

Women on the Verge

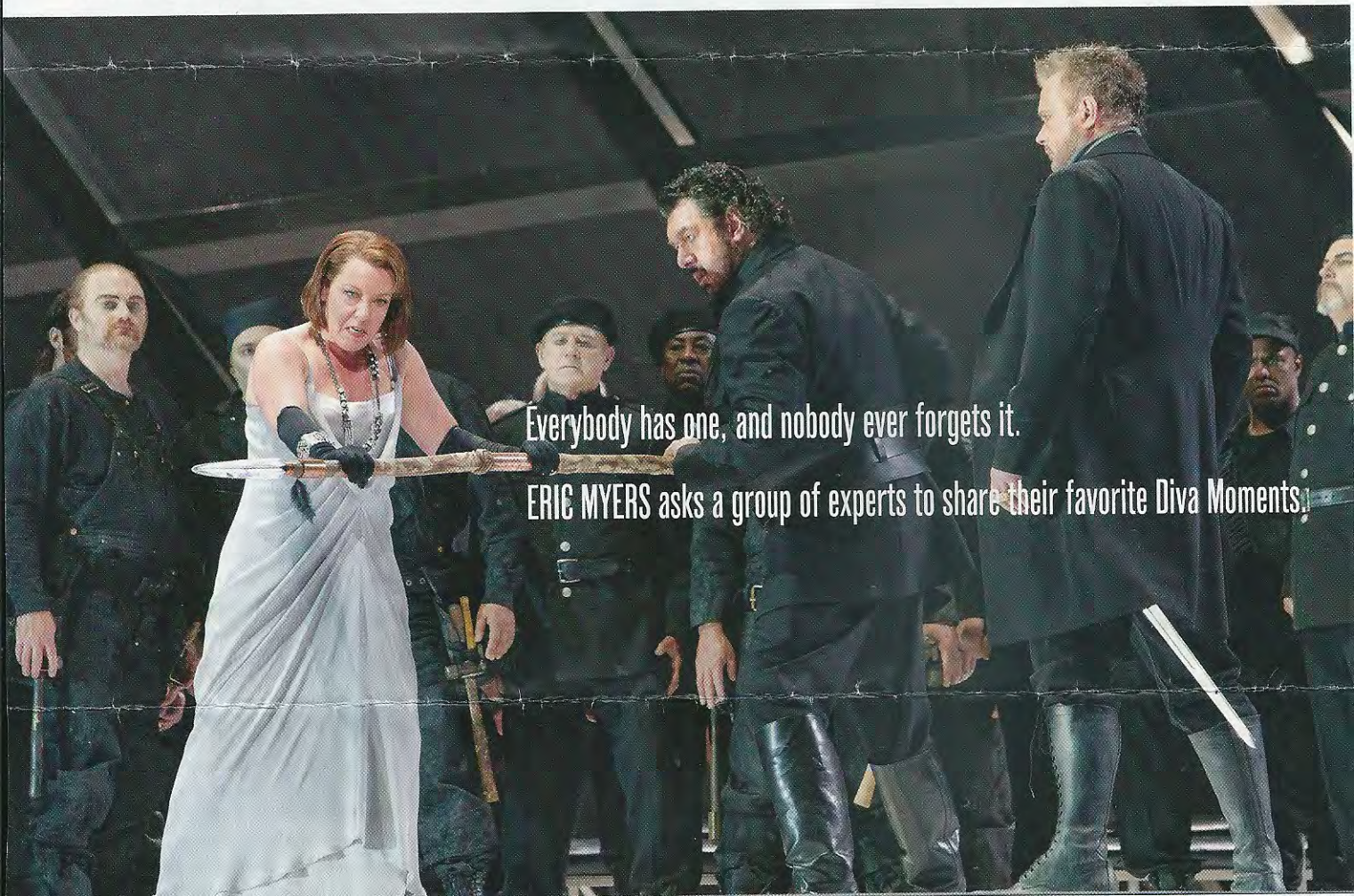


Sondra Radvanovsky, left, in the title role of *Suor Angelica* at Los Angeles Opera, 2008; Nina Stemme, opposite page, as Brünnhilde in *Götterdämmerung* at San Francisco Opera, 2011

It happened to me for the first time on September 25, 1982, at the Met — Eva Marton's role debut in *La Gioconda*.

She had been wowing the audience for three acts with her visceral performing style, her thrilling top and her down-and-dirty chest tones. But after she scored with one of the most exciting "Suicidio's ever, the cheers and bravas and rabid applause would not stop. Finally — if only to put an end to things and get the performance moving again — Marton did the unthinkable and flew in the face of a cardinal Met dictum: for a split second, she broke character and inclined her head in the briefest of bows, acknowledging the acclaim. It was my first genuine Diva Moment in the opera house.

at the end of the first act. I was not yet in a position to be any kind of real judge of performance — I was just a kid. But any time Jeritza stood on a stage, there was an electricity throughout the house. She was always totally involved, and at the same time totally aware of what she was doing. There was a regality about her. She simply *knew* she was a diva. And that continued all her life. Decades later, long after she had retired, she invited me to be her guest for a performance at the Met, and at the intermission she barreled through there as if the rest of the audience didn't count. Her elbows were sharp as nails!"



