman

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First performance:
Paris, February 9, 1959

First San Francisco Opera performance:
October 3, 1979

CAST

The Woman Karan Armstrong*

*San Francisco Opera debut

All performances of *La Voix humaine* feature Supertitles by
Christopher Bergen, San Francisco Opera.

INTERMISSION

Continued on page 33

La Voix humaine/Synopsis

The Woman, rejected by her lover who is about to marry another, engages in a farewell phone conversation, often interrupted by disconnections and other voices on the line. Her moods change quickly from anguish to a forced calm and back again. She discloses that she has taken sleeping pills to no effect, and we see her wind the telephone cord around her neck in a desperate gesture. She speaks standing, sitting, prone, supine, on her knees, roaming the room to the extent of the phone cord, finally falling on the bed, her head hanging, the phone receiver dead.

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LI-CHAN CHEN

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Carmen; Berlioz's *Les Nuits d'été*, Fauré's *Pénélope* and Ravel's *Shéhérazade*. Her numerous awards include the highest ones conferred by the French government: the Chevalier (1972) and Officier (1982) of the Legion of Honor. The San Francisco Opera Center was honored to have Mme. Crespin give Master Classes to its Adler Fellows and members of the Merola Opera Program in 1985, in addition to special coaching for the Merola production of *Faust* which was presented at Stern Grove.

Soprano **Li-Chan Chen** portrays Monica in *The Medium*. A 1985-86 Adler Fellow with the San Francisco Opera Center, she made her San Francisco Opera debut in the 1985 Summer Season in *Der Freischütz*, and returned for the 1985 Fall Season as Nannetta in the family matinee performances of *Falstaff*, and in *Der Rosenkavalier*. Her credits last year include her Schwabacher Debut Recital and the Showcase production of Conrad Susa's *The Love of Don Perlimplín*, as well as a tour with the San Francisco Opera Center Singers as Adina in *The Elixir of Love*. A participant in the 1984 Merola Opera Program, she was heard as Nannetta at Stern Grove and won the combined Austin Morris Family, Dr. Jesse S. Miller, Jean Herzberg and Aaron Kruger Memorial Award at the program's Grand Finals. She has performed extensively with the major orchestras of her native Taiwan, including the Taipei City Orchestra and the Taiwan Symphony. Her operatic debut as Pamina in *The Magic Flute* with



KATHRYN COWDRICK

the Taipei Opera Theater was followed by appearances as Marguerite in *Faust* with the Taipei Music and Arts Festival. She returned to her native country in December of 1984 as Musetta in *La Bohème* and in 1985 as Norina in *Don Pasquale*. A graduate of the Manhattan School of Music, Miss Chen recently appeared as Micaëla in *Carmen* with the Stockton Symphony, and will perform four roles with San Francisco Opera this fall: Barbarina in *Le Nozze di Figaro*, Jano in *Jenůfa*, Siebel in the special matinee performances of *Faust*, and Poussette in *Manon*.

Mezzo-soprano **Kathryn Cowdrick** appears as Lola in *Cavalleria Rusticana* and as Mrs. Gobineau in *The Medium* during the San Francisco Opera 1986 Summer Season. She recently sang two roles in the San Francisco Opera Center's 1986 Showcase: Zaida in Rossini's *The Turk in Italy* and Genevieve in *The Long Christmas Dinner*. The Pennsylvania native made her Company debut in the fall of 1985 in *Adriana Lecouvreur* and was also seen that season as Meg Page in the matinee performances of *Falstaff*, and in *Der Rosenkavalier*. A participant in the 1984 Merola Opera Program, Miss Cowdrick received the Gropper Memorial Award at the Program's Grand Finals. During that summer she performed the role of Meg Page in *Falstaff* at Stern Grove and Tisbe in *La Cenerentola* at Villa Montalvo. She toured with the Center's Western Opera Theater as both Cenerentola and Tisbe in *Cenerentola*, and was named to a 1985



SUSAN PATTERSON

Adler Fellowship. This past spring she performed with the San Francisco Opera Center Singers as Orlofsky in *Die Fledermaus* and Flora in *La Traviata*. A professional speech therapist, she received much of her professional training at Juilliard's American Opera Center. In 1983 she appeared in Barber's *Antony and Cleopatra* at Charleston's Spoleto Festival, which was later issued on a Grammy award-winning recording, and in *Madama Butterfly* at the Spoleto Festival in both Charleston and Italy. Miss Cowdrick appears this summer as Marcellina in *The Marriage of Figaro* at the Carmel Bach Festival, and returns to San Francisco Opera during the 1986 Fall Season as Siebel in *Faust*, Karolka in *Jenůfa*, and Rosette in *Manon*.

Alabama native **Susan Patterson** makes her San Francisco Opera debut during the 1986 Summer Season as Inez in *Il Trovatore* and as Mrs. Gobineau in *The Medium*. The young soprano is a graduate of the universities of Samford and Florida State, and is currently working toward a doctorate at Indiana University. Her college performance credits include roles in *Tamerlane*, *The Daughter of the Regiment*, *Die Fledermaus*, and *Così fan tutte*. As a member of the 1985 Merola Opera Program, Miss Patterson appeared as Marguerite in *Faust* at San Francisco's Stern Grove, and also portrayed Donna Elvira in *Don Giovanni* for Western Opera Theater's 1985-86 National Tour. Currently an Adler Fellow with the San Francisco Opera Center, she recently appeared as



JEAN-LOUIS LOCA

Violetta in *La Traviata* with the Opera Center Singers in Palm Springs, and sang three roles for the 1986 Showcase Hindemith double bill: Helen in *There and Back* and Lucia II/Lucia II in *The Long Christmas Dinner*. The recipient of several prizes and grants, including a Rotary Scholarship to study at the Verdi Conservatory in Milan, Miss Patterson was a Metropolitan Opera National semi-finalist, and won the Florence Bruce Award at the Opera Center's 1985 Grand Finals. She will appear in four roles with the Company this fall, including Marguerite in the special matinee performances of *Faust*.

French actor **Jean-Louis Loca** makes his San Francisco Opera debut as Toby in Menotti's *The Medium*, the vehicle of his recent American opera debut with the Opera Company of Philadelphia. He has performed the same role in productions of *The Medium* in Paris and Nice under the direction of Jean-Louis Thamin, who is staging the San Francisco production. Additional credits include performances in Thamin's staging of Dostoyevsky's *The Idiot*, and in productions of Dario Fo's *La Marcolfa*, Marivaux's *Arlequin Poli par l'amour*, Büchner's *Léonce et Léna*, and *Désir, Les Lits I* and *Météorologies*, the last three plays written and directed by Pascal Rambert.



MONTE PEDERSON

Currently an Adler Fellow with the San Francisco Opera Center, bass-baritone **Monte Pederson** made his Company debut during the 1985 Fall Season in four roles: a Mandarin in *Turandot*, the Jailer in *Tosca*, the First Mate in *Billy Budd*, and Pistola in the family performances of *Falstaff*. He most recently portrayed Don Geronio in Rossini's *The Turk in Italy* during the Center's Showcase season. Pederson participated in the Merola Opera Programs of 1983 and 1984, appearing in productions of *Falstaff*, *La Cenerentola* and *The Tales of Hoffmann*, and also toured with Western Opera Theater in *Madame Butterfly* and *Cenerentola*. He has performed with the North Bay Opera, the Marin Opera, Pocket Opera and Midsummer Mozart Festival. With the Concert Opera Association of San Francisco, Pederson was heard in Donizetti's *Lucrezia Borgia* at Davies Symphony Hall, appeared in Pocket Opera concert presentations of Handel's *Imeneo* (title role), Donizetti's *Maria Stuarda* (Talbot) and *La Cenerentola* (Don Magnifico), and with West Bay Opera in the title role of Wagner's *Der Fliegende Holländer*. Recent performances include the role of the High Priest in Spontini's *La Vestale* with the Concert Opera of S.F., and as bass soloist in Shostakovich's Fourteenth Symphony with the Chamber Symphony of San Francisco. He will sing Dr. Bartolo in *Le Nozze di Figaro* this summer at the Carmel Bach Festival. Pederson appears with San Francisco Opera during the 1986 Summer Season as a gypsy in *Il Trovatore* and as Mr. Gobineau in *The Medium*, and returns to the Company this fall to sing five roles.



JAMES JOHNSON

Recently appointed Special Assistant to the Music Director of the San Francisco Opera, Sir John Pritchard, **James Johnson** conducts *La Voix humaine* during the 1986 Summer Season. He made his Company conducting debut with performances of *Madama Butterfly* during the 1984 Fall Season. A graduate of the Eastman School of Music, he was music director in 1967 and '68 for the Turnau Opera, for which he conducted *The Rake's Progress*, *Pagliacci* and Weisgall's *The Stronger*. In 1968 he also led the first American stage performances of Busoni's *Arlecchino* for New York's Theater for Ideas. From 1968 to 1973 he was pianist and coach at the Metropolitan Opera, where he worked with such conductors as Cleva, Leinsdorf, Molinari-Pradelli, Davis, Varviso, Böhm and Krips. Johnson was conductor at the Opera du Rhin in Strasbourg from 1973 until 1979, leading, among other works, *Die Fledermaus*, Gounod's *Mireille*, Britten's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, *Eugene Onegin*, *Pagliacci*, Schönberg's *Erwartung* and Ravel's *L'Heure Espagnole*. During this time he also served as musical assistant for stagings by Jean-Pierre Ponnelle. Since 1979 he has been a member of the musical staff of the San Francisco Opera, as well as assistant conductor for the opera companies of Lyons and Marseilles. For the last three years he has been engaged at the Théâtre Musical de Paris (Châtelet), where he most recently conducted Rossini's *Petite Messe Solennelle*, given as part of the 1986 Rossini Festival.

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The presentation of *The Medium* is made possible through the generosity of the Paul L. and Phyllis C. Wattis Foundation.

San Francisco Opera Premiere
Tragedy in two acts by GIAN CARLO MENOTTI

Text by the composer

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The Medium

(in English)

Conductor
Jérôme Kaltenbach**
Stage Director
Jean-Louis Thamin**
Designer
Mauro Pagano*
Lighting Designer
Joan Arhelger
Sound Designer
Roger Gans
Musical Preparation
Robert Morrison
Jeffrey Goldberg
Joseph De Rugeriis
Philip Eisenberg
Prompter
Philip Eisenberg
Assistant Stage Director
Laurie Feldman
Stage Manager
Darlene Durant

This production of *The Medium* was originally co-produced by the Nouveau Théâtre de Nice and the Théâtre Musical de Paris.

Costumes executed by the Sartoria Teatrale Farani

First performance:
New York, May 8, 1946

THURSDAY, JUNE 19 AT 8:00
SATURDAY, JUNE 21 AT 8:00
TUESDAY, JUNE 24 AT 7:30
THURSDAY, JUNE 26 AT 8:00
SUNDAY, JUNE 29 AT 2:00

CAST

(in order of appearance)

<i>Toby</i>	Jean-Louis Loca*
<i>Monica</i>	Li-Chan Chen
<i>Madame Flora (Baba)</i>	Régine Crespin
<i>Mrs. Gobineau</i>	Susan Patterson
<i>Mr. Gobineau</i>	Monte Pederson
<i>Mrs. Nolan</i>	Kathryn Cowdrick

** American opera debut
*San Francisco Opera debut

TIME AND PLACE: Shortly after World War II in a large city

ACT I Madame Flora's storefront parlor

PAUSE

ACT II Evening, a few days later

Latecomers will not be seated during the performance after the lights have dimmed.

