

OPERA always arouses strong feelings: people either adore it or hate it! Those who abhor opera may count among its many debunkers, no less than the illustrious personality of Dr Samuel Johnson who dismissed it as "an exotic and irrational entertainment". As an opera buff, I hardly find this sufficient reason to dislike this art Dr Johnson would likely have made a similar invective against Love, and look how popular this is! Well, Sam old chap, I happen to love Love and I love opera and I particularly love both because they are exotic and irrational, and I am not the only one who feels like this — so there, you stuffy, opinionated opera hater you!

Yes... well, as one can see, divergent views on opera can produce some ruffled feelings and passionate outbursts! It's in the nature of the art itself — this is a full-bodied and passionate form that requires a fulsome response from its audience. The cool blooded, dispassionate, and overly analytical among us will fail to see the magic which is the essence of opera, the incandescent spirit within its over voluptuousness.

In the preceding paragraph, I notice that I have, inadvertently but fortuitously, used the word "audience" rather than listener. In this one word resides the clue to properly appreciating opera, which to many is a form of music and to some a kind of theatre. In fact, opera straddles both worlds, and therein lies its exclusivity. The audio or musical dimension of opera is obviously a very important aspect of its uniqueness, but this has to be experienced not just listened to. It is my opinion that a lot of people have developed a resistance to it not only because they have not been exposed to it enough, but also because they have been exposed to it inaccurately and incompletely. That is to say, they have heard Opera music in a recording, or seen it on the screen, which only gives one a unidimensional view of this multi-aspected art. Its a bit like tasting food without smelling it or like watching Jurassic Park on TV. Opera must be experienced live, in its proper aesthetic and acoustic setting, throbbing with its rich pageantry and theatricality. One must accept it in its entirety, with its special codes and traditions, and an abundance of what Coleridge called, "the willing suspension of disbelief."

Although I accept that opportunities to indulge in an evening at the opera is not



Ruminations from Rome
by Neeman A Sobhan

OPERA

something that is readily available to many, (not just in our country but in many cities of the western world), I find that even where an opportunity exists, a lot of people have an in-built resistance to opera and reject it as something unpleasant and ludicrous. It is both to such people and to the potential sympathisers of opera that I address this article.

I cannot pretend to be one of the real cognoscentis of opera. But I enjoy it and I know that even a superficial acquaintance with the history of this art, a working knowledge of the plots of its most standard repertoire, and an open mind in listening to a different way of singing and expressing, can make opera accessible and enjoyable to many who go through life thinking it to be a lot of fat singers making loud noises on a gaudy stage! If one comes to this unique form of entertainment a little prepared, the rewards are enormous. After all, one is getting in one evening, not a single but a many faceted feast, for opera is not just one art form but, as Richard Wagner described it, unpronounceably yet aptly, it is *gesamtkunstwerk* or a "combination art work". Indeed, it combines many of the arts: theatre, poetry, ballet (in many operas), painting and sculpture (in the sets), history and of course, music — both vocal and orchestral.

What follows, in the second part of this article (next week), is a brief and rudimentary history of opera, its special vocabulary and some of the people who have shaped it over time. But before I present what little background information I myself have acquired over the years flitting with opera, I must make a quick admission. I must admit that, although I recommend others to do so, I myself did not first encounter opera by

viewing it in its full glory on stage. For me — pardon my mixed metaphors — my first glimpse of it was in a recording, but it was love at first sight, I mean first sound. Now I forget what I had heard but I remember being transfixed by the sheer power and range of the human voice.

I love music of all kinds, eastern western classical, modern. Pop to Op, as they say. I have a very open mind and am willing to give diverse kinds of music a fair hearing, so to speak. (I can even listen for a whole three and a half minutes to my son's collection of hard Rock!) I also remember how I always hated Qawwali till one summer evening I allowed myself to be persuaded to attend a live performance on the steps of Rome's Museo del Civiltà, where I heard Nusrat Fateh Ali sing an old Amir Khusro song with such thundering ecstacy that I was humbled into revising my ideas even on qawwals and had to reassess my criteria for music. Now my major criterion for good singing is that it be infused with passion, conviction, soul and honesty. My adventurous spirit regarding music has brought me to many kinds of unlikely musical experiences, and opera is one of them. I say unlikely because, fundamentally I am a devotee of Indian classical vocal music, and the traditions of Western classical music are supposedly too different for one to like both simultaneously. I am not sufficiently erudite in musicology to enter into a cerebral argument on it but to me the supreme consideration in vocal music is the voice which to me is a fascinating instrument and I burn incense at the alter of any form of music that takes the voice to the extremes of its potentials and explores the nooks and crannies of its possible range. In the operatic vocalization I