Everybody has one, and nobody ever forgets it.

ERIC MYERS asks a group of experts to share their favorite Diva Moments!

feel as well as hear it. Corelli went through the side door to escort her into the church, and — she didn't come out! There was a moment where we thought, 'Well, where *is* she?' And then she *shot* through the door really fast — simply went to the front of the stage and stood there. And the audience just cheered for maybe two minutes! It was extraordinary. She stood absolutely still, in character as Tosca, holding the flowers and looking *amazing*. Talk about a Diva Moment — that one was seismic! Just by holding that extra beat before she entered, and not entering slowly, but *shooting* through the door, she electrified the public, without having actually sung an onstage note."

Ira Siff, stage director, Met broadcast commentator and creator of drag diva Mme. Vera Galupe-Borszkh, singles out a moment in Act III of that performance that was formative for him. It was the high-lying phrase "Io quella lama" that ends Tosca's narrative of how she killed Scarpia. "By 1965, Callas's high C was not a thing of beauty," he says, "and when she lunged at it in that phrase, the sound elicited a loud gasp from the audience. Callas, entirely in character and a brilliant Tosca all evening, broke it for a split second to glare in the direction of the public, those huge eyes darting toward us for just one terrifying moment. After that, we behaved."

Barbara Cook, creator of Cunegonde in *Candide* and Marian in *The Music Man*, is a frequent operagoer who credits Renée Fleming with giving her an entire series of Defining Diva Moments. For Cook, the most memorable was when Fleming was paired with Marcello Giordani in *Manon* in 1997. "That sexy, wonderful scene at the church — well, it really caught fire. It worked like gangbusters. I remember thinking that this was one of the greatest opera moments I'd ever seen. And I had seen that opera before, but this was an incredible night. It was not just me — everyone around me was talking about it. I found myself talking about it to people I didn't even *know*. We were all saying, 'My God, what a spectacular night to be here!'"

One of the honor badges a true diva may proudly wear is the refusal to give less than 100 percent, even in a dress rehearsal. Barbara Barrie, a Tony nominee from the original cast of *Company* and an Oscar nominee for *Breaking Away*, is a life-long opera fan whose most telling diva experience came by way of Natalie Dessay at a Met dress rehearsal of *La Fille du Régiment*. "From the moment you first saw her, ironing uniforms in a sleeveless T-shirt, she struck you. She could do everything! She moved like a dancer, she could fly around that stage, she could be *terribly* funny. I turned and said to my friend, 'I've never seen anything like her — she's like Ruth Gordon in *The Matchmaker*!' She had that same all-encompassing enchantment on the stage. We still talk about it, to this day. She is an artist supreme, and she totally enraptures the audience without even trying."

Sometimes the test of a diva's valor can result in a very public



trial. Conductor Steven Mercurio was a Juilliard student when he managed to snag a front-row seat to Roberta Knie's first and last Met *Isolde*, on February 9, 1981. "It was the performance when she lost her voice completely," he says. "To her great credit and tenacity, she stayed to the bitter end. By the time she got to the end of the evening, she was marking some passages, and some things were coming out a fifth lower. But she didn't just walk offstage. She tried and tried and showed great willingness to make it all the way through. It reminded me that opera is this living art form, and that live performance is such a fragile thing. It left a huge impression on me and made me realize that these people are not machines. They are singers. Their body is their instrument, and it can be fragile. To watch someone disintegrate, yet hang in there like she did — it gave me such respect not only for her but for *anyone* who goes up there and does what they do to try and create that magic moment. To anyone at any time, stuff can happen. Roberta Knie deserved a medal that night."

Film director James Gray (*The Yards*, *We Own the Night*, *Two Lovers*) is someone for

Eva Marton, left, as La Gioconda at the Met, 1982; Renée Fleming, below, in the *St. Sulpice* scene of *Manon* at the Met, 1997, with Marcello Giordani



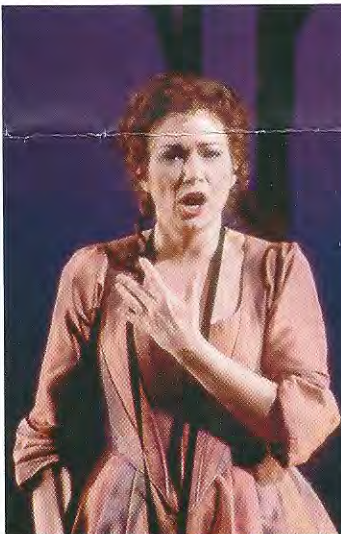
whom "opera is everything," and his films often feature characters with opera-size emotions and opera themes on the soundtrack. "My wife and I go rather fanatically to Los Angeles Opera," he says, "and I can tell you from having witnessed it in person that the best moment I've ever

seen with a diva is probably very recent, about two years ago. Bill Friedkin directed the two tragedies in *Il Trittico*, and what Sondra Radvanovsky did in *Suor Angelica* was incredible. When she sang "Senza mamma" lying on the floor, she literally gave herself over to the piece, with total emotional commitment. There was no irony — no wall between her and the audience. She *believed* it. My wife and I were both moved to tears."

