

IDOMENEO

RE DI CRETA

AN INTERVIEW WITH LILLIAN GROAG, STAGE DIRECTOR OF BLO'S PRODUCTION OF *IDOMENEO, RE DI CRETA*

Miss Groag has acted, directed and written for many regional theatres in the country, Broadway and Off Broadway, as well as opera houses. Her plays have also had long runs in Germany, Mexico and Japan. In 1993, Groag acted as part of an ensemble cast in *The Kentucky Cycle* at the Kennedy Center in Washington, D.C.. For this performance she received a Helen Hayes Award for Outstanding Supporting Performer in 1994. In 1997, Groag's play *The Magic Fire* premiered at the Oregon Shakespeare Festival. She received a Kennedy Center *Fund for New American Plays* (FNAP) to support this.

BLO: How do you think your varied background as an actress and writer has influenced your current directing style?

LG: I think it would account for the fact that I a) concentrate on individual performance and b) on text. Very few directors work on the text, word for word, and thus you get these generalized performances which are bland and meaningless. So people turn off the drama – what little there is of it – to listen to sound and wait for those high notes... On stage, in the non-music theatre, you can't ignore the words. In opera, they too often are handled as a set of vowels to carry sound.

BLO: How would you describe your style of directing?

LG: My style is dictated by the material. I would never direct a Handel [opera] the way I direct a Puccini, or Wagner as a Smetana. And perhaps I would not direct the same opera in the same way with different singers and at a different time. I hope I continue to think about these pieces long after I have finished a production and that I don't repeat myself. But I try to make the story come through loud and clear and give the audience something to think about not just a pleasant aural experience.

BLO: How does it feel to be a high profile female director amidst a generally male-dominated field? Do you think there are more women entering the field?

LG: Sometimes it feels like having wandered into the wrong club, and other times it feels – as it should – that we are all colleagues and gender is irrelevant. It is dispiriting, however, to see few women running theatres. I don't know that I see more women entering the field as I see too many people now, of both sexes, entering the field because it's "a gig" and not because they like opera or they know the first thing about it.

BLO: How is directing this production different from your work in the past?

LG: Just by virtue of the fact I have never directed it before. There is also the added interest that we are actually using a set and costumes which were designed for another, quite different opera: Gluck's *Orfeo*. It will be a job of adaptation more than of "creation."

BLO: Who have been your biggest inspirations?

LG: Giorgio Strehler, Jean-Pierre Ponnelle, Walther Felsenstein, John Conklin, Maria Callas. Contemporary directors I like – and they are always inspiring, even when one doesn't agree with them, are David McVicar, Michael Hampe, Robert Carson, Peter Sellars, David Schweitzer, Joe Hanreddy and Laird Williamson for theatre. I'm sure I forget others, but it's always exciting to see someone else's work (if it's coherent) who doesn't do what you do. I am leaving out the oxygen of my artistic life—Shakespeare, Eliot, Marivaux. Oh, one could go on and on.

BLO: What do you enjoy most about this production?

LG: I don't know. I haven't started yet. For the moment, it is working with [BLO Director of Artistic Operations] Nick Russell, [BLO Artistic Advisor] John Conklin and [General & Artistic Director] Esther Nelson, with whom I have had nothing but excellent experiences in the past. There is nothing like working for Esther and Nick and with John Conklin. *Nothing*. I am also excited to be working with [conductor] David Angus whom I heard at Glimmerglass a couple of seasons past and whom I found thrilling.

BLO: How do you feel about directing around Mozart's music?

LG: To be surrounded by Mozart's music is like walking straight into the throat of "god".

BLO: What is your take on Mozart's *Idomeneo*?

LG: If I can simplify, I think it's a confrontation between God and Man. What is Man's due? What is God's due? I may change my mind completely *after* doing the work. I try never to forget that I am working with human beings, not puppets, and that the combination of minds and hearts can create something quite different from what was intended at the start. I would never suffocate a singer's idea, if it's coherent and to the point. Great treasures of interpretation are discovered that way. Of course, there are singers who don't come with ideas and who just want to be told what to do. I can do that too, but it isn't as much fun or inspiring.

BLO: Have you ever directed a Mozart piece before? If so, how does that compare to this production? If not, what are your expectations for this production?

LG: I directed *Così fan Tutte* and I can't describe in words what it was like to be inside that music for four weeks. And I will direct *Don Giovanni* right before coming to Boston. They couldn't be more different, so comparisons and expectations might prove futile.

BLO: This work has been done many a time. How do you plan to keep Mozart's favorite fresh?

LG: I have never seen it *acted* with passion and commitment. I wonder what that would be like. I have often seen it done as a costumed concert and *that* would have disappointed Mozart and [librettist Giambattista] Varesco, I'm sure.

BLO: What do you hope to achieve in directing *Idomeneo*?

LG: I would like to see it be a drama of intense moral and civic conflict that will come across the footlights with directness, as well as the appropriateness of this theme these days, when religion can raise its head—ugly or not, depending on your convictions—and do much damage.

BLO: What do you hope the audience will take away from this production?

LG: I hope they get engaged in the above mentioned, and talk about it among themselves. I think what every director hopes is that audience members will argue about what they've just seen and heard all the way home. Or preferably, as in Europe, they go to a café and argue till 3 am. That's what I would like. If they go home talking about the pretty singing, I will not have succeeded.

BLO: What do you enjoy most about opera? When did you first fall in love with this artistic medium?

LG: I grew up with opera, so I couldn't imagine the world without it. I went to my first productions when I was around 4 years old. I distinctly remember *Aida*, where I fell in love with Amneri; *Hansel and Gretel*; *Barber of Seville*; and *Die Fledermaus*, where for some reason, I became intensely concerned about the fate of Alfred, of all people. I love the fact that it is the supreme form of theatre. For me, if it's not theatre it's not opera. And when it's theatre, there is nothing like it.

BLO: Could you ever imagine doing anything else?

LG: Sometimes I wish I could. I suppose I could teach literature – that's what my PhD is about – but it feels so dry. And I don't think I have the patience for teaching anything other than master classes in opera interpretation. With singers I have all the patience in the world.

BLO: You travel extensively across the country for different theatrical engagements. What are the most challenging and rewarding aspects of your travels?

LG: I have come to love airports, especially early in the afternoon. I do a lot of people watching and writing while waiting for airplanes. I love the difference among cities – I prefer cold weather to heat and I really don't do well in *humid heat*. But for a writer, there is nothing like the silent, almost non-descript atmosphere of a hotel suite, or artist housing where nothing interferes with those hours of work where you can concentrate without interruption.

BLO: Have you ever directed productions in Boston? How does it compare to directing operas in other U.S. cities?

LG: I once came to direct the first week of *Lucie de Lammermoor*. It was finished by an Assistant Director, as I had to be somewhere else, so I never got a sense of the city.

BLO: Are there any activities or sites you are planning to enjoy during your stay in Boston?

LG: No idea. I imagine I will try to hit the museums and the bookstores immediately. And the farmers markets!