

March 2011

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**Anthony  
Laciura**

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Small Roles, Big Impressions**

Tenor Anthony Laciuira knows much about making something out of nothing and taking things one step at a time. In his 26 years at the Met, he made a name for himself as the go-to guy for consistent, thoughtful, and hilarious work. Now retired from the Met, Laciuira reminisces about his years there and talks of his new role starring on the HBO series *Boardwalk Empire*. And his former colleagues share their admiration for this master of character and comedy. *by Greg Waxberg*

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# Anthony Laciura

## Small Roles, Big Impressions

BY GREG WAXBERG

*Tenor Anthony Laciura knows much about making something out of nothing and taking things one step at a time. In his 26 years at the Met, he made a name for himself as the go-to guy for consistent, thoughtful, and hilarious work. Now retired from the Met, Laciura reminisces about his years there and talks of his new role starring on the HBO series Boardwalk Empire. And his former colleagues share their admiration for this master of character and comedy.*

Anthony Laciura as Eddie Kessler in HBO's *Boardwalk Empire*

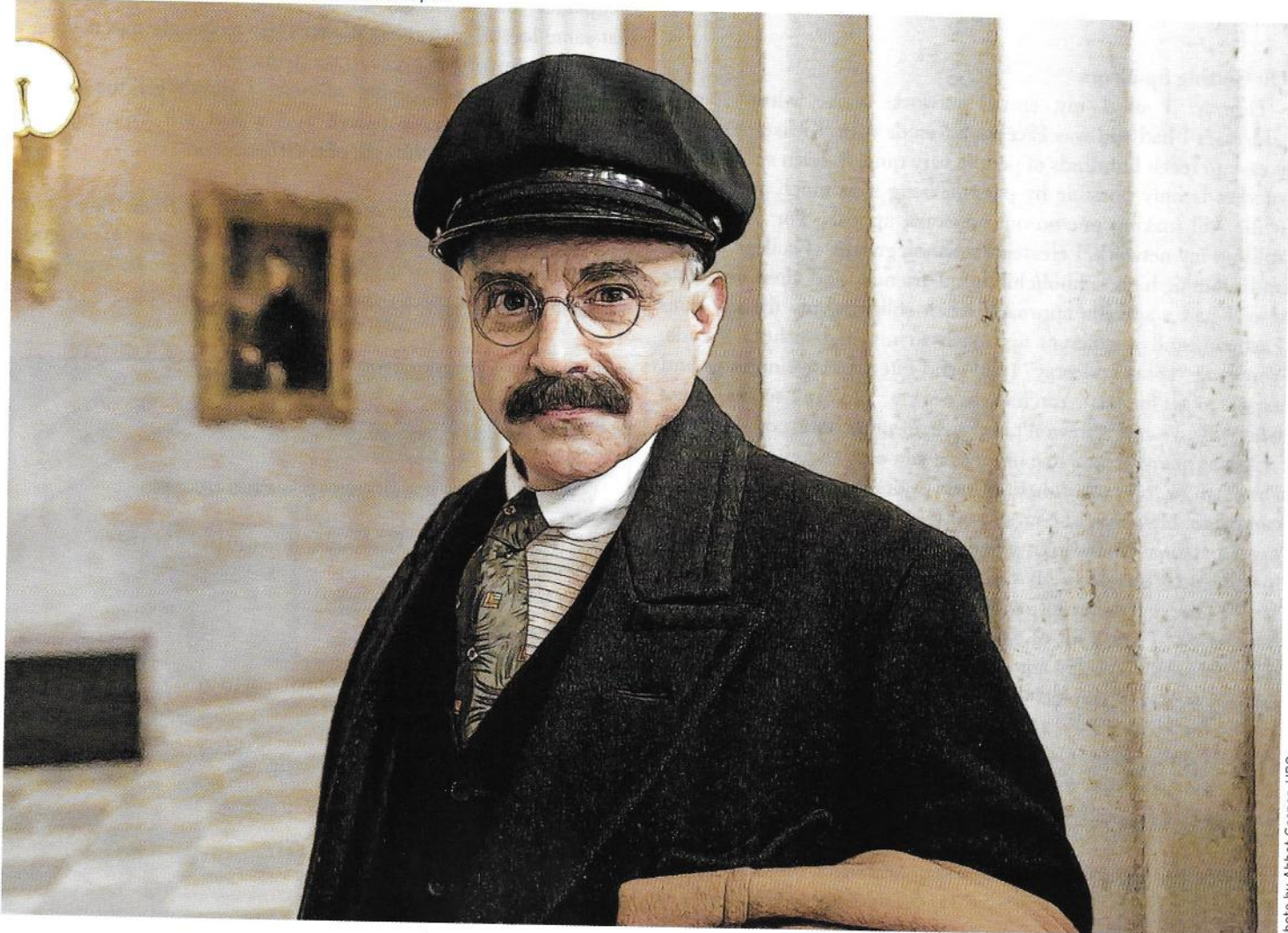
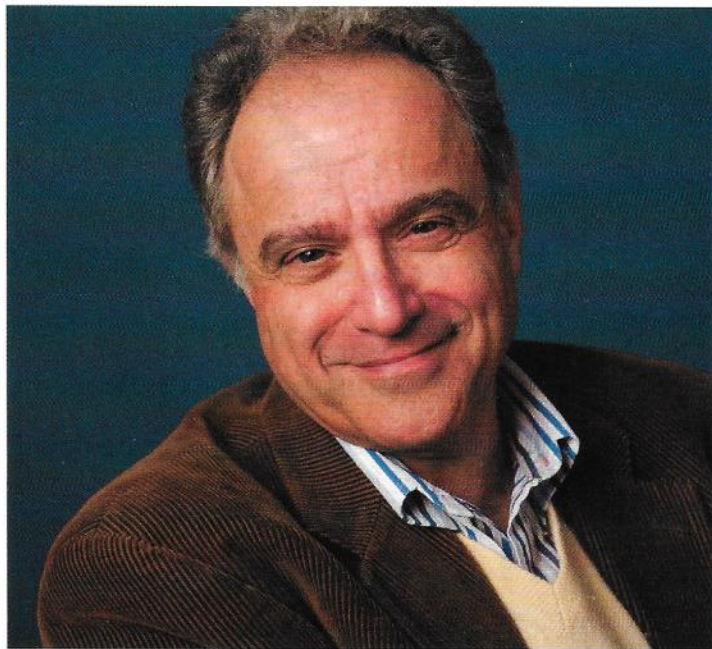


