

The Thirty-Second Day of March

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Sunday

Il Barbiere di Siviglia (The Barber of Seville)

On Tuesday night I brought my laptop upstairs and put it on the dining table, and Grace and I did our best to try to concentrate on the Metropolitan Opera's free stream of *Il Barbiere di Siviglia* (The Barber of Seville) while the kids fought and complained all around us and tried to pick fights with us. This opera is famous for being the *other* opera that Bugs Bunny riffed on, and for its energetic music, but I had never seen the whole thing before or studied the story.

The Met's production was absolutely delightful and hilarious. This thing was a joy from beginning to end. The staging is minimal and perfect, and highly mobile, allowing scene changes to take place very rapidly. Right off the bat, we noticed that this opera moves along briskly. That's a welcome change after *Siegried* and *Gotterdamurung* last week, which were staged beautifully, but could not hold my attention during the long and slow expository scenes.

Barbiere is a light-hearted opera. It starts out merely amusing and romantic with the occasional sight gag, but as the plot thickens, it becomes almost surrealist, and it involves a lot of dramatic trickery I didn't expect in a 200-year-old opera. In Act One I realized they were setting us up for a play-within-a-play, and English majors like me absolutely eat that shit up. But it also started to feel like a Tom Stoppard play, with characters breaking the fourth wall and playing directly to the audience, and even goes Monty Python-esque at the conclusion of the first act. But then of course I realized that the influence went the other way. When in *Spamalot* the characters sing:

LADY OF THE LAKE: I can't believe there's more
SIR GALAHAD: It's far too long, I'm sure
LADY OF THE LAKE: That's the trouble with this song!
It goes on and on and on
BOTH: For this is our song that is too long!
SIR GALAHAD: Jesus Christ, God damm*t!
LADY OF THE LAKE: Dear God!

LADY OF THE LAKE: We'll be singing this til dawn
SIR GALAHAD: You'll wish that you weren't born
LADY OF THE LAKE: Let's stop this damn refrain
BOTH: Before we go insane

They seem to me to be channeling the end of Act One of *Barber*, when the characters sing (in Italian, of course):

*My head seems to be
in a fiery smithy,
the sound of the anvils,
ceasless and growing.
deafens the ear.
Up and down, high and low,
striking heavily, the hammer
makes the very walls resound
with a barbarous harmony.
Thus our poor, bewildered brain,
stunned, confounded,
in confusion, without reason,
is reduced to insanity.*

To emphasize the connection, in the Met's staging, at the end of this act a Monty Python-esque giant anvil falls onto the stage, squashing a cart full of pumpkins.

The plot of this opera is extremely convoluted. We have a Count named Almaviva who disguises himself as a young student, Lindoro, to woo the young woman, Rosina. Figaro, the titular barber, advises the Count to disguise himself as a drunken soldier and billet himself with Rosina's guardian Bartolo, who is planning to marry her, much to her dismay. In Act 2, Almavira disguises himself as a priest, who is also a music tutor, and pretending to be a substitute for Rosina's regular music teacher. So Rosina thinks that her substitute music teacher is Lindoro, but he is really Almaviva, which is more-or-less fine until the real music teacher shows up in an identical outfit, right down to the very fine hat. It can get quite confusing to try to remember who everyone is disguised as, while at the same time keeping track of who each character *thinks* each person is. But if you find yourself losing track, don't despair, because the details hardly matter.

This production features Joyce DiDonato, who sang the role of Aggripina in the recent production, and she is terrific as Rosina, who is not nearly as guileless and innocent as she first appears. In fact all the leads are terrific. Peter Mattei sings Figaro and he is particularly funny, because he's not a bad-looking man at all, but makes himself into a sex god primarily with his acting. Meanwhile, Juan Diego Flórez is smoking hot, but doesn't flaunt it like Figaro does. John Del Carlo as Bartolo tends to steal the show a bit because of his deadpan humor. In Act One he tends to sing sharp, which I think is deliberate, to illustrate the abrasiveness of his character, but in Act Two, when he does some more honest,

heartfelt singing, he is hilariously on key. And even a minor governess character has a beautiful song and reveals that she is an amazing singer.

