

Masters Dissertation

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A detailed account and personal exploration into the character of Rodolfo in La Bohème by

Giacomo Puccini.

Preparation for a chosen role. Choose a major role from an opera that you might aspire to sing. Detail the characteristics of the role, the vocal type, the range required, the acting skills necessary, the difficulties likely to be encountered and solutions to these. Make it clear how you use reference materials (documents, sound recordings, DVD's) to research the role.

Introduction

This dissertation focuses on my personal process of developing and interpreting Rodolfo using the tools and methods I have learned during my study at Circle In the Square Theatre School in New York and the Wales International Academy of Voice. This process is ideally followed through prior to music and staging calls and aside from the director's and the conductor's concepts for the opera. I find this to be very effective as La Boheme is known as a verismo opera and the acting skills that I have learnt would be effective in portraying the realism in the genre.

The Bohemians

English born novelist William Makepeace Thackeray, having moved to Paris in 1834, describes Bohemia as being:

A land over which hangs an endless fog, occasioned by much tobacco; a land of chambers, billiard-rooms, supper-rooms, oysters; a land of song...of delicious reading of novels, magazines, and saunterings in many studios a land...where most are poor, where almost all are young, and where, if a few oldsters do enter, it is because they have preserved...their youthful spirits, and the delightful capacity to be idle.¹

¹ Cross, Nigel. *The Common Writer: Life in Nineteenth Century Grub Street*. Cambridge University Press: New York, 1985.

These poor, young idealists disregarded Bourgeois values and it's way of life in the pursuit of great art and literature, leaving the finer details of 'responsibility' to the gods. Materialism, morality and wealth, unless in the service of art, were rejected. In Henry Murger's *La Vie de Bohème* (to which *La Bohème* is based), we find many examples of this playing out. One example is when the painter and musician Alexander Schaunard wakes up having forgotten his landlord's deadline of 12pm that very day to evacuate the premises and to pay the 3 quarters rent owed. He had hoped, as he always does, that 'Providence would take the responsibility'. In the face of this, he sits down at his piano and tries to write a polka that he might sell to somebody on the street. Having come out unsuccessful, wraps a few of his belongings in some linen, stuffed his pockets and leaves all his furniture and belongings behind.

They rejected private property and materialism and would live in shared accomodations with other bohemians. Murger's characters Marcel and Schaunard, a day after just having met agree to live together, with Marcel kindly offering to pay the first months rent. They also rejected social graces and the strict catholic values of the time. One self proclaimed bohemian wrote in his memoir that 'We were afraid of nothing and thumbed our noses at public opinion. . . The most outstanding characteristic of our Bohemian existence was our open revolt against all prejudices, I might say against all laws.'²

It is also worth looking into the role that the Cafe played amongst the Bohemians. Cafes were seen as more than just a place to sit and eat, but a meeting place where ideas and philosophies could be discussed. To satisfy his coffee addiction and his hip pocket, Murger and his friends frequented the

² Knepler, Henry, ed. *Man About Paris: The Confessions of Arsene Houssaye*. Victor Gollancz Ltd.: London, 1972

Cafè Momus where coffee costs just 5 sous. Unfortunately for any poor bourgeois that found themselves in the cafe they would find the atmosphere unbearable. In *Scenes de la Bohème* Murger writes that ‘ the passing client who ventured into the den... Used to escape without finishing his paper or his coffee (the unheard-of aphorisms on art, feeling and political economy turned the cream sour). Such were the conversations of the four friends that the waiter who serve them had gone mad’.³ Such is the carefree way of life our bohemians lived.

Rodolphe or Rodolfo?

Although it is known that Murger’s Rodolphe is based on himself and his stories inspired by his youth, I will be careful to not draw any conclusions from *Scènes de la vie de bohème*, as Puccini’s retelling only takes from it what will serve his own imagining. One example of this difference is in the description of Rodolphe, ‘whose face was hidden by a dense thicket of beard of several distinct shades. By way of a balance to this wealth of hair on his chin, a precocious baldness had despoiled his forehead, which was as bare as a billiard ball’⁴. Not exactly the most appealing look for a romantic lead in theatrical standards, nor what an audience will accept as a representation of youth. Also too is his his Mimi. He describes her feelings toward Rodolphe as being only a ‘lukewarm attachment resulting from habit’ and at times displaying ‘an expression of almost savage brutality’. In the chapter *Francine’s Muff* Rodolphe recounts a story of former neighbour Jacques, a promising

³ Murger, H. (2006). *Scènes de la vie de bohème*. S.l.: Project Gutenberg.