The use of cameras and any kind of recording equipment is strictly forbidden.

The performance will last approximately two and one-half hours.

The Medium/Synopsis

ACT I

The curtain opens on Madame Flora's (Baba's) parlor. Her daughter Monica and Toby, the mute gypsy boy who lives with them, instead of preparing for the evening's séance, play a game of make-believe. Baba suddenly appears and berates them when she discovers that nothing is ready for the séance. Monica calms her mother, and everything is quickly prepared. As the doorbell rings announcing the arrival of the clients, Toby and Monica hide themselves. As the clients enter, Baba is absorbed in a game of tarot, pretending not to hear their conversation. Mrs. Nolan, nervous and fearful because this is her first visit to Madame Flora, hopes to contact her daughter Doodly. The Gobineaus reassure her: for almost two years, their own child has never failed to appear at these weekly sessions. The séance begins, and Baba pretends to fall into a deep trance. In the darkness a figure appears, and is recognized by Mrs. Nolan as her beloved daughter Doodly. She asks the apparition simple questions, which are answered to her satisfaction. When the false Doodly vanishes, Mrs. Nolan breaks into hysterical sobbing and is restrained by the others. Monica then imitates the sound of a child's laughter for the benefit of the Gobineaus. Suddenly, Baba screams in terror at the touch of a cold hand at her throat and turns on the light. As her clients try to reassure her, Baba, unable to explain her sudden fear, rudely sends them away. She seizes Toby and accuses him of deliberately trying to frighten her. Monica calms her mother by singing a gypsy cradle song and, at the sound of Toby's tambourine, the children gradually lose themselves in the rhythm of the ballad, while Baba insists that they all kneel in prayer.

ACT II

A few days later, the children are alone in the house. Their childish games become an unusual love scene. Baba enters the house while Monica runs to her room and Toby retreats into a corner. She has been drinking heavily to try to forget the mysterious incident at the séance and again suspects Toby, but he refuses to make the slightest sign either to acknowledge or deny her accusation. Driven to despair, Baba resorts to whipping the boy, but Toby maintains his enigmatic silence. The clients return for another séance. Baba cannot bear their presence and tries to convince them that they have been cheated, but nothing can shake their faith. They have seen and heard their departed loved ones. Baba suddenly loses her temper and drives them away and, despite Monica's pleading, chases Toby out of the house. Now alone and haunted by voices and visions, Baba tries to drown her terror in drink, and falls exhausted into a deep sleep. Toby furtively returns. When he unintentionally wakes Baba, he leaps behind the curtains. Baba stands up and, frozen with terror, takes a gun out from a drawer and fires wildly, saying "I've killed the ghost."

La Voix humaine

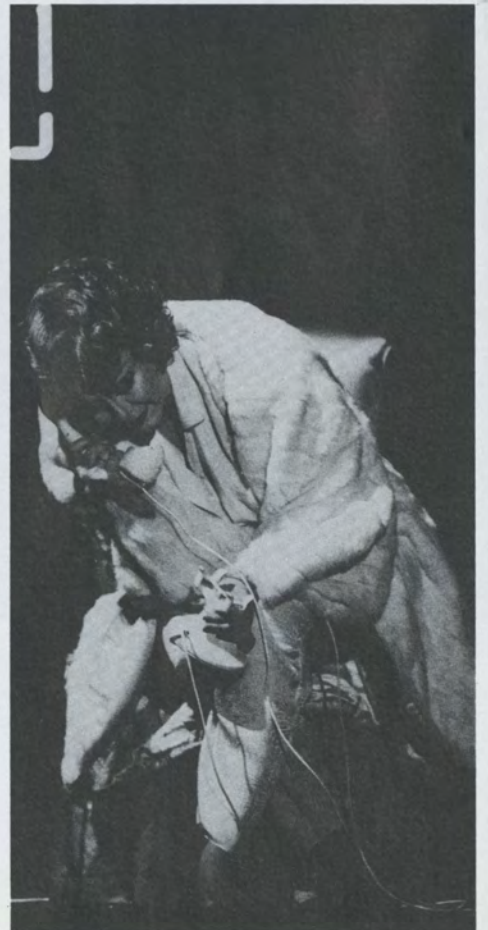
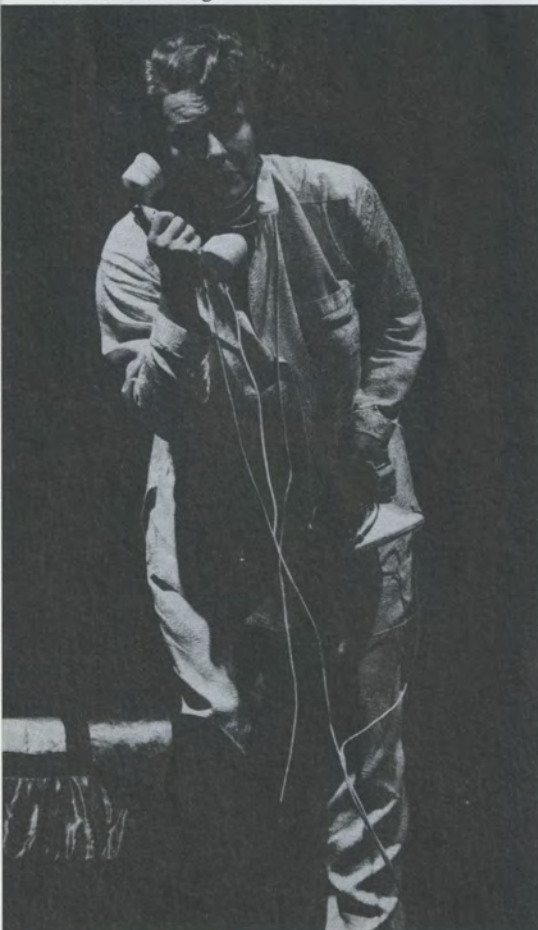
Photos taken in rehearsal by Marty Sohl