The real star of this show is the ebullient music. The leads are often singing in duet or trio format, often with one person singing a slow part where another is singing double-time or triple-time, resulting in a gorgeous and breathless effect. It's easy to see why this has been such a popular opera for so long.

Nixon in China

I was excited to see what *Nixon in China* looks like since I have heard several recordings but never seen it staged. I love this opera's music, and I'm fascinated by the subject, but there is no denying that *Nixon in China* is, as I put it on Facebook, "weird as hell." And that's not entirely a good thing. I admire a lot of what John Adams and Alice Goodman achieved here, but I can't escape the sense that strangeness for the sake of strangeness may have been one of their goals, whether conscious or not. My copy of the Nonesuch CD set includes a fat booklet with essays by Adams, Peter Sellars (the director of the original production and also the Metropolitan Opera's production), Goodman, and other luminaries. This is all quite interesting, but I can't help but feel that I shouldn't *need* to read these essays to understand the work.

I also wrote on Facebook "it's a bit like the old saw about going to a fight but a hockey game broke out. I was watching a poetry reading, a ballet, a newscast, and a riot, and an opera broke out..."

So, let me unpack what I meant by that a little bit.

Nixon in China blends all those kinds of presentations, and it does so in a seamless way that constantly blurs the line between literal historical events, interpolations of events, impressions of characters' inner thoughts, and fantasy actions that reveal the characters' impressions, memories, fears, and misunderstandings. It's this overlap that makes it both beautiful and affecting, but also confusing, and may tend to alienate audiences who expect scenes to stick to a single mode of storytelling at a time.

Right from the beginning we see this constant shifting. Members of the Chinese army, navy, and air forces chant "The Three Main Rules of Discipline and the Eight Points of Attention," by Mao Zedong ("Chairman Mao," often transliterated as "Mao Tse-tung"). That text (as translated in Goodman's libretto) includes lines such as:

*Divide the landlord's property,
take nothing from the tenantry,
do not mistreat the captive foe.
Respect women, it is their due
replace doors when you leave a house.
Roll up straw matting after use.*

Did the soldiers waiting for Air Force One to land really chant these lines? I have no idea, but it serves to illustrate the way that Mao's teachings and writings pervaded Chinese society; this theme recurs in the opera.

From there we go to a more realistic-seeming conversation between Nixon and Premier Chou En-lai, who greets him; it is banal and again, probably not literal, but it illustrates a lot about Nixon's personality: his general friendliness, somewhat meandering thoughts, and schmoozing ability, all at the same time:

CHOU: Your flight was smooth, I hope?

NIXON: Oh yes,
smoother than usual I guess.
Yes, it was very pleasant.
We stopped in Hawaii for a day
and Guam, to catch up on the time.
It's easier that way.
The Prime Minister knows about that.
He is such a traveller.

Nixon draws out the word "smoother" until it seems to have a dozen syllables or more, as if he is filling time while he thinks of something to say next. Then he seems to second-guess himself, adding a gratuitous "I guess." He babbles a moment about the time change, which to be fair would probably leave me hesitant and dazed as well, then decides a little flattery is in order.

From here things become less plausible, but there is no clear indication in the staging when the text shifts from literal dialogue or monologue that we are expected to take as having happened, and inner monologue, full of imagery and clichés, and no small amount of paranoia, made audible for the audience:

*It's prime time in the U.S.A.
yesterday night. They watch us now;
the three main networks' colors glow
livid through drapes onto the lawn.
Dishes are washed and homework done,
the dog and grandma fall asleep,
a car roars past playing loud pop,
is gone. As I look down the road
I know America is good at heart.
An old cold warrior piloting towards
an unknown shore through shoals.
The rats begin to chew the sheets.
There's murmuring bellow.
Now there's ingratitude!
My hand is steady as a rock.
A sound like mourning doves reaches my ears,
nobody is a friend of ours.*