Friedkin himself numbers Radvanovsky's performance as one of the top half-dozen he has witnessed in his own career as a director of opera and film. "With all of Sondra's extreme intelligence," he says, "she committed to this in an emotional way. Her rendition of that aria was one of the most beautiful I've ever heard. And I'll be honest with you, it wasn't in the rehearsal. I had her break down and study each of the moments that led up

to “Senza mamma,” to make those moments real. It was all there in her — she had the great talent to produce this. All I did was help her find it. Toward the end of our rehearsal period, I didn’t even *bother* to rehearse with Sondra. I would just sit with her, and we’d talk about it, because I don’t like to over-rehearse. Once I see it — and as a director, you can see in a performer’s eyes when they have it — you *know* when they’ve got it, and then the best thing you can do is shut up and give them the freedom to do it. I saw every performance, and I never needed to give Sondra a note. All kinds of stars came backstage afterward to see her, including Streisand. She sat with her and said to Sondra, “How do you *do* this? How can you act like this and sing at the same time?” And you know, Streisand is a tough critic. She does not mince words.”

The longer we live, the more perspective we gain on our formative opera experiences. When Francesca Zambello finished directing her *Ring* cycle at San Francisco Opera in June, she left with a deepened comprehension of a Diva Moment she had experienced decades before. “I used to write all the supertitles at San Francisco Opera during the ’80s,” she says, “including the *Ring* cycle. Eva Marton was Brünnhilde. I remember being overwhelmed by her singing the immolation scene live in that theater. She was in her prime, and it was a defining moment of an incredible force of nature — an incredible



A true diva plays by her own rules, and usually the fans are the ones who benefit.

raw energy. *Nobody* was going around saying, ‘Oh, you should have heard Birgit.’ Now, all these years later, here I was *directing* the *Ring* at San Francisco Opera and working with Nina Stemme, who was making her debut as Brünnhilde. When we got to that moment in the dress rehearsal of *Götterdämmerung*, I felt this incredible wave of the past washing over me as I witnessed Nina. I suddenly thought, ‘This is as if I’ve risen to some sort of celestial place on earth, and I will probably never hear this kind of sound and beauty and understanding of character.’ I had this sort of epiphany as I was sitting at the production table, thinking of Eva Marton and seeing Nina — these two divas, both very, very different, who were two pillars, two magisterial women. It closed the circle, from my baby-understanding of a Diva Moment to a grown-up understanding of it.”

And what of the diva herself? What thoughts are going through her own mind; what feelings burst through when she is onstage in the very midst of that elusive, ephemeral Diva Moment? One insight comes from Carol Vaness, a singer not normally associated with the broader aspects of the term “diva.” She will never forget what took place during a 1996 Met *Così Fan Tutte*: “It was the moment when my character reaches ‘Giusto ciel!’ — where she finally gives over to Ferrando. The entire night had been for me one of great emotion. Things per-

sonally in my life were sad, and my family not well. But this gal, Fiordiligi, always made me feel better. Well, I threw myself into her. The farther I got into the show, the less I could even remember *why* I was so sad. My heart became more and more determined to be with her, and to help the audience believe how real her predicament was. Her honor and purity were *so* sadly and honestly human. She did not want to betray *anyone, ever* — she wanted to be ‘like a rock,’ faithful until death overcame her.

“Well, this night, even I myself felt torn up by her dilemma. I *never* cry onstage. It is a luxury I never afford myself — I think it can cheat the audience, and I never want to do that. But I did when I got to that moment, during the E natural of ‘Giu ... sto ... ciel!’ Then my entire heart went with it all. Levine felt it and stayed with me, letting me hold that note. It was *not* a normal place to stop and wait — but something was *happening* on that one note. A life was changing in front of 4,000 eyes and ears, and Jimmy went with me. And I will never forget it — the complete satisfaction of knowing that no one ever would come close to that. It is true that I am *not* a person who will ever say, ‘Well, I am the best at this *ever*.’ But this night, both this moment and ‘Per pietà’ were untouchable and, I know, untouchable forever. There are many wonderful sopranos whom I adore in the part and who have their spectacular moments, but these two — never



From top:
Carol Vaness as Fiordiligi in the Met’s *Così*, 1996;
Natalie Dessay in Act I of *La Fille du Régiment*, 2008;
the inimitable Maria Jeritza, in full diva gear in 1973

again. That, I guess, is a true Diva Moment, and one I am so proud of. My [professional] life of thirty-five years of worry, joys, curtain calls, presidents, honors, Grammys, you name it, will always remain a wonder to me. After all, I do think often, ‘Why me?’ But in this moment, I *knew* why me!” □

ERIC MYERS is the author of three books. He has contributed articles to *Playbill*, *Time Out New York* and *The New York Times Magazine* and *Arts and Leisure* section.