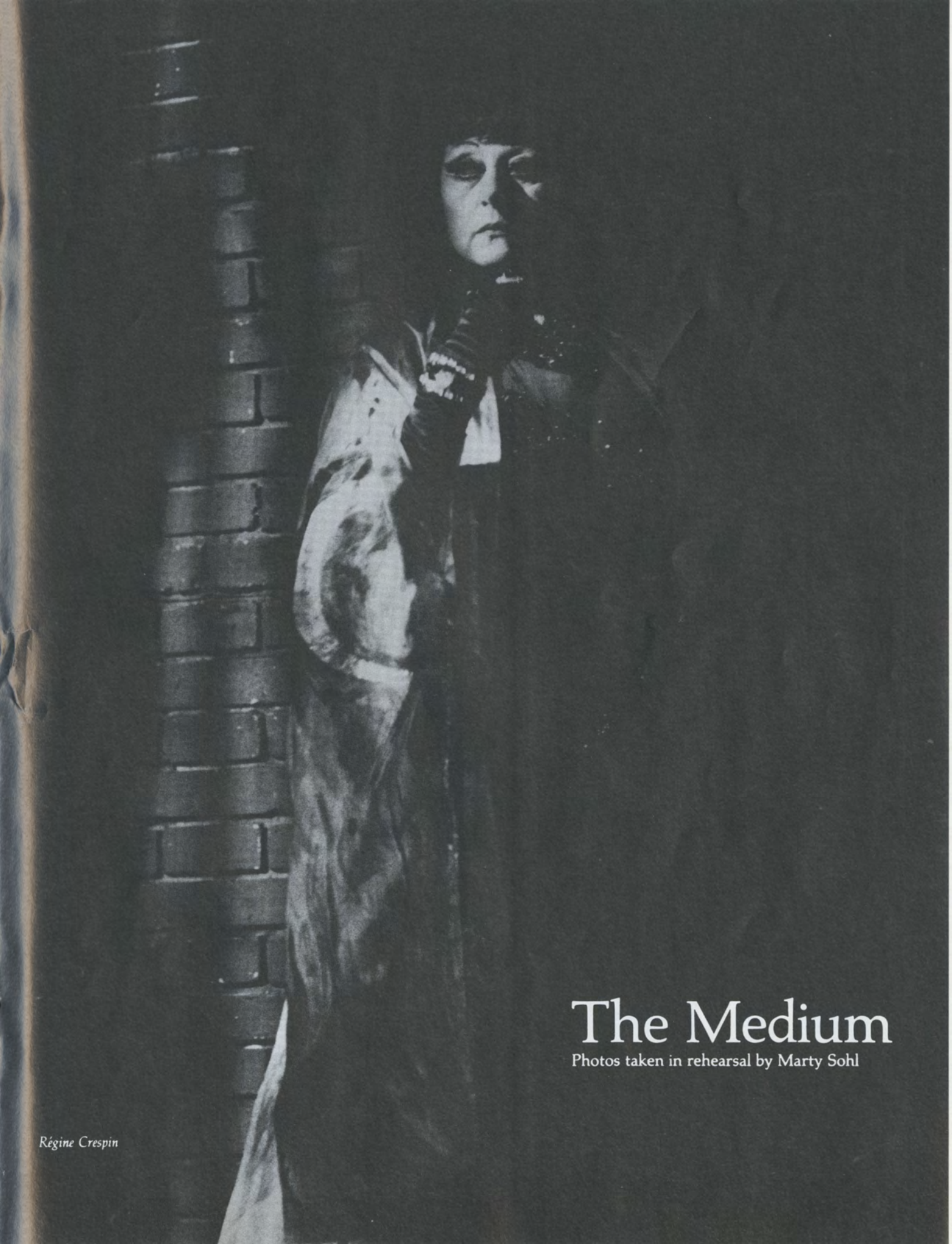


Karan Armstrong



Karan Armstrong





The Medium

Photos taken in rehearsal by Marty Sohl

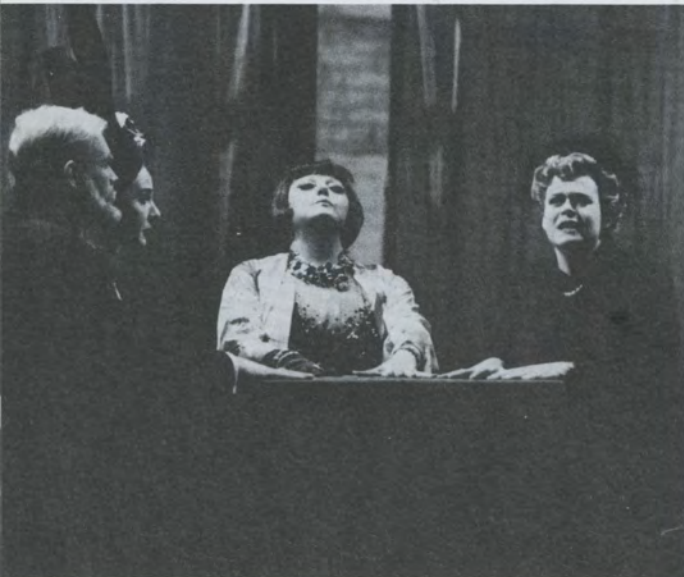
Régine Crespin



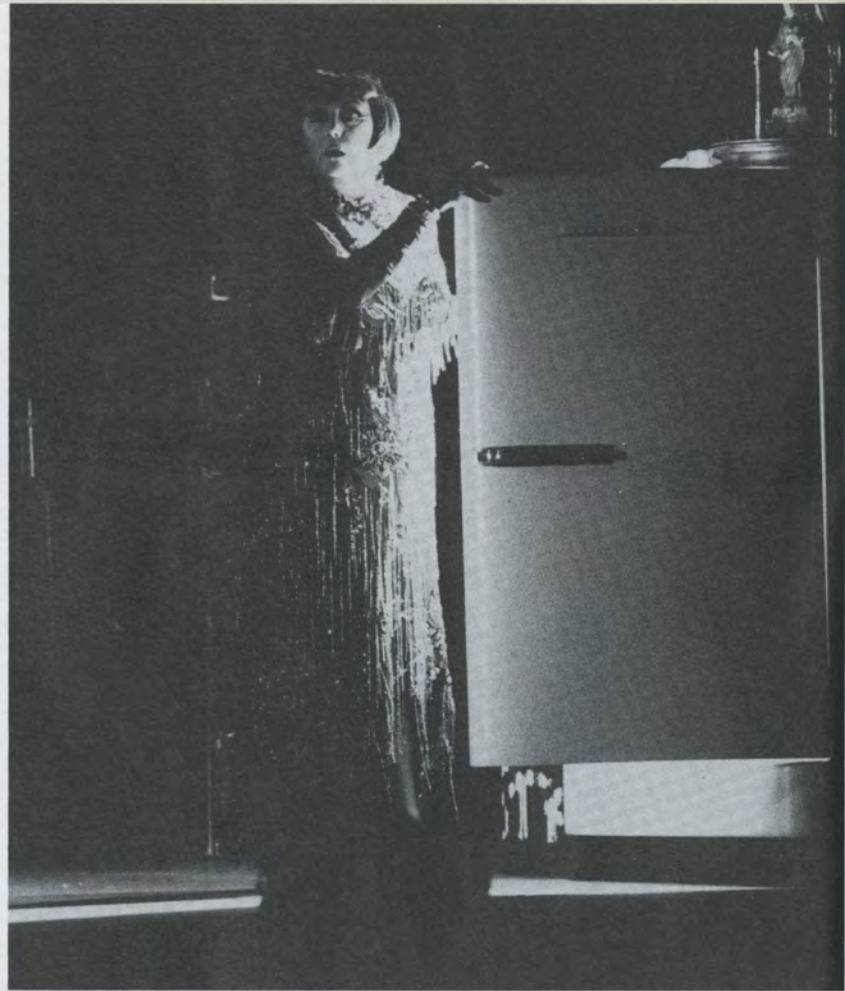
Régine Crespin



Régine Crespin



(L. to r.) Monte Pederson, Susan Patterson, Régine Crespin, Kathryn Cowdrick

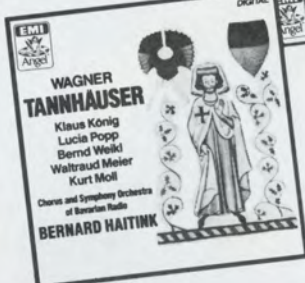
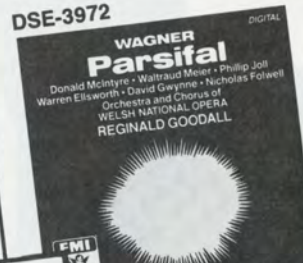


Régine Crespin



Li-Chan Chen, Jean-Louis Loca

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JÉRÔME KALTENBACH

French conductor **Jérôme Kaltenbach** makes his American opera debut with San Francisco Opera's 1986 Summer Season production of Menotti's *The Medium*, a work he recently led at the Théâtre Musical de Paris (Châtelet). After studying at the conservatories of Paris and Rouen, he served as apprentice to conductors Jean Martinon, Manuel Rosenthal and Franco Ferrara from 1972 to 1976. He graduated from Rome's St. Cecilia Academy and was twice honored as recipient of the Besançon International Young Conductor Contest. In his native country, Kaltenbach has led the orchestras of Lyons, Toulouse, Nice, Côte d'Azur and Lille, in addition to the Orchestral Ensemble of Paris and the National Orchestra of France. In 1979 he was appointed permanent conductor and director of the Lyric Symphony Orchestra of Nancy and musical director of the Nancy Opera. Since then he has appeared as guest conductor each season at the Châtelet. The French Ministry of Culture in 1982 appointed him founder and conductor of the Orchestre Français des Jeunes, with which he has been invited to appear at the music festivals of Besançon, Dijon, Lyons, Paris and Rimini, Italy. He has also led orchestral tours to Japan, South America, Canada and Eastern Europe.

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FRANCESCA ZAMBELLO

Francesca Zambello is an Artistic Director of the Skylight Opera of Milwaukee, and co-founder of Opera Colorado in Denver, where she served as Artistic Administrator and Production Director from 1982-84. She recently collaborated with Jean-Pierre Ponnelle on a new production of Rossini's *Otello*, which was shared by Teatro La Fenice in Venice and the Théâtre de Champs-Élysées in Paris. This success has led to her reengagement for a new production of Bellini's *Beatrice di Tenda* which will open the 1987-88 season in Venice. Earlier this year, she directed new productions of *Cavalleria Rusticana* and *Pagliacci* in Miami and Fort Worth, *Don Giovanni* in Milwaukee, *Carmen* for Texas Opera Theater, *Faust* in Houston, and a double bill of Rossini's *Il Signor Bruschino* and Donizetti's *Viva la Mamma* at Wolf Trap. Next season's assignments include *The Tales of Hoffmann* at Wolf Trap, a revival of the Venice-Paris *Otello* in Caracas, *Faust* for Seattle Opera, and Sondheim's *Sweeney Todd* in Milwaukee, in addition to another collaboration with Ponnelle for *The Magic Flute* in Zurich. Miss Zambello, who made her San Francisco Opera debut directing the Family Matinee performances of *La Traviata* during the 1983 Fall Season, stages Poulenc's *La Voix humaine* during the 1986 Summer Season, and will return to the Company this fall to direct Gounod's *Faust*. An innovator of the system of Supertitles, she has authored over fifteen English translations for San Francisco Opera productions, including all four operas of the 1985 *Ring* cycle.



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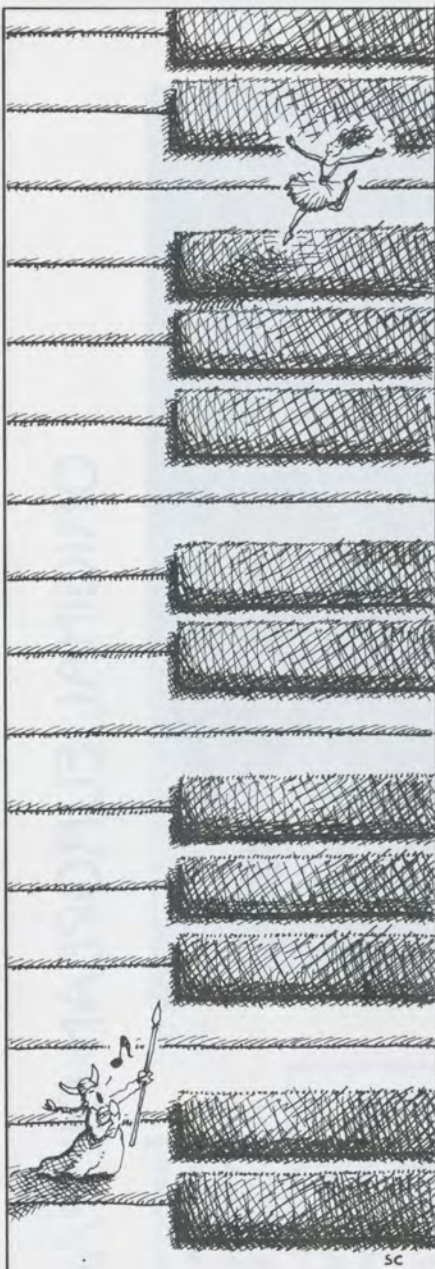
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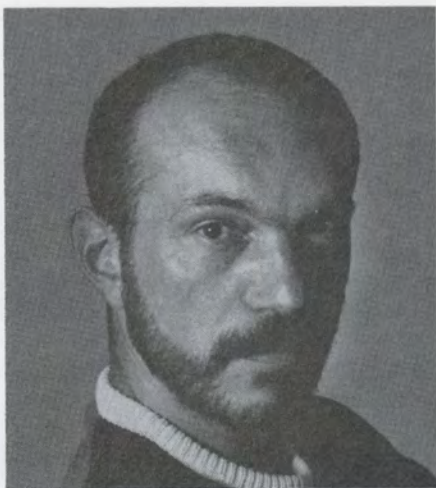
JEAN-LOUIS THAMIN

French director **Jean-Louis Thamin**, making his American opera debut, stages the San Francisco Opera premiere performances of Menotti's *The Medium* during the 1986 Summer Season. He also directed this production at the Nouveau Théâtre de Nice and at the Théâtre Musical de Paris-Châtelet, both with Régine Crespin. After studies at the Centre de la Rue Blanche in Paris, and an assistantship to directors Raymond Rouleau and Tania Balachova, he founded the Compagnie de la Contrescarpe et Monte. He then began directing plays at the Comédie Française, the National Theater of Strasbourg, the Odéon in Paris, the Théâtre de l'Est Parisien and the Théâtre de la Ville. In 1974 he staged *Manon* for the Paris Opera and, in 1978, *Don Pasquale* at the Aix-en-Provence Festival. He has also directed operas at the Bordeaux May Festival and at the Berlioz Festival in Lyons. Recent assignments include *The Italian Girl in Algiers* in Paris, Verdi's *Il Corsaro* at the Arena in Nîmes, and Rossini's *La Pietra del Paragone* in Bordeaux. Thamin served as director of the Centre Dramatique National of Nice/Côte d'Azur from 1978 to 1985, and is currently director of the Centre Dramatique National of Bordeaux/Aquitaine. The French government has awarded Thamin the honorary title of Officer of the Arts and Letters.



PET HALMEN

Romanian-born set and costume designer **Pet Halmen** created the designs for Poulenc's *La Voix humaine*, a production first seen at San Francisco Opera in 1979 along with Dallapiccola's *Il Prigioniero*, which also featured his designs. He created the costumes for Reimann's *Lear* for the 1978 Munich world premiere and the first U.S. staging at the San Francisco Opera in 1981, a production which was repeated here last fall. He was also responsible for the costume designs in the Company's presentations of *Turandot* (1977) and *Der Fliegende Holländer* (1975 and '79), on which he collaborated with Jean-Pierre Ponnelle. Following an apprenticeship as a theater painter in West Berlin, Halmen was for a time Ponnelle's assistant for set and costume design. Other collaborations with Ponnelle include a television production of *Carmina Burana*, *Salome* in Cologne, *L'Elisir d'Amore* in Hamburg, *La Traviata* in Houston, *Les Contes d'Hoffmann* in Salzburg and cycles of Mozart and Monteverdi operas in Zurich, the Monteverdi works being filmed and televised internationally. He has also collaborated on a Ring cycle co-production for Strasbourg and Lyons and *La Traviata* for Göteborg with director Nicolas Joël. Other design commissions include *L'Enfant et les sortilèges* for the Deutsche Oper Berlin, *Norma* and both a Mozart and Molière cycle in Zurich, as well as a film version of *Elektra* directed by Götz Friedrich. Halmen has also worked with Gian Carlo Menotti and August Everding, among other directors, and in ballet with choreographers John Cranko and Erich Walter. He also designs record covers, posters and special magazine illustrations, many of which were seen in a major exhibition in New York.



