

# Confusing plot, great songs

## Il Trovatore Edmonton Opera

review by Stuart Lemoine

The 1984-85 season of the Edmonton Opera Association opened Sept. 27 with a performance of Verdi's *Il Trovatore* (The Troubador).

A notoriously convoluted and confusing melodrama in which a good deal of significant action occurs between the scenes, *Il Trovatore* is nonetheless gripping because Verdi gives his characters wonderfully engaging music to sing. If the performers are able to combine technical assurance with effective stage presence, then the opera will likely be a success. This is largely what happened in Edmonton, and it is all the more remarkable in that there was no strong production concept in evidence in either the design or the direction.

Briefly explained (Ha!), the opera concerns two men: the fairly evil Count di Luna, and Manrico, a gypsy troubador. The two are pitted against one another in their love for Leonora, a noblewoman. She loves Manrico, which so frustrates the Count that he has his rival executed. It is then revealed by Azucena, an old gypsy previously supposed by all to be Manrico's mother, that he was not her son at all but rather the long-lost brother of the Count, and that she had stolen him as a child, intending to throw him into a fire (never mind the reason) but threw her own baby in by accident. By the time this news breaks, Leonora is also dead, which renders the previous intrigues futile. Some might consider all this waste to be high tragedy, but no character really displays anything like a tragic flaw, unless one considers it tragic to be mis-

informed, as nearly all the characters are at one time or another. Like I said, it is the singing which makes *Il Trovatore* go.

In this production there was some very fine singing and the the finest of the evening was surely that of Susan Dunn as Leonora. This young soprano, who is just beginning her career, has a large voice with a beautiful floating quality that could make her the Zinka Milanov of the eighties. A large woman and not a very specific actress, she was convincing nonetheless through the discretion and simplicity of her gestures and she more than held her own in her extended solo scene in Act IV.

If Miss Dunn stood out for her singing, it was Bianca Berini (Azucena) who walked off with the acting honors, although she too has a fine voice and her singing was richly nuanced. Azucena is the most dynamic character in *Il Trovatore* and the role is well suited to Miss Berini at this stage in her career. If some of her touches seemed unduly zany, this was readily excused by a sense of dramatic abandon appropriate to the emotional excess of the work.

Local hero, tenor Ermanno Mauro (Manrico) disappointed me less than in the past and this is, I suppose, a none-too-extravagant way of suggesting that he has improved. He maintains a smoother line than in the past and there is still the clarion ring of his high notes, but I was unable to detect the "dramatic stage presence" alluded to in his program bio.

His acting does carry more conviction than it previously has, but I find him on the whole to be rather dour and decidedly unsuave, and this is certainly accentuated by the ugly distortion of vowel sounds which gives a

forced quality to much of his singing. I realize that tenors who can even get through the role of Manrico are increasingly scarce, but there are those who would have us believe that Mauro is one of the four greatest tenors alive. These people are wrong.

It is all very well for Edmonton audiences to celebrate the international achievements of a former citizen by cheering him to the rafters, but the situation becomes embarrassing when the far superior vocal efforts of Misses Dunn and Berini are greeted with only polite applause.

The remainder of the cast was satisfactory from every standpoint and the chorus has certainly improved since the awful *Norma* of last season. I was particularly impressed with Alfredo Silipigni's conducting. He accompanied the singers sensitively, yet did not lose the momentum of the drama.

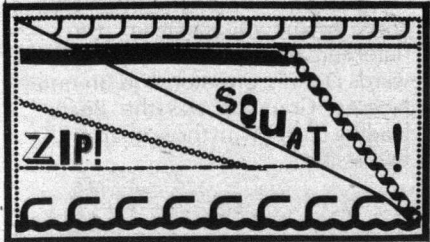
Cynthia Auerbach's direction was efficient if not exactly imaginative. She kept the action free of unintentional hilarity, and this is no small task.

I was not altogether taken with the sets. Last time they were used here, in 1978, they were credited to Philip Silver, but this time they weren't credited to anyone at all. Big and suitably gloomy, they required lengthy breaks for changes and this served to slow the momentum. There was also an abundance of stairs, steps, and platforms which made for picturesque groupings but made quick entrances and exits rather difficult.

In sum, this was a *Trovatore* short on inspiration and innovation, which was nonetheless stirring thanks to the level of music-making. Certainly it has been some time since the EOA has done this well by the Italian Romanticists.