photo by Abbot Gesner, HBO



Top: Hakan Hagegard (left) as the title role, Michael Smallwood (right) as Andres, and Laciura (standing) as the Fool in Santa Fe Opera's 2001 production of *Wozzeck*

Bottom: Anthony Laciura

“Supporting artists—the house singers—are the Metropolitan Opera. The lead singers are guests,” says Anthony Laciura, who knows a thing or two about being a supporting singer. From September 20, 1982, to April 12, 2008, he sang as a comprimario tenor at the Met and other opera houses, amassing 877 Met performances and impressing audiences with his flair for comedy and drama in roles ranging from a perplexed policeman to a heartless henchman.

Even though his number of performances varied from week to week and month to month, depending on the number of operas in which he was cast during a season, there were weeks when Laciura was on stage every night. That made for a busy schedule, combined with daytime rehearsals—sometimes for more than one role. Yet, exhausting as all of this performing could be at times, Laciura loved every second of his comprimario career and, in retrospect, would not do anything differently. “I never looked upon it as a job, as something I had to do. I *wanted* to be on stage. I *wanted* to share my talent with the audience and my colleagues,” he says.

### The Beginning of His Stage Experience

Laciura has been sharing his talents from a young age. As part of his first stage appearance, in the Christmas play *The Little Boy Who Couldn't Sing*, Laciura played a boy who prayed to have a singing voice. Then, at age 10, opera entered his life when the boys' choir in which he sang at Sacred Heart of Jesus Church in New Orleans (where he was born in September 1951) was invited to perform as the children's choir in *Tosca* with New Orleans Opera.