⁴ Murger, H. (2006). *Scènes de la vie de bohème*. S.l.: Project Gutenberg.

sculptor and seamstress Francine. We find out that their love affair is tragically cut short after she dies of consumption and he subsequently from a broken heart.⁵

The libretto of our opera *La Bohème*, written by Luigi Illica and Giuseppe Giacosa, takes many liberties in their reimagining of Murger's stories. So to keep in line with the opera's through-line of story telling, I will dig for any known facts about Rodolfo and his characteristics in their text.

Act 1

- We learn that he is a poet and writer and currently writing an article for *The Beaver*.

RODOLFO
I must stay to finish
my article for
The Beaver.

- Also...

RODOLFO
Who am I? I'm a poet.
My business? Writing.

- He has a good sense of humour.

MARCELLO
Rodolfo, I want to tell you
a profound thought I've had:
I'm cold as hell.

RODOLFO
As for me, Marcello, I'll be frank:
I'm not exactly sweating.

- Willing to burn his own play for heat.

RODOLFO
No, the paper will unfold in ash
and genius soar back to its heaven.
A serious loss to the age...

⁵ Hopkins, Kate (2014). *The satirical stories that inspired La bohème*. From Royal Opera House website. <https://www.roh.org.uk/news/the-satirical-stories-that-inspired-la-boheme>

Rome is in danger...

- He and the others are 3 months behind in rent.

BENOIT
This is the bill
for three months' rent...

- They are crafty in avoiding the payment.

MARCELLO
This man has a wife
and foul desires in his heart!

THE OTHERS
Horrors!

RODOLFO
He corrupts and pollutes
our respectable home.

THE OTHERS
Out with him!

MARCELLO
Burn some incense!

COLLINE
Throw out the scoundrel!

SCHAUNARD
Our offended morality expels you!

BENOIT
I say...I...

THE OTHERS
Silence!

BENOIT
My dear sirs...

THE OTHERS
Silence...Out, sir...
Away with you! And good evening
to your worship! Ha! Ha! Ha!
(Benoit is thrown out. Marcello shuts the door.)

- He has a bold and charming when talking to a potential love interest. He says this in the first
10 minutes of meeting Mimi.

RODOLFO
In hopes and dreams
and castles-in-the-air,
I'm a millionaire in spirit.
But sometimes my strong-box
is robbed of all its jewels

by two thieves: a pair of pretty eyes.
They came in now with you
and all my lovely dreams,
my dreams of the past,
were soon stolen away.
But the theft doesn't upset me,
since the empty place was filled
with hope.

- He is fast to fall in love with her and it is reciprocated.

RODOLFO
Tell me you love me!

MIMI
I love you.

RODOLFO *and* MIMI
(as they go out)
Beloved! My love! My love!

Act 2

- has a millionaire uncle.

RODOLFO
I've a millionaire uncle.
If God acts wisely,
I'll buy you a necklace
much more beautiful...

- he is easily made jealous.

RODOLFO
Whom are you looking at?
...

MIMI
Are you jealous?

RODOLFO
The man who's happy must be
suspicious too.

- Also...

RODOLFO
(to Mimi)
Let me tell you now:
I'd never be forgiving.

SCHAUNARD
She speaks to one for the other to hear.

MIMI
(to Rodolfo)

I love you so, and I'm
all yours...
Why speak of forgiveness?

- He is intuitive.

MIMI

...

I've longed for such a bonnet
for months...and he read
what was hidden in my heart...
Anyone who can read the heart's secret
knows love...he's such a reader.

SCHAUNARD

He's a professor in the subject.

COLLINE

With diplomas, and his verses
are not a beginner's...

- Again, crafty when it comes to not paying.

RODOLFO, MARCELLO, SCHAUNARD, COLLINE
The gentleman will pay!

...

MIMI, MUSETTA, RODOLFO, MARCELLO, SCHAUNARD, COLLINE
Hurry! Let's run off!

Act 3

- Has left Mimi, telling her it's because he is jealous.

MIMI

Rodolfo - he loves me
but flees from me, torn
by jealousy. A glance, a gesture,
a smile, a flower arouses
his suspicions, then anger, rage...
Sometimes at night I pretend
to sleep, and I feel his eyes
trying to spy on my dreams.
He shouts at me all the time:
"You're not for me.
Find another.

- Got to the tavern around 6am after a fight with Mimi.

MARCELLO

All right. I'll wake him up.

MIMI

Is he sleeping?

MARCELLO

He stumbled in here

an hour before dawn
and fell asleep on a bench.
Look at him...

...

MIMI
I've been aching all over since
yesterday. He fled during the night, saying:
"It's all over." I set out
at dawn and came here
to find you.

- He is afraid their love is killing her.