*Il Trovatore*: a notoriously convoluted drama



## Tommy Shaw Girls With Guns A & M

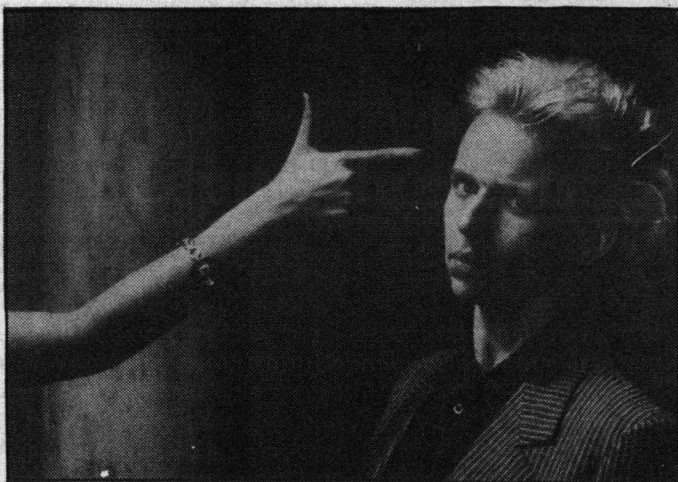
review by Don Teplysk

What do you get when the vocalist/guitarist of a mediocre multi-platinum band records his first solo album? Usually, you get a collection of mediocre ballads and semi-rockers that goes multi-platinum (ie. Steve Perry).

Tommy Shaw has gone out on a limb with his first album outside Styx. *Girls With Guns* is a collection of ballads and semi-rockers that is destined to go multi-platinum.

Tommy Shaw comes across as a really nice guy. He is agreeable in interviews, appears intelligent and even looks like a guy you wouldn't mind your baby sister going out with. And he makes music that will not ruin this image; nothing on *Girls With Guns* could possibly ruffle anyone's feathers.

The album is largely composed of attractive love songs which show the protagonist alternately searching for love (tracks 4, 5, 9, and 10) and apologizing to his love (tracks 2, 3, 6, 8). "Lonely School" is reminiscent of Styx at their best ("Renegade", "Blue Collar Man") but is really the only song on *Girls With Guns* that is. Tommy Shaw's slow songs



are smoother than his former band's ballads, and his rockers ("Come in and Explain") contain a raw edge seldom heard on Styx recordings.

The album's lead-off track, best song and soon-to-be first million selling single, is the title track, a "Footloose-y" bouncer that hops along to surprisingly significant lyrics. "Stand tall, don't think small/Don't get your back against the wall/Shoot straight, I can't wait/Aim for the heart and fire away." Bobby Dylan could not have moved me more.

It is all too easy to run down an album like *Girls With Guns*. The music is not adventurous; the lyrics are trite; and the package is basically unexciting. But AM and FM will welcome several songs off this album with open arms. *Girls With Guns* is music for the masses. Me? I'll stick with my Wham! singles.

## And they can dance too

### Backstage at the Kirov Principal Plaza

review by Neil Fenna

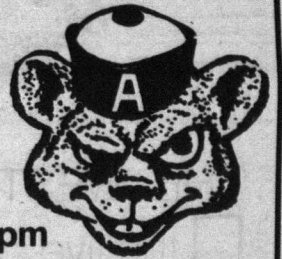
"I want it more than I'm afraid of it" — these are the words of a ballerina about to dance solo for the first time. The ballerina is of the Kirov Ballet's Corps de Ballet; the ballet is *Swan Lake*.

This beautiful and entrancing film, *Backstage at the Kirov*, documents the route taken by the great Russian ballerinas, from the selection classes at age six, through years of obscurity, to the Corps de Ballet and finally, for the best, the lead roles. In correct documentary style, the cameras and producers stand back from the scene, permitting the

artists to create the film just as they create the Lake of Swans — with the strength, beauty and automation we now expect of the Russians.

However, this is not the complete picture. Although we see backstage, and although we talk to the ballerinas, we get no real idea of what makes them tick. Do ballerinas have emotions, or are they indeed marionettes? Do they exist beyond the stage? Where is the pain, the tension, the frustration? In short, with a few exceptions, our view backstage is of the beauty of ballet, of the individual movements, artists, teachers and technicians coming together to create the complete musical idea, perfectly.

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