“I remember it so vividly. We finished Act I, and the company offered us tickets so that we could watch the rest of the opera. I was so impressed with the Scarpia—Cesare Bardelli—and said to my father, ‘I think I want to be an opera singer.’ He was *thrilled*. It sounds precocious, but opera was already part of me. It's difficult to put into words always knowing what you were going to do. And, in my mind, the natural place to be was at the Met—the greatest opera company in the world—where I was at home for 27 years. I was very happy and comfortable there, and everyone treated me beautifully,” Laciura says.

Under the guidance of voice teacher Charles Paddock, Laciura performed frequently with orchestras in New Orleans. In his first concert, he sang Copland's “First Book of Songs” with the New Orleans Philharmonic, conducted by Werner Torkanowsky. Laciura's debut as a boy soprano took place a year after the *Tosca* production, when he sang the Street Urchin in *Louise* with New Orleans Opera; the cast included Norman Treigle and Dorothy Kirsten.

His path to becoming a professional opera singer led him to Loyola University, which Laciura chose to attend so that he could continue studying with Paddock to become more secure with his vocal technique. Upon receiving a bachelor's degree in music education, he taught chorus for three years at Redemptorist High School in Baton Rouge and performed often with New Orleans Opera. Thanks to a scholarship, he was able to attend graduate school at Tulane University and earn his Masters of Fine Arts.

Laciura as Pedrillo in the 1984 Metropolitan Opera's production of *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*

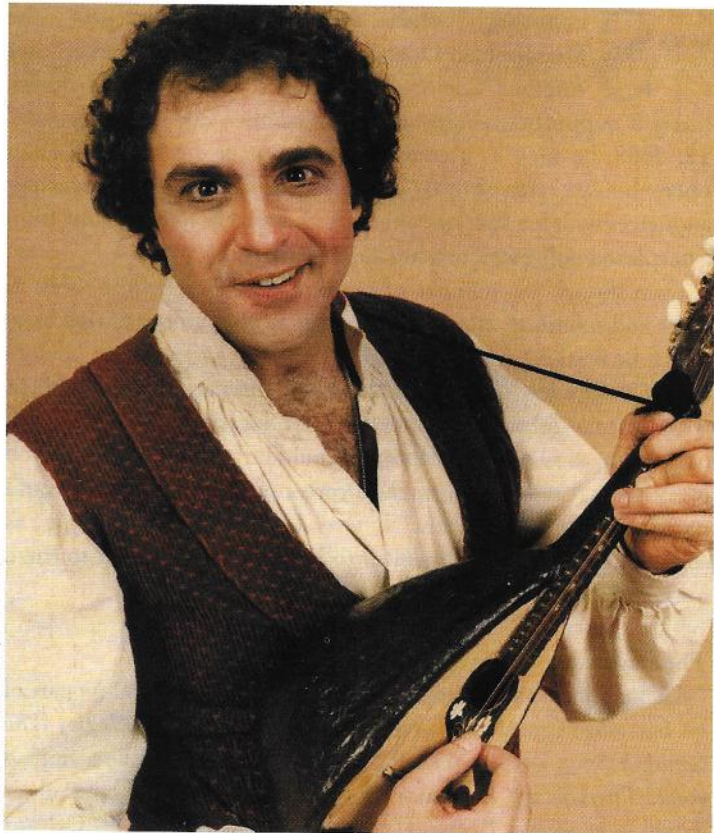


photo by Metropolitan Opera Archives

### Choosing a Comprimario Career

While Laciura had been performing in New Orleans, the late Arthur Cosenza, former general director of New Orleans Opera, felt that Laciura possessed a natural talent for comedy and acting and suggested that he consider a career specializing in supporting roles. "My instinct was that I was not immersing myself in all of these studies just to do supporting roles," Laciura recalls, but he was later given the same advice from leading singers who came to perform with New Orleans Opera. "I finally said to someone, 'If I'm supposed to sing comprimario roles as a character artist for the rest of my life, I'm going to do it one place—at the Metropolitan Opera.'" However, he emphasizes that he did not make the commitment to a comprimario career simply based on people's recommendations—he made the choice.