MAURO PAGANO

Internationally renowned designer **Mauro Pagano** makes his San Francisco Opera debut with designs for *The Medium*, a production which had its premiere at the Nouveau Théâtre de Nice and the Théâtre Musical de Paris in 1985, and which was seen recently at the Opera Company of Philadelphia. Pagano designed the sets for La Scala's 1985 season-opening production of *Aida*, along with the sets for Massenet's *Cendrillon* and Offenbach's *The Tales of Hoffmann* in Brussels; the set design for the world premiere of Hans Werner Henze's production of Monteverdi's *Il Ritorno d'Ulisse in Patria* at the Salzburg Festival and, at the Paris Opera, costumes for Gluck's *Iphigénie en Tauride*. He has also created the sets for *The Barber of Seville* at the Edinburgh Festival, *Così fan tutte* at the Salzburg Festival and at La Scala, and productions of *Un Ballo in Maschera*, *L'Incoronazione di Poppea* and *La Gazza Ladra* in Cologne. Upcoming projects include new productions of *La Sonnambula* and *Alceste* at La Scala, *Don Giovanni* in Salzburg, and, in 1988, *Der Fliegende Holländer* at the Bayreuth Festival.

P O W E R T O P S L



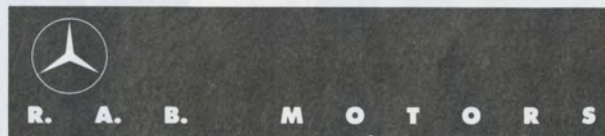
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A question of faith
continued from p.23



Gian Carlo Menotti at Spoleto in 1966.

The roots of *The Medium*, the work that launched Menotti's international career, stretch back to the period when he was working on *Amelia*. With his close friend, composer Samuel Barber, Menotti had rented a summer cottage near Salzburg, situated near the home of a Dutch baron and his English wife. The couple frequently entertained the two composers.

"The baron and baroness were most charming and hospitable," Menotti has written, "but there was also something puzzling about them. After each dinner, the baroness would rise from the table and say, 'Excuse me, but I must go to chapel.' She would leave the room and not return until much later. Finally I could not resist asking the baron about his wife's mysterious visits to an invisible chapel.

"He said, 'It isn't really a chapel. It's a room in which my wife holds séances. You see, we had a daughter named Doodly; that was her nickname. She died when she was fourteen of an infected tooth. My wife never got over her death. Of course, I don't believe in such things, but my wife met a medium in London who introduced her to the powers of séances. My wife retires into that room every evening because she thinks she sees our daughter and is able to speak with her.'

"Of course, I became instantly fascinated and asked the baroness whether she would allow me to come to one of her séances. The baroness said I could come any time. A few days later, when we again had supper at their house, the baroness

asked me to come with her into the so-called chapel. We sat in the dark around a table. Suddenly she went into a trance and began speaking to her daughter. She kept saying, 'Doodly, Doodly, can you hear me?'

"It was a tremendously moving experience for me, so much so that I found myself with tears streaming down my cheeks. There was no doubt the baroness was actually seeing her daughter. I, on the other hand, saw nothing at all. It was I, not she, who felt cheated. The creative power of her faith and conviction made me examine my own cynicism and led me to wonder at the multiple texture of reality. It also made me wonder whether belief was a creative power and whether skepticism could destroy creative powers. Anyway, this episode was the beginning of *The Medium*, which despite its eerie setting and gruesome conclusion, is actually a play of ideas."

At the core of Menotti's opera is the pathetic figure of a woman, Madame Flora, or Baba, who is trapped between two opposing worlds—the world of reality and the need to make a living, which she does not fully comprehend, and the world of spirits, which she exploits and cannot believe in. Then, one night during a fake séance, a frightening thing happens that leaves her shaken and more desperately in need of faith than ever before in her life.

She feels a cold hand on her throat that terrifies her. To regain her composure and peace of mind, she tries to convince herself that she was touched by the mute Toby, who lives with her and her daughter Monica, and takes part in the sham séances. The more Toby denies that it was he, the more Baba refuses to believe him. She cannot accept the fact that there was no explanation for what happened, or that the explanation just might be supernatural.

As Menotti puts it, Toby "seems to hide within his silence the answer to her unanswerable question ... and in her anxiety and insecurity, [Baba] is finally driven to kill Toby, 'the ghost,' the symbol of her metaphysical anguish, who will always haunt her with the riddle of his immutable silence." Like a gyroscope keeping the drama on its inexorable course is the rocklike faith of the clients, serene and unshakable, who refuse to believe Baba when she confesses to them that the sessions had all been a ruse. They

COURTESY, GIAN CARLO MENOTTI



Marie Powers in the 1947 Broadway presentation of *The Medium*.

know through their faith that they were in contact with their beloved dead.

The personages in this striking opera are as much symbols as they are characters. It is in effect an emotional triangle between doubt (Baba), faith (her clients), and love (Monica's for Toby and his for her). The catalyst that affects all concerned is Toby. To Menotti he represents "the unknown." Baba turns to him for reassurance that there is a logical explanation for the horror she has experienced, her obsession with Toby breaks the contact between the clients and their deceased children, and Toby's murder drives Monica out of Baba's house and life.

Despite the highly symbolic nature of those who people *The Medium*, Menotti with this work was moving from the caricatures found in *Amelia Goes to the Ball* and his second opera *The Old Maid and The Thief* to real characters, adding previously unsounded dramatic depth and dimension to his writing not only of music but of words. *The Medium*, now forty years young, is extraordinary in its continuing ability to charge our emotions and excite our imaginations. It is music of enormous clarity and inevitability that contains no fat; only lean, sinewy drama.

From its opening, stabbing chords, which return like signposts throughout the acting out of the story, to Baba's final hoarse utterance over Toby's body ("Was it you? Was it you?"), the opera is tense, exhilarating theater. With it, Menotti in a single, swift, bold leap came into his own. With it, he also changed opera in our time by being so successful at this improbable craft that *The Medium* (which opened on Broadway in May of 1947 and ran for 212 performances) spawned hundreds of imitative works and led to a revival of interest by other composers in creating chamber operas.

And yet, ironically, everyone around Menotti tried to discourage him from composing this piece. But he knew better. The invitation to write it came from Columbia University's Alice M. Ditson Fund in 1945. Menotti was still licking the wounds inflicted by the failure of his third opera, *The Island God*, which had been commissioned and presented by the Metropolitan Opera. It remains the only work of his he has actively attempted to suppress.

To Menotti's publisher at the time, the house of Ricordi, writing an opera for a university after having composed for



Evelyn Keller as Monica and Leo Coleman as Toby in the 1947 Broadway production of *The Medium*.

the Met seemed like a comedown. Menotti broke with Ricordi over the matter, for he felt he had tried to go too far too fast with *The Island God*; a thick, ponderous, "boring" (Menotti's word) work. Before attempting to work on a larger scale again, he needed to try his hand at a more concentrated form of theater. Besides, he reasoned, a failure at Columbia University would not be as exposed and damaging as another failure on a major opera stage.

Also, Menotti was convinced that *The Island God* had failed in part because of the poor production it had received. He was determined that he would stage his new opera himself, rather than leave the job to someone else; instinctively, he realized that the Columbia commission would be an ideal situation in which he could try out his wings as a stage director. He felt that

whatever he was able to manage as a director would be no worse than what had been inflicted upon his previous opera.

So with *The Medium* not only did Menotti emerge as a musical voice and personality to be reckoned with, but as a vital and creative stage director. He has gone on through the years to build a resounding second career staging not only his operas but Debussy in Paris, Puccini at the Met, Stravinsky in Hamburg, Tchaikovsky and Rossini in Washington, and Wagner and Mozart at his own Festival of Two Worlds in Spoleto, Italy.

After the successful 1946 premiere of *The Medium* at Columbia, Menotti learned that the Ballet Society in New York, founded by Lincoln Kirstein to encourage productions of new dance works, was also planning a season of one-act operas. Menotti asked Kirstein to



Oliver Smith's set design for the 1946 Columbia University premiere production of *The Medium*.

include *The Medium* in that season, and he agreed if the composer would add another one-acter to the bill to make up a full evening's entertainment. Menotti complied with the light-hearted curtain-raiser,

The Telephone. So well received were both, that the pair were quickly moved to Broadway.

But though the notices were excellent, Broadway was not clamoring for

either opera or Menotti, and the houses for the double-bill were soon largely empty. Then a minor miracle occurred. Menotti invited Arturo Toscanini to a performance, and the conductor was so delighted he went back a second time. This was at the height of his fame, and the press made a great deal of "Toscanini Visits Broadway."

The resulting publicity led to packed houses and an extended run for *The Medium* and *The Telephone*. There was also a feature story by *Life* magazine, productions in London and Paris, a Menotti-directed film of *The Medium* and three further full-scale "Broadway" operas: *The Consul*, *The Saint of Bleeker Street* and *Maria Golovin*. The rest, as cliché would have it, is history.

Looking back to *The Medium*'s early years, one thing towers above all else. Despite Menotti's inability to have the sort of stereotyped faith he has secretly yearned for, he kept faith with the idea of *The Medium* and with his own gifts. That faith paid off more handsomely than he or anyone else could have imagined at the time. ■

BABA À LA RÉGINE

By NINA BECKWITH

When Régine Crespin was first asked to sing the role of Baba (Madame Flora) in Menotti's *Medium*, she turned it down flat. "That was almost ten years ago," she recalls. "I said no, it's not for me, it's too low, I can't sing that. I didn't realize what a fabulous part it is."

She had also held out against *Carmen* for years before she sang that marvelous role at the Metropolitan in 1975 and achieved a sensational success, "*une de mes pierres blanches*," she calls it, one of the happiest events of her career. She shakes her head laughing about that now, on a winter day at her home in Paris, ensconced amid the apricot and peach and russet colors of her sitting room, a warm Mediterranean haven against the grayness of the city outside.

Henry Lewis conducted her first Met *Carmen* and it was he who urged her to

Nina Beckwith is a free-lance writer specializing in arts. A former Time magazine overseas correspondent, she writes and edits Bene Legere, the newsletter of the General Library, U.C. Berkeley.

accept another proposal to sing *The Medium* in a French radio concert performance two years ago, which he was to conduct. "While I was learning the part," she says, "I realized how difficult it was going to be to do it without staging, without acting." Not long before the scheduled broadcast, Crespin and Lewis learned that there were two other pieces on the program to be performed by different artists and that only one week could be allowed to rehearse all three. Knowing that was not nearly enough time, they cancelled.

