

Beginner's guide to opera

By KEN KEOBKE

You never thought you would like kissing either. Opera grows on you. It does more. It becomes an obsession, and for good reason.

Opera is the most expensive legal entertainment you can buy—getting ripped off by a scalper doesn't count. Toronto tickets range in price from \$7 to \$65, but only represent half the cost of each seat. The other half you sit on is paid by government and corporate sponsors. Bless their hearts. What does all this money buy? Spectacle.

To stage an opera such as the current *La Forza del Destino* (The Force of Destiny) requires 61 musicians, a dozen principal singers, 84 chorus members (including children and dancers), make up artists, costumers, stage designers and enough technicians to man a space launch, all working together to the rhythm of the conductor's baton. The music is monumental. Often drawn from history and mythology, the stories are grand, enduring, and *adult*; there are no operas about extra-terrestrials lured by candy into relationships with children.

Instead, passion and death and madness are explored with the most human of instruments, the voice. And there is nothing between the audience and this voice; no microphones, no reverb touch ups, no

swords said to be thrown down were still held; Isolde said to be standing over Tristan, was actually kneeling; and in the last act, the action took place on a beach, where Wagner has clearly written a castle.

At first, the dying Tristan's allusions to his castle and his companion's comforting assurances make it seem that the castle was only ever in Tristan's mind. But, the open plane of the beach failed when the forgiving King enters and idly witnesses the slaughter of Tristan's companion. It is inconsistent with the King's nature and the logic of the scene, and his searching and calling out for Tristan, obviously stretched out a dozen feet away, is laughable.

The opera playing alternative nights to *Tristan* is Verdi's *Forza del Destino* (The Force of Destiny). It begins with a bungled elopment

speakers. To realize that a human can make these sounds will change how you sing in the shower.

But back to the kissing part. Yes, many people don't like opera—but they can learn. Opera needs introduction. Opera needs preparation. Here are ten steps to making the spectacle an event:

1. Order your tickets. Try to get the first few rows; when the action lags, it's fascinating to watch the orchestra members flirting with one another.
2. Buy or borrow a recording. Many libraries are now adding compact discs to their opera collections. Play the music while you do homework or housework. Do not pay attention. Sway with the rhythms and daydream about the action.
3. Read a synopsis of the opera from a dictionary of music. If not included with the record, these summaries are usually short enough to memorize in a bookstore.
4. If there's a video available, see it. Otherwise, play the opera while reading the libretto. Libretti are always translated into English and contain clues on what to eat for dinner. More on this later.
5. Dress up. Ladies: rhinestones. Gentlemen: a second hand tuxedo. At every opera performance, one always sees hairy intellectuals in jeans practicing a perverse snobbery that suggests they are above fashion and only there for the music. They never look happy.
6. Invite friends, because on the night of the opera, it is necessary to have an intimate relaxed dinner party at home. Prepare a light meal connected to the setting, story, or composer. It's a chance to be creative. For Verdi's *La Forza del Destino* you might choose Italian or Spanish cuisine, a stew, as is served to the peasants, or even what you imagine is eaten in the opera's refectory. But for the operetta *Sweeney Todd*, you must eat meat pies served with hand-made biscuits in the shape of anatomical parts.
7. Drink a little champagne. Drink a lot of coffee. Save dessert till after. Take enough expensive chocolate so as not to resent sharing.
8. No talking during the opera. For lovers, it's a chance to use the knowing glance, the tender squeeze of the hand, the seductive graze of the thigh. At intermission, mingle: your betters will be impressed; your future employers will remember you; your dentist will give you better service.
9. At the end, cry *Bravo* for men, *Brava* for women, *Brave* for groups. Turn and look disparagingly at anyone who gets this wrong. Clap till your hands fall off or the lights come up. *Never* leave early, boo, or whistle; judges are notorious opera fanatics and will certainly side with any opera-goer charged with killing a rude fellow patron.
10. Have dessert at a nearby restaurant in hopes that it is where the cast will retire after the performance. As they enter, stand and applaud. Others will join in, and the stars will graciously acknowledge. The next day, tell everyone what a wonderful time you had. You did. You really did.



Tristan: good music but poor staging

By KEN KEOBKE

A woman nurses a shipwrecked stranger only to discover that he is the mortal enemy of her betrothed. Taking a sword, she rises up to kill him, but looking into his waking eyes, she cannot. Isolde lets Tristan live. When Tristan recovers, he kills her fiancé and takes Isolde back home but not for himself; his orders are that Isolde is to be bride of his King.

The opera *Tristan und Isolde* opens on the deck of Tristan's ship. Isolde broods on how the dutiful Tristan ignores her. Her love now turned to hate, she commands her maid to prepare a goblet of poison, planning to drink with Tristan and be united in death. The maid disobeys and substitutes a love potion. Tristan and Isolde drink, embrace, and the trouble begins. Four and a half hours later, seven people are dead on the stage.

In between, is a tragedy with Wagner's most beautiful love music. But in The Canadian Opera Com-

pany's current production of *Tristan und Isolde*, the designer is the star.

The opera has only three sets, one for each act. As there is little physical action, it is difficult to represent the changing mood of the music. An elegant solution was arrived at by designer Annalies Corrodi, who spent 1500 hours hand-painting eighty-one 18cm² glass slides. Synchronized to the music, these continually fade and dissolve to represent the changing skies and landscapes, as well as abstract mood motifs that the eye searches like Rorschach blots.

The music was excellent and the singers powerful, although it was sometimes difficult for them to compete with Wagner's heavy orchestral arrangements. But, the meaning was always clear: the O'Keefe is fitted with Surtitles, which project unobtrusive easy-to-read English translations over the proscenium arch.

But the Surtitles also pointed out some of the production's errors:

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**FRIDAY,
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Anyone wishing to register after this date must submit a written petition to the Registration Office no later than **Friday, November 6, 1987**. The appropriate form is available from the Registration Office, Suite C130, West Office Building, telephone 736-5155.

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