RODOLFO
Mimi's just a flirt
toying with them all.
A foppish Viscount eyes her
with longing. She shows him
her ankles, promising,
luring him on.

MARCELLO
Must I tell you?
You aren't being honest.

RODOLFO
All right, then. I'm not.
I try in vain to hide
what really torments me.
I love Mimi more than the world.
I love her! But I'm afraid...
Mimi is terribly ill,
weaker every day.
The poor little thing
is doomed...

- Racked with guilt.

RODOLFO
My room's like a cave.
The fire has gone out.
The wind, the winter wind
roars through it.
She laughs and sings;
I'm seized with remorse.
I'm the cause of the illness
that's killing her.

- They are willing to stay together until the spring.

RODOLFO and MIMI
We'll part when the flowers bloom!

Act 4

- Although Rodolfo and Mimi have split up, he still loves her.

RODOLFO
You saw her?
(with pretended unconcern)
Really?

MARCELLO
She was in a carriage,
dressed like a queen.

RODOLFO
That's fine. I'm delighted.

MARCELLO
(The liar! Love's consuming him.)

...

RODOLFO
(O Mimi, you won't return!
O lovely days! Those tiny hands,
those sweet-smelling locks,
that snowy neck! Ah! Mimi!
My short-lived youth.)

- He has kept her pink bonnet.

RODOLFO
(And you, little pink bonnet
that she hid under the pillow
as she left, you know
all of our joy.
Come to my heart,
my heart that died
when our love died.)

- Despite his challenges he gets carried away in horseplay with his mates.

SCHAUNARD
Something choreographic then?

THE OTHERS
Yes.

SCHAUNARD
Dance with vocal accompaniment!

COLLINE
Let the hall be cleared.
A gavotte.

MARCELLO
Minuet.

RODOLFO
Pavane.

- Desperately cares for Mimi.

MIMI
O my Rodolfo!
You want me here with you?

RODOLFO
Ah! My Mimi!
Always, always!

- Devastated by mimi's passing.

RODOLFO
Mimi! Mimi! Mimi!

From this investigation, I have learned quite a lot about him. From my first reading I am able to paint a rough sketch in my mind about where to start on my analysis of Rodolfo. From a purely superficial reading it seems a little extreme to fall in love to fast. In the Script Analysis section, I will explore how this could work on a deeper, psycho- analytic level.

I also see that he is a very free-wheeling type of person and always seeking adventure. Poetry is king with him, and inspiration can be drawn anywhere.

Vocal Type

In the book *Singing Opera in Germany*, it lists Rodolfo under the 'Lyrischer Tenor schwer (heavy/spinto tenor)' category under the German Fach system. ⁶ Technically, I am considered a lyric tenor, but I may be able to play this role in a few years once my technique is secure and I will not be tempted by the grand music by Mr. Puccini.

⁶Marita Knobel, Brigitte Steinert, *Singing Opera in Germany - A Practical Guide* (Barenreiter-Verlag Karl Votterle (14 Dec. 2005)

The piece is Verismo in style, and my singing style should match that. Verismo began as far back as 1875 with the opera *Carmen*. The main factor of this style is that the drama of the libretto takes precedence over musical forms.⁷

On the subject of vocal type, the famed German lyric tenor, Fritz Wunderlich writes:

I have set the light Italian parts, such as Rodolfo in 'La Bohème' or the Duca in 'Rigoletto', as my limits for the next ten or twelve years. Rodolfo is really an exception, and I can only include him because Puccini composed his melodies in a manner so kind to the voice that a strain seems audible that is in reality just a natural vibration of the voice. Puccini's melodic gift ensures that the high notes simply come of their own accord. A good example is the final high 'c' in Rodolfo's aria 'Che gelida manina'. It is one of the most easily reached top notes in the tenor repertoire, because it arises from a melodic phrase in a completely natural way. You simply have to open your mouth, and it is there. Verdi's high notes are much more precariously placed, because they often involve large intervallic leaps. Verdi makes great demands on vocal agility and hence vocal endurance. Puccini is a composer who accommodates singers, while in Verdi singers have to accommodate the composer. For this reason my limit is higher in Puccini parts than in Verdi.⁸

This is a comforting passage to read, as this is a confirmation that Rodolfo is a kinder role on the voice and therefore one that could be sung by a budding young lyric tenor.

Acting Skills Required

The famed Russian acting teacher, Constantin Stanislavski is considered to be the founder of the modern acting technique most commonly used in theatre and film. While he was busy writing his books on the subject of acting, he also started an Opera Studio. It is in this setting that the book *Stanislavski on Opera* is based and I will delve into its contents to extract any nuggets of wisdom on the creation of Rodolfo.

⁷ Montgomery, Alan. (2006). *Opera coaching: Professional techniques and considerations*. New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group.