"It was an amazing coincidence," Crespin continues, "That same week I got a call from the director of the Châtelet (Théâtre Musical de Paris) who said he wanted to see me right away because he had a terrific idea. He asked me if I would cancel *The Medium* for the radio. I said, 'Don't you know I've already cancelled?' 'Why? Don't you want to do the part?' 'Yes,' I said, 'but I want to do it on the stage.' 'But that's just what I called you for,' he shouted. 'I want you to do it on the stage in a co-production with the Théâtre

de Nice, whose director is Jean-Louis Thamin.' So we all met with Mauro Pagano, the designer, and that was that. One year later I sang it. *Gott sei Dank*, because otherwise I would have missed a great part again."

Crespin sang the role in Nice and in Paris early in 1985. "Pagano's production is very interesting and it was a terrific success," she says. "Terry McEwen was in Europe at the time, in Germany, and I called him and said 'Terry, you have to come and see this production.' He said he would love to but couldn't because his trip was all tightly planned. I said 'Terry, if I ask you to come, try to make it, please.' So he changed his trip and came, and right after he saw it he said 'I buy it. I have to have this in San Francisco.'"

Crespin was a student at the Paris Conservatoire when she first saw *The Medium*, a few years after its Broadway run, with Marie Powers in the title role. "I did not understand one word because it was sung in English. I'm sorry I don't remember her better in that role. I was too

continued on p.52

40 Years Later Menotti Reflects on *The Medium*

By NINA BECKWITH

Two tawny stone gatehouses flank the wide wrought-iron portals leading from the village green into a mile-long paved drive bordered with trees and paralleled by a rushing stream. At the end, on a slight rise, stands Yester House, Gian Carlo Menotti's stately Scottish home.

Edinburgh is an hour away, the Firth of Forth and the North Sea not far from this corner of East Lothian, but it is quite a distance from the Lake of Lugano region of Northern Italy where Menotti was born 75 years ago next July.

For one thing, there is the bracing and all-embracing Scottish mist, or there was on this December day. For another, the gently rolling spacious land today breathes timeless peace, though—like Italy—it has seen centuries of bloody struggles. Removed but not too remote from the madding crowds and the theaters of Europe's and America's great cities, it was this peace and quiet in a beautiful setting that beckoned Menotti to settle in Scotland in 1973 after years of a highly productive vagabond life.

His classically elegant house was designed in the 18th century by the brothers Adam for the Marquess of Tweeddale. Nearby are the ruins of the family castle. Quite happily in the falling mist, sheep are grazing the terraced lawns behind the house. In the walled garden are espaliered fruit trees and so many raspberries in summer that the public is

Nina Beckwith is a free-lance writer specializing in arts. A former Time magazine overseas correspondent, she writes and edits Bene Legere, the newsletter of the General Library, U.C. Berkeley.



Gian Carlo Menotti rehearses the séance in preparation for the first production of *The Medium*.

COURTESY, GIAN CARLO MENOTTI

invited in to pick them.

Indoors are lofty graceful rooms, each with its own color scheme and handsome carved marble fireplace. The rooms are filled with books, music scores and recordings, drawings, paintings, porcelains, sculptures and pottery of many cultures, mementos of all kinds, and very comfortable furniture.

While waiting for Menotti to deal with a flood of phone calls, the visitor is shown into a chartreuse and lime sitting room, reflecting the soft green shades of the lawn outside. The only sound is an occasional hiss of gently burning logs until a smiling Scotswoman arrives with coffee, not the usual pale brew of the British Isles but real rich *espresso*, as good as can be found anywhere in Italy.

It is almost 30 years since this visitor first met Menotti during the adventurous beginnings of his Festival of Two Worlds in the lovely Italian hilltown of Spoleto. As the Festival goes into its 29th edition this year, the mere listing of its controversial productions in music, theater, dance, and the visual arts, and of the artists who were

discovered there and launched into fame, fills a large and exciting volume. Ten years ago Menotti founded *Spoleto USA* in Charleston, South Carolina, which has become one of this country's outstanding arts events. Next year, with the indefatigable energy of a man half his age, Menotti will inaugurate his new festival in Melbourne, Australia.

So, there is a lot for us to reminisce and talk about. We are joined by a dignified female King Charles spaniel whose name is, of course, Doodly, and that takes us right back to *The Medium*. It was with her dead daughter Doodly that a baroness communicated in the séances Menotti attended one summer in Austria, an occurrence which inspired him to write the opera.

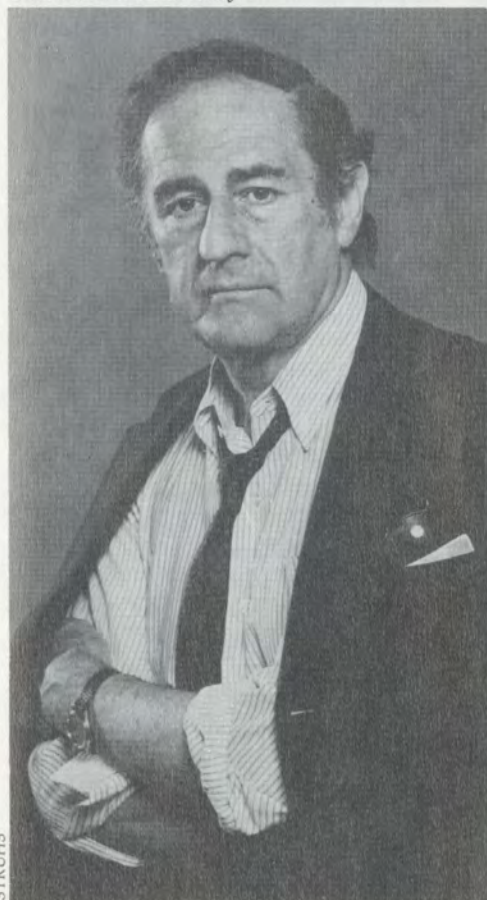
Then it's time for an *aperitivo* and lunch with Chip and his wife Melinda. Chip is Menotti's adopted son, Francis (Phelan) Menotti. He is largely responsible for restoring and decorating Yester House and scouring sales and auctions to furnish it. As actor Frank Phelan, he played the role of Toby in *The Medium* in

a production filmed in 1961 for French television and on stage in three Spoleto productions of the opera in 1969, 1970 and 1981, all directed by the composer.

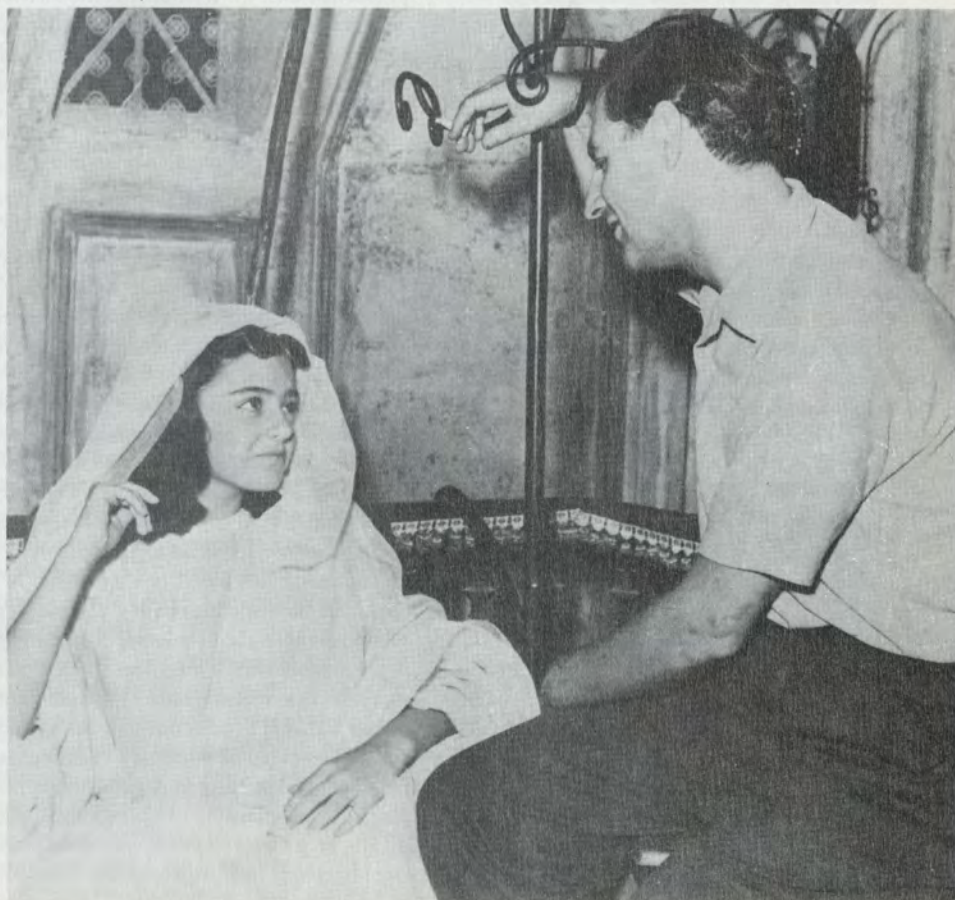
Lunch at a big round table in a Delft blue and white dining room is informal and memorable. Like the *espresso*, one does not expect to find perfect *pasta al dente* with fragrant aged Parmesan and crisp fresh vegetables in the land of single malt whisky and smoked salmon. Asked if there were an Italian cook hidden away somewhere among the Scottish staff, Menotti replies, "I was the Italian cook and then became only the *suggeritore*, the prompter. By now they perform very well without my prompting."

Menotti is a man of innate courtesy who can also delight in gossip and give vent to occasional bursts of fury. He is a dreamer, an inspirer of others, and an organizer to match any corporate chief-tain. In any conversation one becomes aware of the vast range of his reading, his friendships and travels, his passionate interest in all forms of art. On this misty day in Scotland he leaves work on his 23rd

Gian Carlo Menotti today.



Anna Maria Alberghetti, Monica in the 1947 Broadway production of *The Medium*, relaxes during a break with composer/director Gian Carlo Menotti.



COURTESY, GIAN CARLO MENOTTI

opera, which is about the great Spanish painter Goya, to be performed by Plácido Domingo, to talk about his fourth, *The Medium*, one that launched him into fame. Its first performance took place at Columbia University's Brander Matthews Theatre in New York 40 years ago, on May 8, 1946.

After lunch, in front of a crackling fire in his spacious second floor studio, Menotti confesses to a certain reluctance in talking about his work. "Music is its own language," he believes. "Not *has* but *is*. It defies verbal explanation for it has its own syntax, its own secret grammar which cannot be translated into words.

"Opera, however, is more accessible to verbal comment because it embraces drama, poetry, and the visual arts. The emotional and evocative power of a melody, which in so-called pure music is indefinable, is more manifest once it becomes part of a dramatic action. Composers should be the last ones to describe their own works. Their 'letters to the world' are often difficult to decipher, even to themselves. They are the real mediums. Like many mediums, they are often fraudulent, and only those among them who accept humbly the mystery of art, without trying to explain, are to be believed.

"Even the creator, the composer himself cannot solve the mystery of art. You can write 75 volumes about why a melody is a melody, but nobody can ever explain to you why some music is beautiful and some is not, or why a painting is a great painting and why another equally well done is not a great painting.