heard notes projected with a clarity and purity that took my breath away. It was not just a question of perfect pitch, tone, control or emoting. Here was the human voice at its most honest — without benefit of microphones, but with absolute discipline and control — not only producing sounds pristine as the first birdcalls of creation, but in all its power and majesty riding over and above a hundred man orchestra! At my first live opera, Tosca or Madama Butterfly I forget, the music swept over me like waves of impossible to describe sensations: loudly soft as the whisper of sea shells, thin and ethereal as some mythic siren song, deep as an animal bellowing in pain within some grotto, warm as molten honey, high and cereneing like seagulls, sharp as pebbles on a lonely windswept beach... It was a passionate moment: I fell in love with opera, and have remained so since. It has been a demanding affair because I know so little about it and it always requires some effort and preparation to fully understand it. But it has been worth it.

Even now, without reading a libretto first and without looking at the words, I cannot easily follow all that a singer actually mouths but I can intuit and understand everything that he expresses. I recall when I first heard Maria Callas sing as Norma the lines "In mia man alfin tu sei" I did not know Italian too well, but even then I could fathom from the anger and contempt oozing out of that rich voice, the revengeful sentiments of this aria which did not need to be translated into "Finally you are in my hands". To me this is where the real drama of opera lies: not just in the story enacted, not simply in the lovely melodies, but in the triumph of the human voice which, by its sheer power, beauty, dexterity, intensity and training, overcomes language barriers and communicates its emotions even to an untrained ear. This is true not just of opera, of course, but all great music. And to those of my readers who love all stirring music but dislike opera, I sincerely hope that one day they will leave some great operatic performance saying to themselves like Rosina in The Barber of Seville:

Una voce poco fa
Qui nel cor mi risuona.

(A voice I've just heard resonates here in my heart.)

Next week: OPERA-II

It is a beautiful rock formation just off Beirut's Mediterranean seafont. Here, lovers hold hands, listen to romantic music waiting from many open-air restaurants and nightclubs all around the area or simply gaze into each other's eyes.

But don't be fooled by the general atmosphere of serenity and contentment. The place is also the final destination of the unhappy, the frustrated, and the broken-hearted, thus earning it the grim title of "Suicide Rock".

Here at the Rock, at least 15 people have so far jumped off to their death during the first months of this year. Despondency, probably made more acute by the happy faces of other people, has driven these hapless few to make that big leap off the rock. Down below, the sea is so deep that only a few managed to escape almost instantaneous death once the jump is made.

Despite the tragedies associated with Roche (as The Rock is known to the natives) — or may be because of them — it has left its name to the entire area adjacent to it where many restaurants, bars,



Suicide Rock

disco houses and other places of entertainment have been set up. A favourite activity of most tourists and visitors is to pose with the Rock as backdrop as the sun begins to set. In the distance one can easily see the Mediterranean Sea.

Suicide Rock has a twin close by. It is a rough, boot-shaped rock formation with the toe almost reaching its twin. But it does not attract the same number of visitors as The Rock and its almost bare top gives it an air of innocence, unaffected by the tragedies witnessed by the other rock.

It enhances, however, the holiday mood in the area as the narrow waterway separating the two rocks serves as venue for sports activities like water skiing, swimming and boat-surfing.

Meanwhile, despite the tragic tales of Suicide Rock, it

continues to lure lovers, honeymooners and plain tourists, especially in early summer. The Rock is even quite popular in Lebanon although not as widely known as Denmark's "Little Mermaid".