Things get strange in the meeting with the elderly, ill Mao Zedong. Mao speaks

in a confusing mishmash of actual conversation, aphorisms, allusions, wordplay, and riddles:

MAO: Founders come first,
then profiteers.
NIXON: Capitalist?
MAO: Fishers of men.
An organized oblivion.
NIXON: The crane...
MAO: Let us not be misled.
NIXON: The Yellow Crane has flown abroad.
Think of what we have lost and gained
since forty-nine.
CHOU: The current trend suggests
that China's future might...
NIXON: Might break the Futures Market.

This is probably not close to a literal transcript of the historic meeting, but it may go a long way towards capturing an accurate *impression* of the conversation.

NIXON: History holds her breath.
MAO: We know the great silent majority
will bide its time.
KISSINGER: There you've got me. I'm lost.

The audience feels for Kissinger.

In Act 2, Scene 2, things seem to diverge more and more from the historical accounts. This part is what led me to mention a ballet and a riot. In an amazing sequence, Nixon and his entourage view a ballet staged within the opera, a portion of a real Chinese ballet called *Red Detachment of Women*, which was actually performed for Nixon and his entourage. Oddly, the singer playing Kissinger seems to also be playing a character in the ballet, Lao Szu. Things get stranger when Pat Nixon reacts to events in the ballet as if they were really happening:

KISSINGER (as Lau Szu): Whip her to death!
PAT: They can't do that!
NIXON: It's just a play.
She'll get up afterwards, you'll see.
Easy there, Hon.

But very shortly, the First Lady is on stage interacting with the characters, and there seems to be a rainstorm — in the theater. And soon there is gunfire, and then, seemingly, an actual riot, leading the viewer to feel a bit like Pat Nixon did — is this opera still going on? How about the ballet? This all leads up to the incredible aria, “I am the wife of Mao Tse-tung.”

This scene seems just a bit like, and I believe might have been inspired by, the “Nighttown” episode in Chapter 15 (Circe) of James Joyce's *Ulysses*, when

Stephen and Leopold wander through an increasingly surreal sequence of dream-like events and become characters in a constantly shifting series of interlocking scenes, and the boundaries between realism, impressionism, and allegory are completely obliterated.

If I've made it seem like this opera is somewhat difficult to understand, that was my intent. However, I would like to clarify that I think this opera can be enjoyed on different levels. I find the music beautiful, and the libretto both beautiful and evocative. But if you get to see *Nixon in China*, go into it informed — it isn't intended to be taken as a documentary, and it isn't exactly a historical drama. It isn't even quite a linear story inspired by historic events. It's something else — something less and more than those things — and certainly something stranger, something dissasociated from linear events, something less literal, something occasionally unstuck in time, and so, something more timeless. And I'll stop there.

Current Events

I wrote all that in part because I'm procrastinating, at least a bit. I don't actually want to talk about current events, because I'm in a strangely dichotomous state. I've been saturating myself in news and opinion, and so I feel like I know a lot about what is going on. But at the same time, we're deeply isolated, and so I feel like I know nothing at all about what is going on. That's why I called this issue "The Thirty-Second Day of March." March hasn't ended. Time has stopped. And it seemed appropriate to skip April Fool's Day, since no one is in the mood for it.

The COVID-19 tracker application here, my constant companion over the last few weeks, shows me some very grim data:

- 1,260,104 confirmed cases, with 68,413 deaths
- 331,151 confirmed cases in the United States, with 9,441 deaths
- 15,718 confirmed cases in Michigan, with 617 deaths
- 518 confirmed cases in Washtenaw County, with 8 deaths

While Detroit is a hot spot, New Jersey and New York are in far worse shape. And let's not forget that infections and deaths are likely both under-detected and under-reported, to an unknown but possibly very large extent.