"That is the mystery of art. I have come in my old age to accept the mystery. There are certain things that will never be disclosed to us. We can go on and on and still never reach that certainty that we would like to have. I have enough faith to believe that death is going to be the revelation we always seek. As I said in one of my compositions, *The Bishop of Brindisi*, 'Why should God have given us an inquiring mind if there is not one day an answer that will be given to us, perhaps through death?' That's the only reason one can accept death silently and without feeling that the gods are being unfair to us.

"Because it is impossible to analyze logically the composer's gift, it makes them uncomfortable to have around. We prefer them dead. Their voice is always disturbing. If Puccini or Verdi were alive today, I'm sure they would be a great



Gian Carlo Menotti directs Denise Scharley for a 1967 French TV production of *The Medium*.

embarrassment to opera houses."

He recalls that in those days music publishers had the power to protect the works of their authors, even to forbid performances as well as promote them. Singers, conductors, and stage directors seem much more important now to impresarios than the men who created the works.

"Fortunately, good operas are able to survive any kind of violence done to them," he thinks. "The vitality of a work of art can be measured by its ability to survive interpretive distortions and hostility by critics. An opera which can be killed by critics must have been weak and dying to begin with. Bad criticism cannot kill a valid work of art.

"If longevity is a measure of quality, *The Medium* has certainly passed that test. With *Amahl and the Night Visitors* and *The Consul*, she has assured me a reasonably comfortable living for almost forty years and I hope will continue to do so for at least as long as I live."

Not having the chance to ask Verdi what he feels about such things as *Rigoletto* transformed into inner-city gang warfare, one wonders how Menotti reacts to the various productions of his works.

"I've seen *The Medium* in Leningrad," he says. "Musically it was unobjectionable, but all manner of things took place on the stage except what was indicated in the libretto. The libretto of *The Consul* has been subjected to all sorts of distortions,

both political and dramatic. Magda, who is supposed to be the wife of a poor factory worker, appeared in Warsaw in a smart green tailored suit with a careful permanent on her blond wig. In Vienna it was presented as anti-American propaganda, in America as anti-Communist, and so on. It is painful for a composer to see his work misinterpreted, but one cannot forever protect one's children. With time they grow up and seem to acquire an independent life. But now that we no longer have publishers who protect our work, are we to accept silently the disrespect of the new generation of stage directors?"

He smiles and quotes a Noël Coward one-liner. "The trouble with opera is not that it isn't what it used to be but that it is."

There is a point of truth in that remark, Menotti finds. "Opera staging cannot remain unchanged through the ages. However, just as Beethoven's Fifth conscientiously interpreted by Toscanini is not the same as an equally conscientious interpretation by von Karajan, there is no reason why an imaginative stage director cannot re-interpret an old work with a fresh eye—without, however, betraying the composer's intentions and ideals."

The Medium marked for Menotti not only his first Broadway and international success but his debut as a stage director. His first opera, *Amelia Goes to the Ball*, had been given at the Metropolitan but he felt "it was very poorly staged and I always



Frank Phelan portrayed Toby in several Spoleto Festival presentations of *The Medium*. He is shown with Gian Carlo Menotti during a staging rehearsal.

thought I could have done better.

"I realized that opera should be theater as it was to Puccini and Verdi and Donizetti. The difference between a play of Victor Hugo and an opera by Verdi is not so great because that was the theater of the time and it had a real dramatic value to the audiences of that time. So did the theater of Belasco and the operas of Puccini. As I loved the theater, I studied the plays of Lorca and Tennessee Williams and Eugene O'Neill. They all had a tremendous influence. Also the Russians. I was fascinated by the plays of Gorki, by Tolstoy, and of course by Chekhov. So this was the kind of theater I thought I would like to bring to the stage."

The Medium turned out to be a point of departure for opera in general because it showed that the habitat of opera need not be only the "huge golden barns," as Menotti calls them, where it is usually given. Forty years ago, there was already an audience of young people who were used to films and wanted a much more intimate contact with the stage, wanted to hear and understand what people were singing about.

"So that's why I decided to write a chamber opera and give it in a small theater," he says. "I tortured my singers until you could understand almost every word they sang, and that was quite new at the time. Audiences were stunned by the fact that they could go to see *The Medium*, enjoy an evening in the theater, under-

stand what was sung, and only realize afterward that they had heard an opera.

"They heard an opera, not a play with background music. It is an opera, and when people accuse me of having written background music to my libretto, they are people who just have not studied my scores. The one thing I am proud of, especially in *The Medium*, is the *parlar cantando*, singing speech, which I discovered for my characters. The action keeps on going all the time but the melodic line is always there. You can take the score of *The Medium* and sing it from beginning to end. This is a great lesson Puccini gave us in *La Bohème*. You can sing all of *Bohème*; there's always a melodic flow that follows the action very closely and also the cadence of the speech."

Since *The Medium*, Menotti has insisted on staging at least the first production of his operas. *Bohème* was the first of anyone else's operas he staged, at Spoleto, in 1960. It became the supreme *Bohème* for all of us who saw it. Fine young singers who could act, unforgettable poignancy, children enlivening the crowd scenes with their spontaneity, masterful handling of movement and masses—all the Menotti trademarks were there.

"That was my downfall," he says. "Because it was such a success, I was tempted to do it again and again. And I lost a good deal of time trying to do other people's works. Certainly Verdi and Puccini do not need my help. But I wanted to

show that you can stage an opera in a novel way, without doing violence to the composer's original vision. That was a different *Bohème* from the one everybody was used to and it has been copied over and over. But it was also very respectful of the libretto. Nothing was there that was not indicated; it was just how it was done—*quel certo non so ché*—that made it a different staging.

"For me the ideal *Medium* must underline the symbolic meaning of the libretto without, however, making it obvious and so robbing the plot of its humanity.

"I see Baba, who symbolizes doubt and skepticism, as a materialistic, ruthless hag, too clever and scheming for her own good. She lives in a suffocating atmosphere, surrounded by all sorts of pathetic trappings, junky possessions with which to strengthen her tottering sense of reality.

"Toby (the unknown), should be an exotic, mysterious, fascinating child, made even more enigmatic by his inability to speak. His strength is his very silence which no violence or pleading can break. I see Monica, who symbolizes love, as very young, innocent, dreaming, who reads in Toby's silence her own world of dreams. The clients, who represent faith, should be fragile, vulnerable creatures, but willing to fight for their beliefs.

"The music is full of long pauses which should be respected. To me they are essential to the musical and dramatic texture. The opera is intended for a small theater, not for a huge opera house.

"This is the child that I gave birth to, but now that it has grown older it seems to have acquired its own physiognomy and often when I meet it away from home I have trouble recognizing it.

"Of course there is not one correct way of producing *The Medium*. I myself make important changes in my staging every time I do it. But more than changes, these novelties are discoveries in depth. They are different personal reactions to the basic theme which remains unchanged.

"Is this the *Medium* that you will see at San Francisco Opera? Unfortunately I have not seen this production. However, you have a prodigious singer, a young and most interesting stage director, and a distinguished conductor. The production was a huge success both in Paris and Nice. Whether or not they are giving you *my Medium* is up to you to decide." ■

continued from p.47

young," she says. "But a friend has given me a tape of her and I also have Regina Resnik's recording. In the final scene, Resnik sings 'It was you. It was you,' with a kind of anger. Marie Powers sings 'It was you, eh?' and then whispers 'It was you'—and still there is no answer.

"This production is completely different because the action is set in about 1946, the year of *The Medium's* premiere. The period of the opera is not precisely indicated by Menotti. But she is dressed as though it were twenty years before, in sumptuous costumes. When I saw the designs, I said to Pagano 'They look so rich, but she is poor.' He said 'Who knows what she was? Perhaps a famous prima donna or an actress who had fabulous clothes. If she is still on her feet, I'm sure she would wear them, maybe even sleep in them.'"

The wig she wears is à la Louise Brooks, a startlingly beautiful film actress of the 1920s who has become a cult figure. "When I first saw it I said never for me, but it's fantastic," Crespin says. "The set is not the usual one, a miserable room. It's a kind of converted warehouse in New York. You can see through the windows, and when the Gobineaus come with their car and chauffeur, you realize that the car cannot get into the narrow street. You see just the headlights of the car which illuminate the street and you understand that it is a Rolls. I know that this is a very different production from the ones Menotti has done, but after all, why not? The first production of *Parsifal* was very different from what we see now."

Crespin thinks that Mauro Pagano is a remarkable young talent. "He has taste and astonishing attention to detail," she says. "He wanted me to wear a glove on my right arm, up to here. But I said 'Mauro, I have to take that glove off at some point. I can't do much with my right hand if I'm wearing it all the time.' He said 'No, you are going to keep it on. You'll find out why.' He brought me a pair of shoes with very high heels. I was worried about being unsteady so I brought an old pair of mine to be decorated as he wished. The next day he came back with his shoes and the heels had been cut down a bit. He didn't like the whip I was using; he put little stones on it so you can see it flashing."

Apart from Crespin, the only member of the French cast performing in the San Francisco Opera *Medium* is Toby.

"Thamin wanted a boy who was not a dancer. Their gestures tend to be too studied, too exaggerated," Crespin says. "This boy, Jean-Louis Loca, is an actor and looks like a gypsy, very dark with blue eyes. What he does during the opera is wonderfully expressive. When you see him you don't think he is a dancer, you don't know if he's an actor, he seems like someone from *quelque part ailleurs*, a different world. Of course he had to be the only one coming from France because he does not say a word and we are now doing the opera in English.

"How many times have I told you not to touch my things?" Crespin quotes a line of Baba's to Toby. And it is more clearly

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Régine Crespin as Madame Flora (Baba) in the Paris production of *The Medium*.

enunciated than it would be by most native English speakers. "Things" is a hard word for the French, but Crespin is famed for her pronunciation and projection in other languages as well. She was the only French soprano of her generation invited to perform at Bayreuth, where she made her debut at the age of 29 as Kundry in *Parsifal* under the direction of Wieland Wagner and Hans Knappertsbusch, both of whom admired her German diction.

"English is a difficult language," she says, "especially for French people. We say 'eet ees' and must learn the short i—it is—our 'r' is very different, and we don't have a sound like 'the'. But I love to sing in English. When I learned *Dialogues of the Carmelites* in English, I worked with a

wonderful actors' coach, an Englishwoman. She taught me to say words such as 'my daughters' correctly, while the others were saying 'dotters'. One day the director spoke to all of us. 'I'm ashamed of you,' he said. 'The only one of you I can understand is Crespin and she's French. The rest of you are Americans and I don't understand what you're singing.'"

Crespin obviously relishes the role of Baba. "*C'est drôle, non?*" she says of her photograph in costume, in a jewel-embroidered gown with a great black cloak and a black fox fur, glittering bracelets and rings on her gloved hand. It made an arresting poster for the French theaters.

"Who is this woman?" she wonders. "It's hard to say because you have no indication in the libretto, but when she talks about the streets of Budapest you realize that she has traveled a lot. Why did she travel? Because she was an artist? Nothing is told you but she may have been a popular singer or an opera singer, an actress, why not?"

"Pagano has filled her loft with overflowing trunks and costumes hanging on racks like a theater. Toby dresses up and dresses Monica, too, in those theatrical costumes. So she must have had some money at one time.

"Maybe she came from Europe, from Poland, Russia, Italy, almost anywhere, and had seen the War, which was just over when Menotti wrote the opera. She could even have been a spy, she is so mysterious, or was she, too, a kind of gypsy? Why did she turn to spiritualism? Just for the money?"