To most Beirut residents, in fact, the Rock's attraction seems to be the sad stories of unhappy and unlucky lovers who ended their misery by jumping off the Roche. Customers at the many restaurants near it seem not to mind having their meals interrupted by the wailing of sirens of fire-brigade cars or ambulances rushing to the Rock.

They would perhaps pause from their eating jostle with the other curious people for a better view of the victim, then shake their heads in resignation as they ponder the thought that the Rock had probably claimed another life.

They know there is absolutely no hope of reviving anyone who jumps off the Rock.

But people are not only taking their own lives in the Roche. A growing number now have theirs taken from them unwillingly as the incidence of murder recorded by the police rises. A cunning murderer will find little difficulty in committing a crime. He knows perfectly well the attraction the Rock has for the romantic and the idealistic.

Records at the local police station list several cases of murder where the methods used to eliminate the victim seemed to follow a similar pattern.

The suspect with murder in his heart usually entices his unfortunate victim to the edge of the rock. There he engages the victim in small talk, and while he or she is distracted, the murderer quietly sidles up to the unsuspecting person, then gives him or her a slight push from behind.

The sound of a body splashing down to the sea below is barely muted before the killer finally vanishes in the dark shrouding the pathways criss-crossing the Rock.

— Deprhnews Asia

Passion in Stone

Erotic sculptures in central India endure the passage of time. Kunda Dixit of Inter Press Service reports from Khajuraho.

EXACTLY why the Chandela Dynasty of central India went into an orgy of temple building at the beginning of this millennium, no one is really sure.

The question is intriguing because the temples of Khajuraho contain some of the most exquisite stone sculptures and erotic art in India.

Voluptuous celestial nymphs prance across the intricate

balconies and columns of the 40-metre high temples. One thousand years after they were chiselled, beads on the necklace of Shiva or delicate folds of muslin on devotees are still sharply etched in



Inter Press Service

Looking Back—from This Side of 50

by Syed Maqsood Jamil

city of Dhaka, my childhood was spent in a remote village of Faridpur. The farthest I can recall about my childhood involves the backward location of the village, and about my parents with their near and dear ones. My father was the principal figure in it. He in his totality, belonged to the village. When I look back, his contentment in subsisting without the barest possible modern amenities and luxuries, his joy of savouring life in a place which offered little ease and comfort, look amazing to me. I remember him taking bath, no matter whether it shines or rains, in the pond, in front to the "Kacharighar" or visitors tinshed, putting a little bit of mustard oil in his navel and on the crown, and rubbing it all over the body. It's very hard to remember the occasions when he used a soap or a talcum powder. Yet never in his life time, did he ever suffer from rashes or allergies. The nearest doctor was several miles away in Faridpur. And I do not recall having seen him taken ill. He rejoiced in the company of the village folks who thronged the tinshed in the afternoon, and in the time spent in Chowdhuryhat, the village market place. It was not less than seven miles from the village. He mostly went there on foot, except in the rainy season, when boat became a convenient transport. His visit to the Chowdhuryhat was an event which offered me much enthusiasm in a place, where time plodded like a tired mare. The particular reason why I used to look forward to his return from the market was that he often brought me the Sitaram Basak version of "Bengali Alphabet". The book with the purplish red cover was a source of great pleasure for me. The book was in tatters within a week. Naturally, he brought me a new one every fortnight.

My mother, being a city bred lady, was obviously in great discomfort in the village which utterly lacked all amenities. Often she used to cry in the corner. She was so protective about her son that she never used to allow me to go out of the courtyard with-

out the company of my father or of the housekeeper Kuti Bepari. She did not even allow my father to help me to learn swimming. Lest her son should drown in the pond. The things I learnt from Kuti Bepari were modelling cocks, cows, dolls in water hyacinths. Whenever any of my relations used to visit us from Dhaka my mother used to send me to the "decent environment" of Dhaka town, at the first opportunity.

What strikes me most while drawing a parallel between me and my father is that while he could subsist so joyfully on the minimum, his son was bound to the convenience and comforts of city life. But my city bred joy paled in brightness before the taste of his happiness which prospered like the bountiful nature around him.