Schwaiger, Egloff. (1968) : "Warum der Applaus - Berühmte Interpreten über ihre Musik", pp. 317-323. Translated from German by Andreas Praefcke, 1997; revised by Gwynne Stanley Newton, 1998.

Stanislavski's techniques

The System

Stanislavski named his method of acting his "System" and I will draw on certain elements over the course of my analysis of the libretto in the following section. My main source for the following information is from the BBC, Bitesize student resource website on Naturalism and Stanislavski.

Given circumstances

The Given Circumstances are the immediate facts that can be drawn from the libretto. Who is the character? How old are they? Where does the scene take place? What is their relationship to the others in the play? These provide a starting point to which an analysis of the character can begin.⁹

Subtext

The text the playwright or librettists give us are simply that, text. Subtext delves deeper and is the underlying meaning and motivation behind what a character says and does.

The Objective, The Super Objective and Through-line

The objective is gives an intention to the action taken in any given moment. At anytime a character has a problem to solve or a obstacle in the way of getting what they want. And objective what they

⁹ BBC, Bitesize. N.D. *Naturalism and Stanislavski*. From the website <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/guides/zxn4mp3/revision/9>

would like to do in order to effect someone. Usually the objective is a verb and answers the question, “what do i want?”. For example, I am a child and my sister has stolen my favourite toy. In the moment of confrontation my objective might be, “to threaten serious pain”, or “to solve the case”.

The super-objective is the overall arc of your characters main “want” and is usually linked to the outcome of the script. It can be a basic human need, such as, “to be loved”, “to be powerful”, or it can be larger in scope, “to make the entire world bend to me”, or “to be bigger than Elvis”.

The through-line is the logical step-by-step moments on the characters journey through the play and towards their Super-Objective.

In my script analysis however, I use the word ‘essence’ a lot to indicate the Super-Objective. This is the case, because it was used in the translation of stanislavski’s words in the book, *Stanislavski on Opera*, written by Stanislavski and co-authored by student Pavel Rumyantsev.

Script Analysis

What is the essence or main theme that Puccini wished to express in his telling of this story? On the matter Stanislavski writes that:

Lightness is the germinal quality of this opera-play. What is its principal line?
These people cannot be got down by anything. Everything constitutes a pleasure to them.¹⁰

10 Stanislavski, Constantin. (2016). *STANISLAVSKI ON OPERA*. New York: TAYLOR & FRANCIS.

From this piece of direction, I can draw some inspiration to base my rendering of Rodolfo. The main Given Circumstances (G.C.) that are relevant before Act 1 begins are:

He is a poet

He is young

Living in a draughty, run down garret with his friends

It is Christmas Eve

He lives in Paris

He is poor and hungry

They are 3 months behind in rent

He has to write an article for *The Beaver*

It is freezing in the garret

I shall divide the acts into more manageable Units, for which scene objects can be broken down into more detail.

Act 1

Unit 1 Two cold friends

It is Christmas Eve and the two friends, Rodolfo and Marcello are at work in their shared garret. Right at the outset, the biggest obstacle to their work is the bitter, freezing cold. It is important here to feel the inner rhythm of the music which begins with forty measures in *allegro vivace* (a fast tempo). It is reminiscent of a frenzied waltz and gives the impression of the mighty draft blowing through the garret and making work almost unbearable.

The *Given Circumstances* of this Unit are that Rodolfo has a deadline to submit an article to *The Beaver*, a magazine. He is sitting and is contemplating Paris, perhaps thinking about what it is he must write about. He is extremely cold and hungry, which are both obstacles to his objective for this first unit. *Scene Objective: to finish my masterpiece of an article. Obstacles are that it's freezing cold; hungry.*

To abide by the main through-line of 'Lightness' against hardship, it's important to keep the mood playful and light despite the biting cold. Much of the dialogue supports the use of light action. Rodolfo is even able to make fun of his own play which they burn in the stove, saying 'My burning drama will warm us'. Stanislavski stresses that any moment to needle, tease, or play are moments you can 'forget the cold for a bit'.¹¹

Unit 2 Colline's arrival

Here we have the arrival of their friend Colline. Poor Colline tells us that he was unsuccessful in pawning off his books. 'Quiet', Rodolfo says, as if this extra income matters, 'my play is being given...', 'to the stove', replies Marcello. This is another example of making light. Colline's sale might have paid for firewood and dinner, and so to would Rodolfo's income from *The Beaver*, or the sale of Marcello's painting, if he is ever able to finish it.

Given Circumstances: Colline has not been able to pawn his books; they are burning Rodolfo's play, The fire did not catch.

Scene Objective: to lift your spirits!