"It really hit me when I was singing Pedrillo in *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* at the Met. I accompanied the lead tenor to the Met's former photo studio so that he could order some pictures. In his photos, he looked exactly like himself in all of the roles he was singing. Then I looked at my pictures, and I didn't know who I was. I looked different in everything and thought, 'For me, this is right—to leave the theater and nobody knows who I am.' With make-up, a costume, a body position, and an attitude, I was able to convince an audience that I was someone else. That's an art form. I made the right decision," Laciura says.

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## “If I’m supposed to sing comprimario roles as a character artist for the rest of my life, I’m going to do it one place—at the Metropolitan Opera.”

### Met Roles

“Abduction” was not his first opera at the Met, though. “My debut at the Met was unforgettable. I remember walking out onto that stage for the rehearsal of *Der Rosenkavalier* (I was singing Faninal’s Major-domo in the second act), seeing the entire Metropolitan Opera auditorium and James Levine in the pit, and thinking, ‘This is great! This is it!’”

Since that debut in September 1982, a partial list of Laciura’s other Met roles includes the Sergeant in *Il barbiere di Siviglia*, the Novice in *Billy Budd*, the Simpleton in *Boris Godunov*, Remendado in *Carmen*, Spalanzani and the Four Servants in *Les contes d’Hoffmann*, Triquet in *Eugene Onegin*, Bardolpho in *Falstaff*, Nick in *La fanciulla del West*, Dr. Blind in *Die Fledermaus*, Trabuco in *La forza del destino*, the Hunchback Gambler in *The Gambler* (his final Met role), Goro in *Madama Butterfly*, Guillot in *Manon*, David in *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg*, Njegus in *The Merry Widow*, Don Curzio and Basilio in *Le nozze di Figaro*, Beppe in *Pagliacci*, Valzacchi in *Der Rosenkavalier*, Spoletta in *Tosca*, Gastone in *La traviata*, Pong in *Turandot*, Hauk-Šendorf in *The Makropulos Case*, and Monostatos in *Die Zauberflöte*—encompassing Italian, German, Russian, French, and Czech.

Out of all those roles, Laciura immediately cites the Simpleton as one of his favorites because of the role’s vocal and dramatic depth. He also lists the Four Servants (“They’re such *characters*, real cameos!”), the Novice (“A young role!”), and Beppe (“He’s so much fun, and the style fits me—the opera is about Sicilians, and I’m part Sicilian—plus he gets to sing a beautiful arietta.”).

Laciura’s adeptness in his roles was evident to baritone Sherrill Milnes, who sang with him in *Pagliacci*, *Tosca*, and *La*