Life During COVID Time

At the same time, life in the Potts House is very quiet. Not literally quiet, because the kids are constantly noisy, but quiet, because nothing dramatic is happening. On Friday afternoon, I finally had a bout of stir-craziness and had to get out. I went for a walk on the dirt roads in our neighborhood. Aside from an angry dog, I didn't come close to anyone. On Saturday I actually got in my car and drove somewhere for the first time in over 3 weeks. Grace and I went to pick up two bags of roasted ground coffee and two brewed coffees from our

favorite local business, Milan Coffee Works. The business has been closed, but the proprietor started accepting orders online and arranged things so that he could leave the doors locked, but reach through a window to put items onto a small table for customers to pick up. So we put our masks and gloves on and picked up the coffee. Grace wiped down the bags of ground coffee with bleach wipes and we left them in the car for a few days, and also wiped down the coffee cups. The coffee itself was hot enough, in our judgment, to denature any virus particles. So we felt that the actual risk was not very high.

It was a joy to get out and do something resembling part of our normal routine, a relief that Milan Coffee Works is not completely gone, and incredibly satisfying to sip a very good cup of black coffee. And I'm extremely grateful for all of these things.

We also called one of our friends in Milan. She came out of her house to stand a very safe distance away and talk to us while we sat in the car in our masks with the windows rolled down. That was also gratifying and allowed us to feel, at a gut level, that there are still people we know and love out in the world.

Mujaddara

Yesterday I made a big pot of lentils and rice with fried onions — mujaddara (although there are lots of other transliterations). It's a very old, very simple recipe. The basic ingredients are oil, salt, onions of some kind, lentils of some kind, and rice of some kind (or bulgur, processed cracked wheat berries). You can add cumin, cardamom, or other spices, but it is fine with salt and pepper. The basic idea is to fry the onions until they are dark brown and crispy, in a lot of oil. I used a blend of lard and olive oil, which is not very authentic but was delicious. Then you cook the lentils, rice, and onions together with enough water so that it doesn't burn on the bottom. Or, if you prefer, cook the lentils and rice separately, and mix them together. That's about it. The result is a simple potage that is high in protein, very filling, and very satisfying. If you have some left over, you can make it into balls or patties and pan-fry it, or serve it cold in pita bread with whatever toppings you like; that makes it sort of the original veggie burger.

The exact cooking time depends on the type of rice you are using. We used short-grain brown rice, which takes a little longer to cook, but has a delicious nutty flavor and chewy texture. You can stir-fry the rice and lentils before simmering them, to partially cook them and coat them in oil. If you have a slower-cooking rice, you might want to start cooking the rice first and add the lentils later. This depends on whether you care if they cook down to a similar texture, or you're content if the lentils get very soft and start to break down while the rice is still a bit chewy. You can save some of the onions to put on top. I put a can of mild diced chilies into the mix, and we served it with lemon slices, various hot sauces, and garlic sauce.

I'm not going to link to a specific recipe, because there are many, many versions

of this and I wouldn't want to try to pick one. You should feel free to experiment. It's pretty hard to screw up. You can burn it if you don't add enough water, but other than that, just about anything you do wrong will still result in an edible dish. You can make it in a pressure cooker if you want to, although if you stir fry the lentils and rice, they won't take that long to cook in a regular pot, so I didn't bother.

The kids loved this dish and it even filled up the teenagers. We served it with three large trays of roasted brussels sprouts splashed with balsamic vinegar. They've been in our garage for a month but held up fine. It is starting to get warm out, though, so we won't be able to keep as much food out there.

Tomorrow, we are planning to put our gloves and homemade masks on and venture out into the world to get groceries. We are hoping to plan well enough, and be able to buy enough, that we won't need to do this more often than once every two weeks or so.

I have to figure out if I can get my prescriptions filled by mail, and get a larger supply, such as a 90-day supply, so I don't have to walk into a pharmacy.

And I need to end it there. We're going to have a small celebration of Palm Sunday, such as we are able, without actually going to a church. I hope you are all staying healthy and sane. Please stay in touch! I would like to hear how you are getting through this challenging time.

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