¹¹ Stanislavski, Constantin. (2016). *STANISLAVSKI ON OPERA*. New York: TAYLOR & FRANCIS.

Obstacles: Colline's disappointment; the fire does not catch.

Unit 3 Schaunard's arrival

The stage direction states that two porters enter, carrying food, wine, cigars and wood. The boys cannot believe their luck. Schaunard now enters bringing with him an excited energy and throws coins on the floor, turning their luck around completely. Schaunard tries to tell the story of his good fortune, but the hunger they all feel renders them deaf to his story. It's time to prepare for a feast. The boys set the room for Christmas Eve dinner and again, a merry feeling continues from the previous Unit. Even more good news, Schaunard has a better idea... we eat out. The feeling of comradeship and celebration is key in this moment. It sets up what is about to happen next, which is the arrival of Benoit, the landlord.

Given Circumstances: Schaunard has arrived with food, drink, cigars and wine; it is party time; Schaunard is telling his story to a deaf audience.

Scene Objective: to feast like a King.

Obstacles: the table is not set, nor does the room look presentable for a King; the others don't know that you are a King.

Unit 4 Benoit's rent

A knock at the door and we hear the voice of our landlord. A panic while we ready our stations.

Benoit enters and shows them the bill and just saying one word. 'Rent'. It is evident that they roll out the red carpet for this man. All measures must be taking to buy time and distract. Stanislavki suggests receiving him 'as a dear and long-awaited guest'. Marcel takes the lead and starts pushing Benoit on the matter of his love life. It is clear to the others that he has a plan. As an actor playing Rodolfo in this moment, I would try and play actions to really make Benoit feel like he is a real stud and 'one of the boys'. He bites our bait and starts talking about women. Then comes the moment we have been waiting for:

BENOIT

I'm paying myself back now
for my shy youth...

my pastime, you know,
a lively woman... a bit...

well, not a whale exactly
or a relief-map of the world
or a face like a full moon,
but not thin, really thin. No!

Thin women are worrisome
and often... a nuisance...
always full of complaints,
for example...

...my wife!

(Marcello rises, feigning moral indignation. The others
do the same.)

MARCELLO

This man has a wife
and foul desires in his heart!

THE OTHERS

Horrors!

RODOLFO

He corrupts and pollutes
our respectable home.

THE OTHERS

Out with him!

At this moment, I would play the action of shaming at a level of the worst kind of Soap Opera melodrama.

Given Circumstances: Benoit has come to collect the rent; the boys bamboozle him and get him drunk; they play a trick on him and throw him out.

Scene Objective: to kick out the intruder.

Obstacles: He is the owner of the building; he has asked for the rent many times before; he cannot know that we have no intention of paying.

Unit 5

The departure

After we have got rid of the pesky landlord, the room needs to be put back in preparation for our departure to the Café. Unfortunately, Rodolfo cannot leave until he has finished his article. A potential *Why* for this could be if he were to do a good job, he may get noticed by someone of note. He might rise to the level of a great artist. He lets the others know that he will only take 5 minutes, saying ‘I know my trade’.

Given Circumstances: They prepare to leave for Café Momus in the Latin Quarter; they divide the money; Rodolfo stays to finish his article.

Scene Objective: to get back into the zone.

Obstacles: The party has just begun and is moving on without me; temptation for pleasure.

Unit 6

Mimi’s arrival

After all the festivities, Rodolfo finds it hard to find the will to work. A knock at the door. We meet Mimi with her extinguished candle. She faints. Stanislavski instructs his Rodolfo to treat this moment very carefully, as if it may fly away at any moment. I must play a nurse for a second, caring for Mimi and making sure she is ok. Her candle is lit and she leaves. Rodolfo is left alone for a second basking in the shadow of what had transpired. She comes back in search for her keys. Here is a chance for him to stall her departure, to find out who she is. Rodolfo searches the floor alongside Mimi and it is dark. Their hands touch and Rodolfo begins his aria, ‘Che gelida manina’.

Stanislavski suggests wrapping Mimi in a blanket so that she can be comfortable while they have their chat. He is also clear too that they are not yet in love. They are speaking as comrades at this moment and speak openly to one another. He has a chance to tell her about himself and perhaps, if he makes a good impression, she will give him the information he is dying to know. *Why* has he spoken about himself for so long? It could be that if he opens up about himself, she will in turn do so to reveal her relationship status. She tells him a little about herself. He is falling for her sweetness, her innocence and her outlook on life. They are startled by his friends calling from the street. I must comfort her at this moment, informing her that they are friends. They are harmless. After he gets rid of the boys, they are left alone and declare their love for each other. Mimi will join him and his friends at the Cafe, and then perhaps come back to the garret after.