In the midfifties, we permanently came back to Dhaka. But my father all along remained a village folk, in his living habits, his outlook, his thinking, his pleasures. He could never transplant himself successfully in the 'greenhouse' environment of city life. I could feel, in his heart he longed to return to his village. That was not to be. It was devoured by the Padma in the mid-sixties. I lost my father in 1988. The loss of a father robs you of the assurance of knowing that you still can make mistake and not pay the penalty because someone is there to back you up.

In one year the Dhaka I knew by visiting places in the company of my parents and relations, and by watching from the 1st floor veranda of my grandfather's house, was that of a dimly lit town of hackney carriages, where movies were the notable events. There was a waterhydrant in the corner of the road. The nearby outer side of the primary school wall, was the place for pasting cinema posters. In a state of confinement within the four walls of the house, the days and nights offered no change. They looked like a sequence of denuded hills which contained no green patches. The inquisitive mind of a six-year-old boy looked forward to any

change with avid interest. A new movie, a new poster on the wall brought that much awaited change. The man with the ladder and a bucket of glue, was a very special man, for whom I waited the entire week. If a particular movie was having a good run, he would simply paste '2nd week' and walk away. That made me deeply dejected. When "Aan" was released in Dhaka in 1952, it created quite a sensation. I was at my grandfather's place. An elephant, I later heard, was used for publicity. Perhaps, it was released in Nishat, which is now known as Manashi. The poster remained there for weeks. My disappointment knew no bounds.

The first movie, I partly saw in the company of my mother and aunts in the ladies class, was Bimol Roy's "Maa". The tragic suffering of the hapless father and the silent sufferings of the mother (Leela Chitnis) were much too overpowering for me. My high pitched crying was a nuisance which the viewers could no longer ignore. I had to be sent back home after interval. New Picture House, now Sabistan, was close to our residence.

In fact, the movies represented the mood of the time. Then people loved to see, talk, spin stories and model their lives on movies. In my school life, when I became an incorrigible movie buff, I remember one incident when "Sagarika" was being shown in Rupmahal. It was the love story of two medical students with Suchitra-Uttam as the romantic pair in it. During the interval, there was much commotion in the ladies class, people around, were talking that, a female medical student or perhaps a nurse had fainted, being unable to withstand the paths of the movie which resembled her own. Such was the gripping effect of the movies.

Recently when Dilip Kumar was visiting Bangladesh, my son was enquiring of me with a quizzical look on his face, what was so special about this actor which demanded such profusion of honour, adulation and com-

pliment. I wish I could take my son back to the fifties and sixties and make him a witness of the time. It is natural for him to ask what was the magic in the actor who was always loosing the heroine and singing interminably slow maudlin songs instead of displaying amazing skill of kung-fus and karate. I wanted to ask my father the same question, after dozing thorough, almost the entire session of "Mera bulbul so raha hai" fame Kismet, which ran for more than a year in Calcutta. The answer is to be found in the two different times. There was little family entertainment other than movies and film songs. Generally the plot of the film developed around a story and the songs presented the moods and sentiments of the principal characters and sometimes dramatized special moments in catchy tunes and in well-worded lyrics. Songs in those days became popular because of the tune and the lyrics, not because of the highpitched beat of the instruments. The films occupied a place of importance, and was treated with much interest in family and in social life. It will not be wrong to observe that the films used to cast a spell on the viewers. They will talk about it in the house, at the restaurant, at school-college, hum the tunes, play it on the loudspeaker.

The spell lasted for weeks. And Dilip's spell lasted longer. His sad eyes, melancholy look, well-intoned voice, charming mannerism, well-cultivated personality, immaculately faithful portrayal of the character, they all combined to mesmerize the viewers. It was hard for the spell to fade away. People will copy his hairstyle, throw glances like him. He represented the culture of the time.

