

CARMEN

AN INTERVIEW WITH JOHN BELLEMER, DON JOSE IN BLO'S *CARMEN*

Mr. Bellemer holds a Bachelor of Music degree from James Madison University and a Master of Music degree from the University of Illinois. He lives in New York with his wife, Sarah Blaze. Possessed of a voice the *New York Times* calls "clarion-toned", he continues to appear in leading roles at opera houses across North America and Europe. Mr. Bellemer has performed Don José in *Carmen* with the Estonian National Opera, with BLO in 2002, and with Michigan Opera Theatre this past season.

BLO: How do you think it will feel returning to Boston, and to BLO in this role, after seven years?

JB: I am excited to reprise the role of Don José in Boston after seven years. The outdoor *Carmen* on the Common show was quite a unique experience. I am looking forward to singing the show in the intimate setting of the Shubert Theatre in contrast to the massive space of the Common with the jumbo screens, sound system and over one hundred thousand people in the two nights we played. Both are thrilling in their individual ways.

BLO: What do you enjoy most about this role? And about this opera?

JB: Don José is a role I love to sing and portray because of how beautifully it is written for the voice and how well the story is told in a very small amount of time. José is a gift to tenors as he allows the singer a true arc for character as well as an incredible matching build in the vocal line.

BLO: What do you feel is most challenging about this role?

JB: Pacing the progression of the energy of a man who is truly trying to be calm and passive after a previous life of violence. While he succeeds at the beginning, he escalates through a series of emotional peaks to a man who kills again, this time out of passion.

BLO: Luminaries over the years have taken on Don José. Who is your operatic inspiration for this role?

JB: I had the pleasure to see Placido Domingo sing the role live many years ago. I feel that he understands and achieves the vocal subtleties as well as the dramatic passion required for the role. I also have a wonderful recording of Nicolai Gedda, which I have listened to many times admiring his vocal brilliance. French tenor Georges Thill also has recorded an inspiring interpretation of the role.

BLO: How do you intend to put your personal stamp on such a well-known character?

JB: While this may not be unique to my approach to the role, I try to take advantage of Bizet's lyrical approach to José in the first two acts. This gives a better contrast to the more dramatic vocal writing in the third and fourth acts. It is a temptation to jump right into the intensity of the role without allowing for a slower progression of the emotion.

BLO: How do you see Don José? What is your understanding of his character? How do you relate to him?

JB: Conflicted between the man he is and the man he is expected to be. I feel I deal with this on a much smaller scale and understand his desire for calm and normalcy as he struggles with his more visceral and passionate impulses.

BLO: You have performed this role with the Boston Lyric Opera, Michigan Opera Theatre this past season, and even internationally with the Estonian National Opera. How does each new opportunity to perform the roles encourage you to change or revamp your interpretation? How do you keep the role fresh?

JB: I never expect people to work around my interpretation of a character. Yes, I arrive with ideas but my portrayal is a combination of these ideas and those of the other singers, conductor, and director. This revitalizes my interpretation as I am continually working with new groups of people.

BLO: How does Don José compare to other mainstage roles?

JB: He is much more violent and self-destructive than most of my other roles. The vocal writing and character development go to more extreme boundaries than other characters I have portrayed.

BLO: How do you enjoy singing French compared with Italian, German, or English? Which is most challenging? Which is your favorite language to sing?

JB: I love singing in French as well as the others mentioned. I find Russian to be the most challenging of all the languages in which I have sung. My favorite language to sing is German. I find it a very singable language because of its vowel colors. In contrast, the consonance of the language allows for a more full and satisfying descriptive feel. I actually wish there was more German operatic repertoire out there for my type of voice.

BLO: You travel extensively around the world for different opera engagements. What are the most challenging and rewarding aspects of your travels?

JB: The challenging aspects are living out of a suitcase, adjusting to different climates, and being away from home for long periods of time. I love exploring places that I may never have traveled to, were I not a singer. Also, I enjoy foods from other countries and cultures. I am currently enjoying the art of the different curries in Britain.

BLO: How does Boston compare to other U.S. cities you have performed in?

JB: It is a great walking city with fascinating history. Although I am now partial to a certain New York ball club, I grew up a Boston fan going to Fenway Park and enjoy the nostalgia of being back when I am there.

BLO: Do you have any pre-performance rituals?

JB: I don't do anything that would be considered ritualistic. I tend to eat filling, basic, energy rich foods and try not to overexert myself during the day. That and my regular vocal warm-up will get me through any role.

BLO: How do you relax and unwind between performances?

JB: I take advantage of my surroundings. I love walking and exploring wherever I am and I also enjoy reading and going to movies. One of the things I love about singing in Boston is that I can bring one of our two dogs with me and we can go on adventures together, having a little piece of home with me while on the road.

BLO: When did you first fall in love with opera?

JB: I don't know exactly when it happened, but it did happen and I am a better person for it!

BLO: If you were not an opera singer, what do you imagine you'd do instead?

JB: I would work for a service that rescued domestic animals from abusive situations. Also, perhaps run a Bed and Breakfast with my beautiful wife Sarah!