Given Circumstances: Mimi is in search for a flame to light her candle; she looks ill and faints; she comes back looking for her keys; They get acquainted; They fall in love.

Scene Objective: to seal the deal.

Obstacles: She is ill; she is delicate and might get scared away; it is cold and dark; she is a girl and is alone with a strange boy; his friends startle her.

Act 2

Unit 1

Christmas in the Latin Quarter

Stanislavski said of this act that there are 'two fundamental elements in this scene ... Lyric and comic.' The setting is now placed in a city square and at the Café Momus. There are people

everywhere, including the general public, hawkers, children, and soldiers. Mimi and Rodolfo are out shopping together. She wants a scarf and he buys her one. There is a lot of movement. A moment happens in which either Mimi is looking at another man, or he sees her being stared at. Rodolfo questions, “Whom are you looking at?,” to which she replies, “Are you jealous?” This will be a very interesting moment to play, because there are so many ways to look at it. I would be inclined to make this moment between he and another male, but this would be up to the director. Perhaps he is easily made jealous. Regardless, he may not yet feel like he has entirely “sealed the deal” so to speak. I would play this as an insecurity, rather than outright jealousy. This would make Rodolfo much more empathetic and provide a juxtaposition to the turmoil of Marcello and Musetta’s relationship.

Given Circumstances: Christmas Eve mayhem; crowds of shoppers and merry-makers

crowding the square; Rodolfo buys Mimi a scarf; it’s freezing and Mimi is not yet 100%;

She catches the gaze of a strange man.

Scene Objective: to make you feel like a princess.

Obstacles: She is a little frail still; crowd is large, careful not to lose her; She catches the gaze of a strange man; it’s very cold; it’s loud.

Unit 2

Mimi meets the Bohemians

Rodolfo and Mimi enter the Cafe and are greeted by the gang. Stanislavski’s description of the essence of the action in the cafe as being jocular and a farce. He also talks of Rodolfo talking jealous guard over Mimi as ‘he knows his comrades.’ This suggests that he feels his friends are far

too unpredictable at times to be trusted. Marcello takes offence to something Mimi innocently said to him:

MIMI
Love is sweet, sweeter than honey.

MARCELLO
That depends: it's honey or gall!

MIMI
Heavens! I've offended him!

RODOLFO
He's mourning, Mimi!

Here I will play an action *to make her at ease*. I know that if I were to bring a potential partner into my friendship circle, I would be monitoring every moment very carefully and always trying to keep the energy light and fun.

Given Circumstances: The gang meet Mimi for the first time; They approve; The boys are making a fuss over Mimi; Marcello is offended by all the talk of love; We are inside a busy cafe.

Scene Objective: to make you feel at ease.

Obstacles: The gang are swarming her with charm; it is quite noisy; Marcello is upset after Mimi said something.

Unit 3 Musetta arrives with Alcindoro

Musetta now enters with elderly, wealthy Alcindoro. A lot of action and drama takes place in this section, but here is a chance to put to practice the essence of *La Boheme's* theme. Lightness is above all else and nothing can bring them down. Rodolfo's concentration then should be on Mimi's happiness and their new love together.

Given Circumstances: Musetta is making a scene; Marcello is upset; There is a lot going on; They charge their bill to Alcindoro and run off.

Scene Objective: to plant seeds for our love to grow.

Obstacles: Very noisy; Musetta is being dramatic; A lot of action that is trying to pull focus away from my attention to Mimi.

Act 3

Unit 1 The Toll Gate

It is now February and there is snow everywhere. Dawn is about to break. The setting is the *Barrière d'Enfer*, which is a toll gate designed to collect taxes from merchants selling goods in Paris.¹² Stanislavski points out that this act should start in a 'half-asleep mood' and that the main focus for Mimi and Rodolfo in this act is 'to get through the winter.' Milkmaids, sweepers and guards interact in the background. In front of the tollgate is a small tavern, in which we discover Marchello and Musetta have taken residency there for a month (Marchello to paint a mural and Musetta to teach singing). Mimi has come in search of Rodolfo and to get an answer to her confusion. Rodolfo has left her in the night claiming that they shouldn't be together. Mimi explains to Marchello that they have tried to separate multiple times, but they are too much in love to do so.

¹² "Barrière d'Enfer," n.d. From https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Barrière_d'Enfer

Given Circumstances: Dawn; It is February and there is snow everywhere; Mimi has come in search of Marchello seeking help; Her illness has become much worse; Rodolfo is asleep in the tavern, having stumbled in around 5am.