"I don't think she believes for one minute that she really has some psychic powers. It's all pretense and at the end she says it clearly; she admits that it's all trickery, with a hidden microphone under the table. But when strange things start to happen, she gets frightened.

"That is the real story. She pretends, she plays with fire and it comes back at her, and she is caught. Until the end she believes, or pretends to believe, that it is Toby who frightens her. But after she kills him she still doesn't know. In her mind it is still something terrifying, coming from where? It is a really frightening story. Nobody will ever have the answer. But it is a fabulous moment of theater."

And for Régine Crespin it is assuredly another triumph and another *pierre blanche*. ■

Company Profiles: Ramona Spiropoulos

This on-going series of interviews introduces our readers to a cross-section of San Francisco Opera Company members who never get to take a curtain call, but whose activities are very important in the process of making opera happen.



Ramona Spiropoulos as herself.

As peasant or lady-in-waiting, religious fanatic or harem girl, a member of Parisian café society or of an ancient Egyptian court, San Francisco Opera chorister Ramona Spiropoulos has an uncanny way of convincing her audience that she's not "playing" a role at all—that, instead, she *is* her character, freshly arrived on stage from a time machine in the wings. It's not that Spiropoulos stands out from her fellow choristers, physically, vocally, or otherwise. Indeed, the very thought would horrify her, original team player that she is. But there's simply no overlooking a figure on stage so thoroughly immersed in her character.

Her explanation is one any chorister might give: "You have to be into your part; you have to make it live. The music is the most important thing, but you have to be a good actress on the side." The truth of the matter, however, lies just a little bit deeper. The hundreds of roles Spiropoulos has played in 23 consecutive seasons on the War Memorial stage are scarcely more numerous than the ones she has assumed in 50 years of an action-packed life. A kind of one-woman refutation of the doctrine of reincarnation, she has telescoped what for ordinary mortals would be a considerable string of lives into one utterly remarkable, and clearly rewarding, existence.

When she says things like, "The

chorus is my whole life," she speaks of a qualitative, not quantitative, commitment, to an organization she considers "my true calling." But she comes closer to the facts when she says, "I juggle my whole life around the chorus." It's a stunt few other performers would even attempt.

Of late, Spiropoulos has been taking up the slack in an already busy chorister's existence by working, full time, as the night (midnight to 8 a.m.) charge nurse on the adult, locked psychiatric unit of the McAuley Neuropsychiatric Clinic at St. Mary's Medical Center. Should midnight happen to find her behind a layer of greasepaint, and a just-fallen curtain—with yet another night's work lying ahead—"They make allowances for me," she says. "So I'm very lucky." And she means it.

Although she says, "I love to sleep," with characteristic conviction, it's the one thing she says that rings false. That "love" nets her five hours a day of the stuff that dreams are made during, and she manages a few extra hours on her days off, "unless I have something else going."

She usually does. She conducts a 45-voice chorus at San Francisco's First Ward LDS Church on Sundays. She also has "a business on the side," called Musical Artiste's Association, which she runs in conjunction with a friend in New York. They book musicians into hotels in Las Vegas and elsewhere, and one of the musicians they book is—you guessed it—Ramona Spiropoulos, who last year sang at the Gypsy Cellar, at Alexis's on Nob Hill. "And last year, believe it or not, I also managed a restaurant for a doctor in the area, during the break. We included a lot of operatic entertainment. I try to do a lot of different things to keep from getting bored."

As with the music, the secret is practice, and, as with the music, she has plenty of it. In the early 1960s, shortly after finishing a nurse's training, having a

child, and becoming a widow, Spiropoulos moved back to her native Las Vegas, where she worked as a nurse and, for a year, as policewoman, on the night shift. "I got depressed because I wasn't doing enough artistically, so I started singing in a review at the Sands Hotel," a gig that later took her to the Sahara and the Tropicana as well. She also did concert opera work (singing the roles of Azucena, Mamma Lucia, and Mrs. Benson in *Lakmé*)



Ramona Spiropoulos as a Windsor woman in the 1985 Falstaff. The photo was taken backstage by Dottye Dean of the San Francisco Opera Chorus.

and traveled back and forth to Utah, where she earned a master's degree in music at Brigham Young University and studied voice with Florence Jepperson Madsen, following the methods of Ernestine Schumann-Heink, "my mentor." She also studied with Lucy Bunker in Las Vegas and Otto Schulman in San Francisco.

Her jackpot in Las Vegas was winning the regional Metropolitan Opera Auditions, which subsequently brought her to San Francisco for the Merola Auditions. "In my mind, I was on my way to Germany, but after I sang for Mr. Adler, I was immediately assigned to a contract. I haven't missed a season here since." The only thing she hasn't found time for so far is regrets, including the ones about having a solo singing career. "If I had had the time and the money and a good promoter, I might have been able to have that kind of career. But I consider the chorus my career. Most of us in the chorus do."

Like most of her fellow choristers, she'd be delighted to make a career of just singing in the chorus. Although she has no quibbles with the salary (she's a big fan of the American Guild of Musical Artists,



Ramona Spiropoulos as a Philistine woman, taunting Samson's (Guy Chauvet) seeing-eye boy. 1983.

the chorus union), she also harbors no illusions that she could get by on it. In her early years of singing for the company, she worked as director of nurses at a series of three local hospitals; working in that capacity at Chinese Hospital meant learning third and fourth-dialect Cantonese, "to communicate with the patients." She also has worked as a jail nurse, both with felons and on death row, with no hazardous duty pay and with a no-hostage clause, i.e., "if you're taken hostage, you're considered dead." In a masterpiece of understatement, she notes, "I really enjoy working under stress. It meets a lot of my needs, in terms of being a help to my fellow man."

Professional music connections have taken Spiropoulos to interesting places around the world, but her medical connections have resulted in travel of an even more fascinating variety. A surgical nurse by training, she has accompanied a group of plastic surgeons she first worked with at San Francisco General to Plaza Santa Maria in Mexico, as well as on the Yucatan peninsula. For the past four years she has assisted the surgeons there, often working from 6 a.m. to 6 p.m., in *pro bono* work, in some cases on "kids so poor they were brought in in wheelbarrows."

In the break between opera seasons last year, she joined 14 U.C. physicians as part of the Professional Consultants Program on a trip to West Africa. Her

duties on that trip included work as diverse as allocating blood from green monkeys ("They have AIDS but don't die from it, so we were doing research to see what T3 antigen is in simian blood") to attending to Masai and other tribes. "I planted 2,000 trees by hand, to feed the cattle," she says. Feeding humans proved to be more heartbreaking. "We fed starving kids in Ethiopia, giving them milk and blood with eye-droppers. I can remember that we would start the day with a little bag of rice for each family. We'd spend the day feeding the kids, who were just bones, by smashing the rice to make rice water. Often, at the end of the day, we'd bury a baby in the sack the rice came in. It got pretty heavy."

This year, in the break between seasons, Spiropoulos will accompany doctors from the same group in a trip to the USSR. When the itinerary was established last January, it was to include Moscow, Leningrad, Minsk, and Kiev, for a study of fallout and nuclear medicine. That was before Chernobyl. Now, she will be one of three nurses and 14 doctors invited to do special bone work on patients in Kiev. "Sure, I'm apprehensive," she says, "but this is our great opportunity to do nuclear medicine—fallout medicine. We'll be working for two weeks under very tight, sterile conditions—but at least it will be in a nice hospital. I figure, after you've been to Africa . . . There we just

set up tents and operated at the side of the road.

"When you do heavy-duty nursing," she explains, almost matter-of-factly, "you also have to do something else with your life, which in my case is the chorus. In some nursing situations, even if I'm totally involved, I have to give only 50 percent emotion. In life you have to be a little laid back. But when I'm on stage, I give 100 percent. Even when I'm very tired, when I walk through the stage door, I shut the rest of the world out, and I live in my own world. And once I'm on stage, I come alive—you have to. There's simply so much to think about and remember."

Her forthcoming trip to Russia will be a genuine marvel if it even approaches the experience she has singing Russian opera. "I've loved every Russian opera we've ever done," she exclaims. And she sees the chorus as having provided the high point of a life anyone else could scarcely chart. "The greatest experience of my life," she says without missing a beat, "was the opening night of the Ponnelle *Turandot* in 1977. It was the first time I had ever heard Montserrat Caballé, who has been my vocal ideal all my life, and it was the first time I heard Pavarotti sing 'Nessun dorma.' And the Prince of Wales was in the audience. From the minute the chorus got on stage there wasn't a dry eye among us. Normally, we're able to contain our emotions, but that was just such an overwhelming experience."

Learning new scores and productions, and relearning familiar ones, takes yet more time, as does the individual vocal training and coaching she feels is essential to maintain musical standards. "You have to keep up. For every month you don't sing, you slip back six." But even all that doesn't preclude a personal life. Although Spiropoulos describes herself as "divorced, naturally," she is pleased to be able to maintain family ties. Her two daughters—and two grandchildren—luckily live nearby.

Her plans for the future start with singing in the chorus "as long as I can. It's in my blood. I'm saving for later life the things I can't do now, because of the opera. I know I have a lot of irons in the fire, but it's amazing to me how everything falls into place. I'm a mover and a shaker—and sometimes a steamroller—and I guess that's the way I like it. I figure you can rest when you're dead." ■

