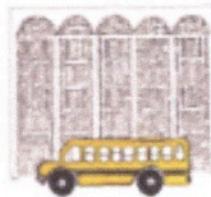


BACK TO THE FUTURE

by Louise T. Guinther

LLike many of my generation, as we careen toward middle age, I find my fancy wandering back to the bygone days of childhood. So when an invitation came last fall, I jumped at the chance to relive a favorite grade-school ritual: the annual class trip to the opera with P.S. 101.



It was 1972 when I first attended a student rehearsal at the Met. The opera was *Don Giovanni*, and I was in second grade. In my day, the cicerone for these pilgrimages was Mrs. Harris, my teacher and a former chorister at the old Met. Mrs. Harris took her opera seriously. An elegant lady of a certain age, she ruled with an iron hand — encased in an immaculate kid glove. I can see her now, her graying hair in an elaborate chignon, her timeless beige sweater suit embellished with a long double-strand of pearls, her narrow glasses pushed forward on her nose. Even more clearly, I can hear her precise and flawless chorister's diction as she drummed the rules of theater etiquette into our young brains.

Our opera odyssey always began with mandatory before-school prep sessions. Mrs. Harris took us through the work at hand step by step with the aid of a phonograph, a pianist and a projector. (She was the only person I know who *never* put a slide in backwards or upside down.) In the year 2000, those still slides have been replaced by a complete performance on videotape, which covers the material but leaves little room for the personal touch. Slouched between two sixth-graders at the last of the pre-*Carmen* classes, I soon discover that kids are more savvy nowadays. Thirty years ago, my innocent companions and I managed to coast right by the more lurid aspects of *Don Giovanni*'s plot. Don't ask me how Mrs. Harris explained to her charges what the title character was up to in the opening scene. The word "seduce" sticks in my mind, but there can't have been many of us who knew what that meant — and such was Mrs. Harris's mastery that not a single hand went up to ask. Parsing *Carmen*, the class of 2001 deems our heroine "a little slutty," but her independent spirit rates high with the budding feminists in the group, while the domestic abuser Don José is dismissed as "a wimp." I discover that sixth-graders today know what an order of protection is.

For all their worldly wisdom, though, they can't spend the bus ride warming up with the famous arias, as we could. In the absence of subtitled videos, Mrs. Harris's introduction included learning at least one selection in English. I can still belt out Leporello's complaint with the best of them: "How I'd like to be a master, and no more a servant be — no, no, no, no, no no...." To rectify this omission, I share the only English version I know of the toreador song: "Toreador-a, don't spit on the floor-a. Use the cuspidor-a — what do you think it's for-a?" My popularity rises, even if nobody knows what a cuspidor is.

This year's trip is led by Merilyn Croslin. In keeping with enlightened teaching philosophy, Mrs. Croslin's persona is more buddy than chaperone; there's not a whiff of the ramrod strictness with which Mrs. Harris kept her pupils at bay. Still, as we file into the nosebleed section, the whole affair takes on a time-warp quality. The sight of those crystal chandeliers always triggers fond memories, and today my childhood diversion of searching their sparkling facets for rainbows through unfocused opera glasses goes over big with my new friends. The wave of astonishment that sweeps across the balcony when the smaller chandeliers take their fanciful flight to the ceiling gives me a pang of *déjà vu*. I can feel Mrs. Harris's sharp eyes on my back, and suddenly I'm seven again.

In other ways, though, times *have* changed. Under Mrs. Harris, a certain level of sartorial elegance was required, and part of the fun was having someplace to go in my best party frock. These days, dress codes smack of elitism. Though no one in our group looks disreputable, blue jeans and sneakers are much in evidence. That old sense of occasion is missing, and I find myself thinking, "Mrs. Harris would never have let those kids on the bus."

Even more stringent were her notions of proper decorum. Her instructions covered everything — from when *not* to applaud to the menu for our paper-bag lunch. Potato chips were strictly *verboten*, and she strongly recommended a "neat" sandwich, such as peanut butter; something that wouldn't fall apart. We stood by the balcony railing to eat, and soda-pop was discouraged lest Act II be disturbed by audible after-effects. Her familiar injunction echoes in my ears to this day: "I do not expect you to be good — I expect you to be perfect!"

At today's intermission, we jockey for position on the floor, where snacks of all kinds are spread out on the red carpet. As we straggle back to our seats, I spot an army of vacuum cleaners ready to efface the evidence of those once-taboo potato chips, now blanketing the carpet like snow.

When the lights go down for Act II, a few youngsters (not, thank goodness, ours) get so excited by the sound of their own applause that the polite pre-curtain hand degenerates into a cross-auditorium contest for who can get in the last clap, hoot or whistle. The conductor waits, hand raised, until something resembling silence prevails. Mrs. Harris would have had a stroke.

Things settle down as the final act heats up, and I catch several of my neighbors watching literally open-mouthed as Carmen meets her fate. (The day's biggest reaction goes to the seat-back title — unheard of in 1972 — that translates Don José's "Démon" as "You bitch.") Yet despite shrieks of enthusiasm at the final curtain, I am struck by how little of the post-performance chatter has anything to do with the music. Between following the titles and watching the action, these kids seem to have been listening with their eyes. What's more, the visual feast has left them unimpressed. "The sets were okay," says one budding critic of Zeffirelli's sprawling Seville. "But *Riverdance* had better special effects." Gee. Back in the '70s, we were mightily impressed by the sheer grandeur of those painted backdrops. For these kids, even a Zeffirelli extravaganza seems low-tech.

Suddenly, I don't feel seven any more. Still, it's nice to know that, thanks to P.S. 101 and the Metropolitan Opera Guild, there are new kids growing up in my old house. Anyway, I'll always have my memories — and those memories aren't good; they're perfect.

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