Unit 2 The Goodbye

Now Rodolfo enters the scene from the Tavern and Mimi runs to get out of site. He had stumbled in an hour before and fell asleep on a bench. At this point Stanislavski is quick to point that this next interaction has three separate moments: 1) He has decided to leave Mimi. This is supported by strong, high musical phrases from the orchestra. 2) He justifies this by saying he is jealous. 3) The truth at the heart of the matter is that Mimi is extremely unwell saying ‘The poor little thing is doomed...’.

Poor Mimi has heard everything and Rodolfo tries to ease the situation saying, ‘I’m easily frightened, worked up over nothing. Come inside where it’s warm.’ He still truly cares for her. She then says a goodbye. On this moment Stanislavski suggests the following:

And you, Rodolphe, think she is leaving you just because of her pride and at the very time when you should be at her side to sustain her. The gravity of this moment lies in the fact that only five minutes ago all seemed well, and now all is shattered. Your relationship with each other is now a different one.¹³

They state that they will stay together until the spring because ‘Nobody’s lonely in April.’ I find this moment difficult to justify, because it seems so complex. Perhaps complexity is at the heart of the matter as they still truly care for each other, but they cannot be together. His love for her is killing her. Perhaps they think that they can remain friends, which in a way to soften the blow. She leaves her scarf to him as a memento of their love. A lovely but bitter sweet moment of the two recalling their beautiful honeymoon.

¹³ Stanislavski, Constantin. (2016). *STANISLAVSKI ON OPERA*. New York: TAYLOR & FRANCIS.

RODOLFO
So it's really over.
You're leaving, my little one?
Goodbye to our dreams of love.

MIMI
Goodbye to our sweet wakening.

RODOLFO
Goodbye, life in a dream.

MIMI
Goodbye, doubts and jealousies...

RODOLFO
...That one smile of yours could dispel.

MIMI
Goodbye, suspicions...

RODOLFO
Kisses...

MIMI
...Poignant bitterness...

RODOLFO
...That, like a poet,
I made rhyme with caress.

Yet as this is being said, “in the depths of your hearts the question keeps welling: ‘Should we now remain together? - No, we must part.’”¹⁴

Given Circumstances: Rodolfo has come to escape from Mimi, his excuse being that she is flirting with other men; This is a lie, he is truly fearful that their love is the cause of her illness; She overhears his conversation with Marchello; She says goodbye; They will remain together for until the spring.

Scene Objective: To part as friends.

¹⁴Stanislavski, Constantin. (2016). *STANISLAVSKI ON OPERA*. New York: TAYLOR & FRANCIS.

Obstacles: Mimi has heard everything; she is embarrassed in public; the longer Mimi is outside, she is dying a little more; She says goodbye; Exhaustion from lack of sleep; Mimi is very frail; Marchello and Musetta are having a loud argument.

Act 4

Unit 1 Summer in Paris

Stanislavski has set his production some time at the end of summer or early autumn. I cannot find anything in the libretto to support this, other than to logic that enough time has to pass for life to feel like it has returned back to normal. Rodolfo and Marchello are supposed to be at work on their respective projects, but are in the deep conversation. They talk of their past loves, Mimi and Musetta. Both has seen the other's girl and both men are happy that they seem to have moved on. *A lie*. In this first moment of this act I will try to use actions that deflect my true feelings. Again, I will go back to the original essence of the main theme which is *lightness* and that nothing can get us down. Good natured humour, sarcasm, prodding and horseplay are just a few examples.

The boys are brought back from their dream state and into the real world:

RODOLFO
What time is it?

MARCELLO
It's time for dinner...
Yesterday's dinner.

RODOLFO
And Schaunard's not back.

Normal day-to-day dealings.

Given Circumstances: Months have passed since the last act; The boys are back at work; They are secretly still in love with their ex partners; They are hungry.

Scene Objective: To make you believe that I am over Mimi.

Obstacles: Still in love with Mimi; Rodolfo is told that she looks like a queen now.

Unit 2 The Dance Scene

Colline and Schaunard enter with dinner - bread and salted herring. *Lightness!* Jokes must be made to make this situation tolerable. A dance with vocal accompaniment is suggested and they must clear the garret to turn their small quarters into a great hall. Here Puccini writes a *pause* for a few measures. Perhaps this could be a moment of preparation before a principal ballerina makes her entrance with a grand jeté. Rodolfo suggests a Pavane as their dance of choice, which is not the most lively of dances. Everything must be done to really make this moment exciting and spontaneous in feel. This will then make the impact next Unit more impactful.

Given Circumstances: Dinner is terrible; The boys start a grand dance party; They start to play-fight.

Scene Objective: To abandon everything.

Obstacles: The thought of Mimi happy without him; Hunger.