I discovered the joy of reading classics in the late fifties. It was through an abridged version of "Pather Panchali" with illustration by Satyajit Ray. "Aam Ather Bhepu" opened up a wide world of deeply fulfilling pleasure in reading. My emotional involvement with Pather Pan-

chali is still as fresh, as the day when I first read the book. Whenever I recall the description where Apu's mind wanders through the many fond memories of his dead sister Durga, the feeling overwhelms me. Who could bear the wrenching pain of those lines where Bibhutí Bhandopadhyaya writes "পরকণ্ঠেই ভাইর মনের মতোই অবাক ভাবা চোখের জলে আত্মবিশ্বাস করিয়া যেন এই কথাই বার বার বলিতে চাহিল — আমি চাইনি দিদি, আমি তোকে ভালিদি, ইচ্ছে করে ফেলবেও আসিনি — ওরা আমার নিয়ে যাচ্ছে —"

"The next moment as if the wonder struck language deep inside my mind wanted to say this time and again by coming out in tears — I did not want it, my dear sister, I have not forgotten you, nor have I left you behind intentionally — they are taking me away —". This is something which is worth cherishing throughout your life time.

I am an ardent fan of test cricket. And which unfolded for me a thrilling world in 1955. In those days, five-day test matches were festivals of great joy and colour. Dhaka Stadium was commissioned for test cricket on January 1955. My father took me to see the India-Pakistan test match. Ramchand was batting. And Fazal Mahmood was bowling from the Paltan end.

He with his collar turned upward and a stray crescent shaped lock beautifying his forehead, had all the charm of a film hero. And he used to bowl with such graceful style. He was the heart throb of the ladies. Abdul Hafeez Kardar, the skipper, had an aristocratic bearing. Tall, slender, gentle, soft-spoken, every inch a product of Oxford. That particular scene, is still vivid in the memory of those who were in the ground to witness the Pakistan-Australia Test match, perhaps in 1959. Neil Harvey was batting on 96. Fazal came with the new ball. He held up the new ball, perhaps, for all to see. Then he started the run up from the Paltan end. A silence enveloped the stadium. And believe me! Neil Harvey was clean bowled at 96! Middle stump uprooted! It is, I believe, is still, one of the most memorable scenes of the Dhaka Stadium. The little master Hani Mohammad who has the record of longest test innings (16 hrs 37 minutes) scored centuries in both the

handsome sandstone.

Sensual figures, youthful and vigorous, are captured in various stages of sexual congress. They writhe along the friezes, movements languid and free — it is a wild celebration of the act of love-making.

The gaze on the faces of the human and divine lovers is tender and tranquil, striking a harmonious balance between body and soul, between the mundane and spiritual.

When the Chandela dynasty collapsed in the 12th century, the temples of Khajuraho were taken over by jungle. In 1838, a British engineer travelling through the region chanced upon them. Removing the vines, he was shocked by what he saw.

"Some of the sculptures here are extremely indecent and offensive, which I was at first much surprised to find in temples," he wrote.

The temples were partially restored in 1953. Later, hotels and an airport were built to open up the area to visitors and pilgrims. Today, the Khajuraho temples have been declared a world heritage site by the UN Educational Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO).

"Perhaps no other collection of medieval art used the body-metaphor as voluptuously as these sculptures," says Pramila Poddar, author of a book on Khajuraho, called *Temples of Love*.

She adds: "Unabashed, incredibly frank, the erotic quality of Khajuraho is disturbing, but also cleansing. This is the love sanctioned by

innings of the unofficial Test match at Dhaka against MCC in 1960. He scored 104 and 111. My recollection of test cricket that Dhaka saw would not be complete, if I do not recall the incredible fast bowling displayed by Wesley Hall of West Indies. His pace was too fiery for Ejaz Butt to withstand, he fell on the wicket.

Time is relentless in its forward mobility. It is irreversible, Shakespeare summed it up by saying "Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow/ Creeps in this petty pace from day to day/ To the last syllable of recorded time." Nothing can bring back the years we have left behind. They are swallowed into the vortex of eternity. Its distant nature imparts an element of

obscurity to the rough edges. Whereas our present has an overpowering presence. It is not without its share of pleasures and perils. We generally tend to be forgetful about the worth of our pleasures that we enjoy, because they look as if they have been ours for a lifetime. The perils, expose our vulnerability. Our desperation, our plight, create the necessity to turn from the present and look to the past. In such a state, the past looks like a rose garden. Such kind of thinking is a bondage. Recollections and reminiscence, can serve us better when we get pleasure from it, gather the courage to fight the battle of today, and are gifted with the vision of tomorrow. And only then we can fall in love with "those were the days" and not get hurt.