—Timothy Pfaff

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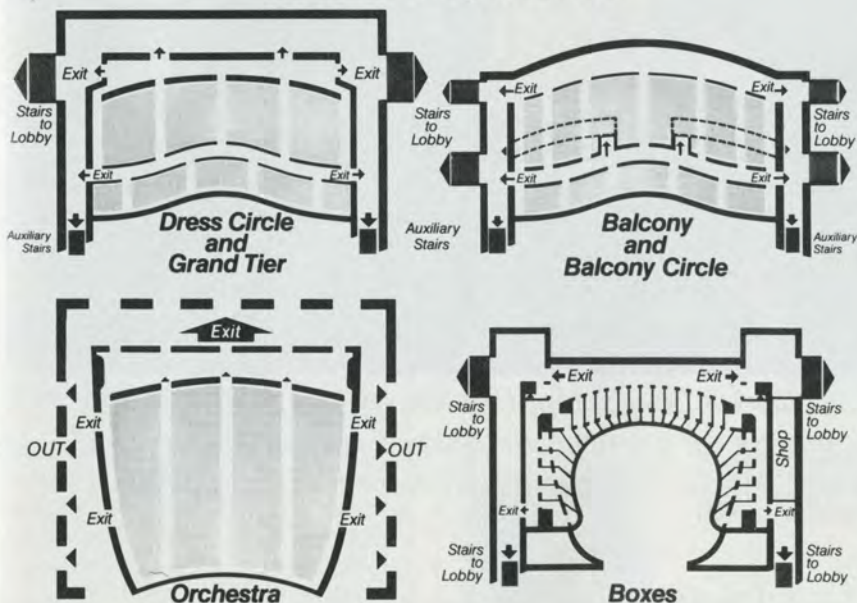
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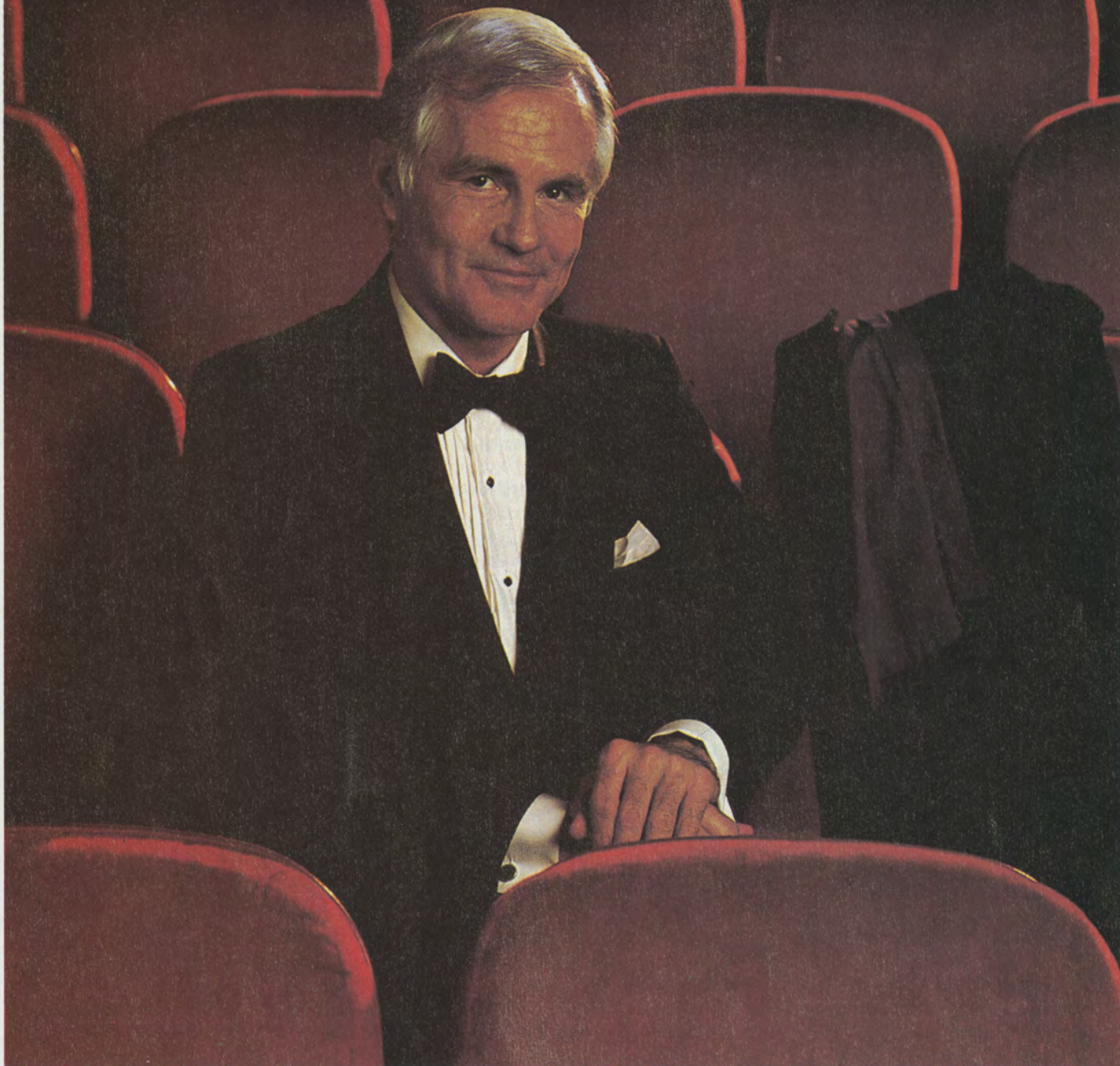
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Medallion



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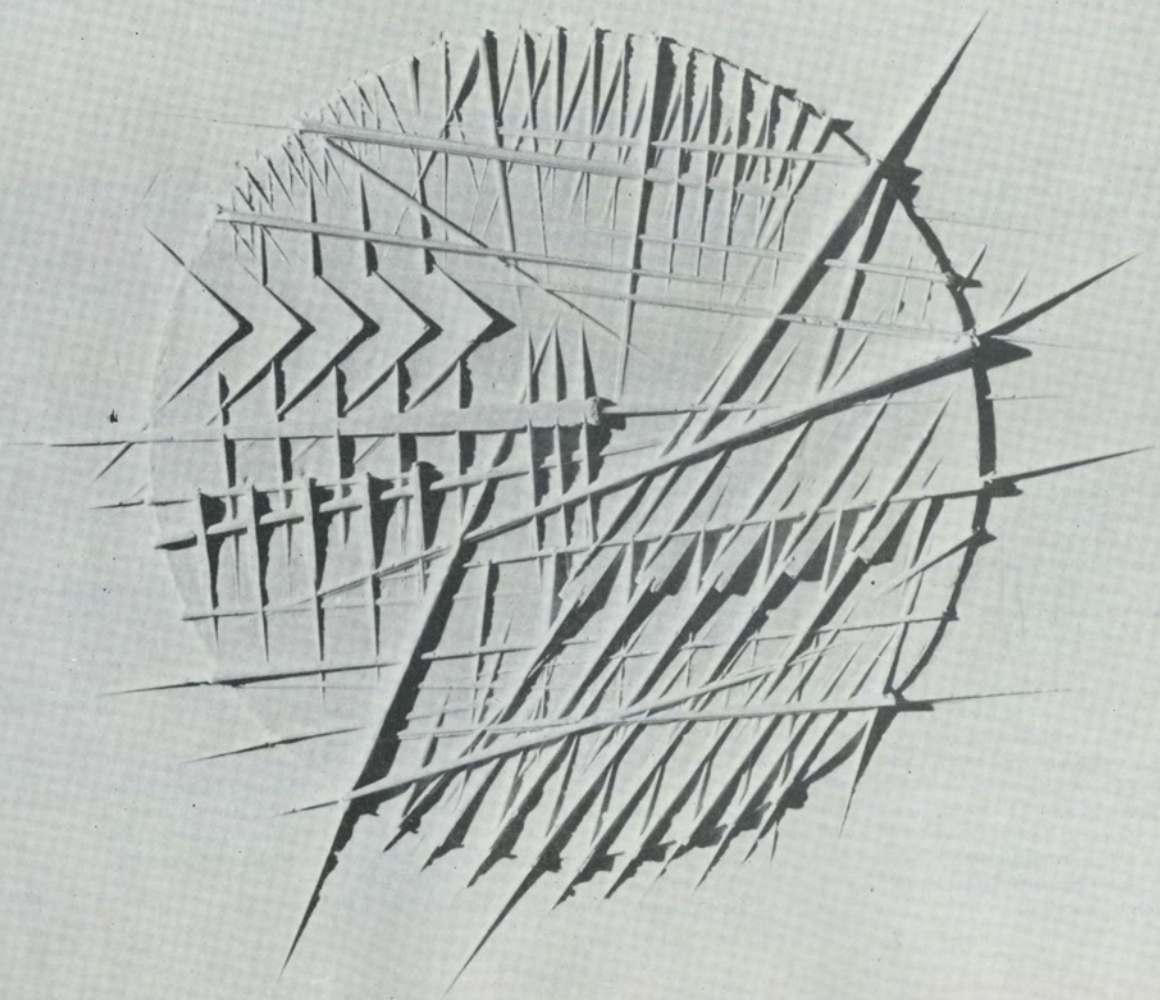
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- Special dress rehearsal and dinner (4 guests) with private reception in Opera House.

All rehearsals are subject to space availability, change of scheduling, and management decisions.

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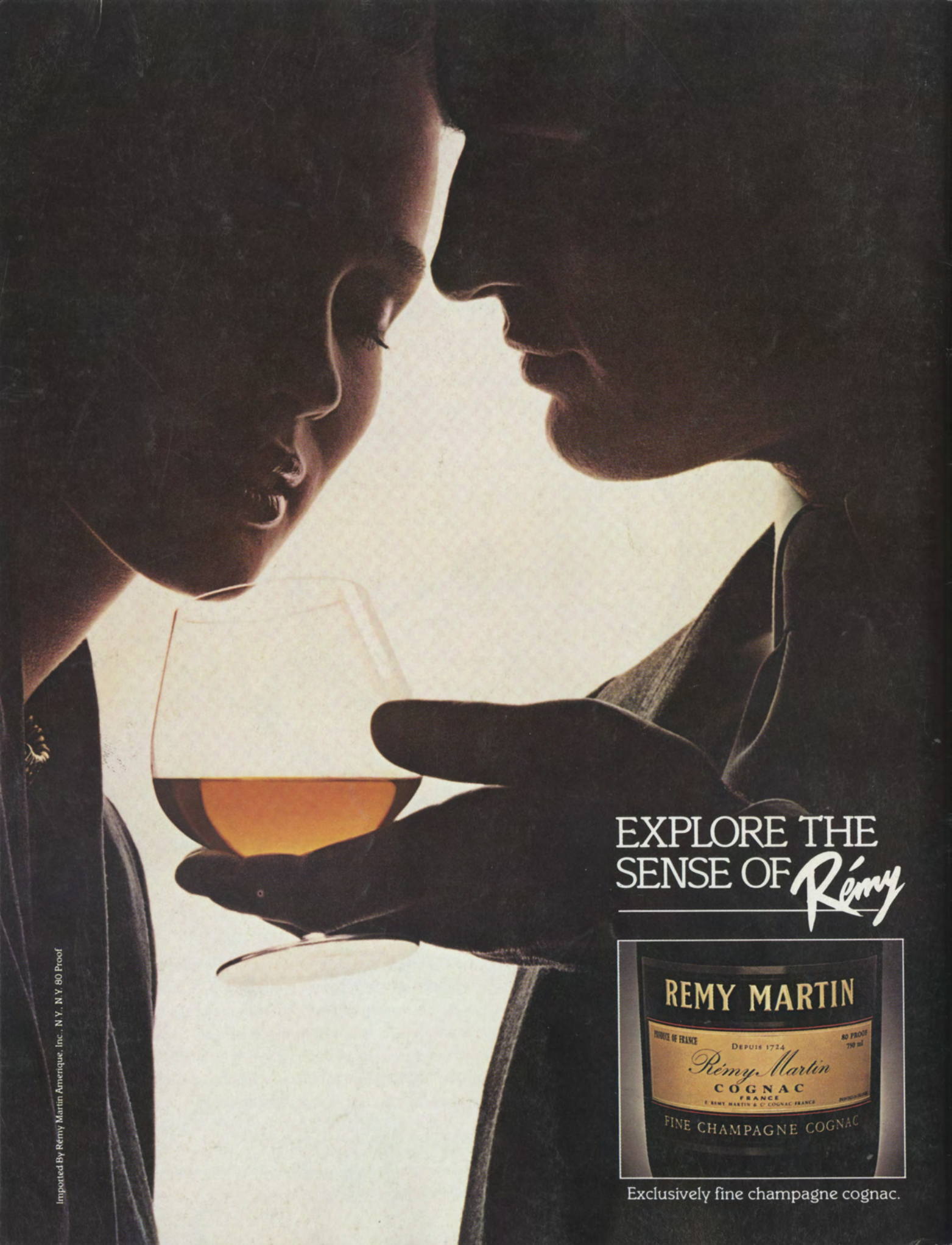
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