Unit 2

Mimi's death

Musetta rushes into the garret in a 'state of great agitation,' and she is accompanied by the orchestra with a loud bang. In the score this moment is marked as being 'Allegro moderato agitato' which in music terms indicates a fast with moderate restlessness.

MUSETTA
Mimi's here...she's coming
and she's ill.

RODOLFO
Where is she?

MUSETTA
She couldn't find strength
to climb all the stairs.

RODOLFO
Ah!
(Rodolfo hastens out to Mimi, who is seated on the last
step. Then they carry her into the room and place her
on the bed.)

I think I will play Rodolfo's chief action in this section to care for Mimi with love. After he gets her on the bed she asks:

MIMI
O my Rodolfo!
You want me here with you?

RODOLFO
Ah! My Mimi!
Always, always!

As Rodolfo I would want her to feel like she has returned to her home. I would also continue to care for her - making sure she is comfortable, that she is warm, stoking her hand etc...

Stanislavski says that for Rodolfo, his entire focus is on Mimi. He does not hear what the others are saying, which is namely her rapidly approaching death.

Next Rodolfo produces the bonnet she had left him in the previous act. She is overwhelmed by the sentiment. I would play this moment as if I were showing her proof of my undying love for her, despite what may have transpired. I would hope that Mimi will get better by this memento of their love.

She is growing weaker now and she rests. A doctor has been called by Marcello, and now all they can do is wait with hope. The others are trying to protect Rodolfo from what is about to transpire:

RODOLFO
I still have hope.
You think it's serious?

MUSETTA
I don't think so.
(Schaunard approaches the bed.)

SCHAUNARD
(softly to Marcello)
Marcello, she's dead.

COLLINE
(enters, and gives money to Musetta)
Here, Musetta.
How is she?

The moment of her death has arrived and is underscored by a long ominous bass note played by double cellos.

RODOLFO
You see, she's resting.
(Rodolfo becomes aware of the strange expression of the others.)
What does this mean?
This going back and forth?
Why are you looking at me like this?

MARCELLO
Courage.
(Rodolfo runs over to the bed.)

RODOLFO
Mimi! Mimi! Mimi!

If I have done my homework correctly, the emotion and intensity of this final moment will come of its own accord. This being a result of failing to achieve the operas main objective:

Lightness is the germinal quality of this opera-play... These people cannot be got down by anything. Everything constitutes a pleasure to them.¹⁵

Potential Difficulties

Interview with Dennis O'Neil

I had the great fortune to steal a moment with the Director of the Wales International Academy of Voice, Mr. Dennis O'Neil and ask him about the potential difficulties in playing Rodolfo. It is a part that he is familiar with, having played it at the Royal Opera House, Covent Garden. In our interview he said that the pitfalls for the role are generally the characterisation. At the beginning Rodolfo has to be extremely youthful. The first scene between himself and Mimi must signal to the audience that he is obsessed with being a great poet, a harmless, a nice guy, he is immediately attracted by her. Why he hasn't noticed her before is one of the mysteries of the piece. He goes on to question how it is she has never passed him on the stairs- a very interesting point. He states that it is a very lyrical act, and that I must be very careful when I start not to over-sing. But he reassures that it's not too difficult.

Act 2 is a breeze. Good to know!

Act 3 however, is the red flag. He tells me that it's longer than it looks and that the tessitura is high. There are no high C's but there are lots of high notes. From a dramatic point of view, you really have to Act, he tells me. He continues by saying not be involved, but seem to be involved, because muscularly and vocally, that is a very demanding thing. The solution he tells me is to look at

15 Stanislavski, Constantin. (2016). *STANISLAVSKI ON OPERA*. New York: TAYLOR & FRANCIS.

Puccini's markings. "Look at how much *piano* he writes and try and really follow his instructions and you'll really score."

And then finally there's the last Act. Mr. O'Neil pauses for a second to consider it's difficulty and simply states that, "it's ok". Almost with a shrug. One last thing on the ending however is that when Rodolfo screams her name, "really scream it".

Finally at the conclusion of our conversation he concludes that the role is a real challenge dramatically. Part of the solution is to be very, very well prepared. Vocally airtight. He then adds not to get carried away, because it is very powerful music and the temptation is such that it is hard not to get involved. Pace it.

This interview took place on the 23rd of January, 2020 at the Wales International Academy of Voice, Cardiff, Wales.

Conclusion (150)

The role of Rodolfo is a massive undertaking and any smart young singer would take a long time to truly study this piece before jumping into the deep end. The work presented here is only a draft of what is required before stepping on the rehearsal room floor, and one must be prepared for anything to change. That said, I have a deeper understanding of who Rodolfo is and feel that he has much more dimension and complexity than previously thought.

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