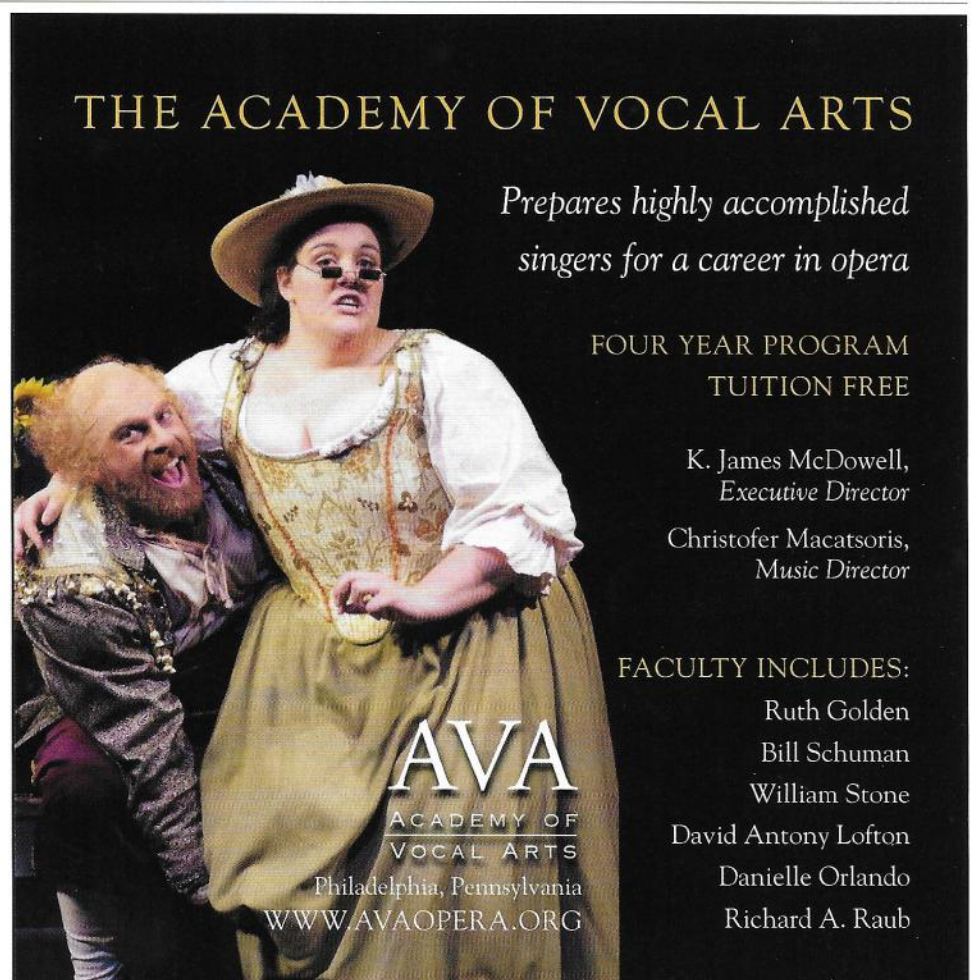
*fanciulla del West*, to name a few of their collaborations. “Anthony sang Beppe’s aria as well as any of the comprimario tenors because he had enough voice to be able to sing an aria,” Milnes says. “As Spoletta, he knew what everybody was saying and had worked out his reactions, so you believed what he was doing. And he was physically savvy as Nick, the bartender—he was able to easily jump across the bar to get involved in the fights among the miners.”

### Learning from and Supporting the Lead Singers

One reason that Laciura considers

himself so lucky in his comprimario career at the Met is that, although he made his debut after what he calls the Met’s “golden age,” he still had the opportunity to sing with and learn from legendary artists such as Mirella Freni, Leontyne Price, Renata Scotto, Joan Sutherland, Carlo Bergonzi, Plácido Domingo, James McCracken, Luciano Pavarotti, and Milnes. “You have to be in the house, in the wings during rehearsals, to find out how they rehearse, how they mark, and how they stay healthy. It was important for me to ask questions,” he says.

Another reason he relished his profession, which he proclaims without any hesitation, was his “being comfortable with every singer and having them be comfortable with [me] and trust [me]—being able to support the great artists of the world on stage and off stage.” Laciura relates that, on the nights when leading singers were feeling insecure about singing, he assured them that he would be at their side to offer support.



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Laciura as Spoletta in the Metropolitan Opera's 1983 production of *Tosca*



photo by Metropolitan Opera Archives

In fact, on one particular evening when Laciura was singing the Four Servants during a performance of *Les contes d'Hoffmann*, he was about to enter in a gondola with the mezzo-soprano who was singing Giulietta. "Out of nowhere, she said to me, 'I shouldn't be doing this role. I'm not beautiful.' With very little time to react, I said, 'Give me your hands. Did you look at yourself in the mirror before you left your dressing room? You didn't see who was looking back at you? An absolutely beautiful woman with a beautiful soul and a beautiful voice. I know, from working with you, that you have a beautiful soul. But do you know what solidifies the fact that you have a beautiful voice? James Levine is conducting and he hired you. Out of every other mezzo-soprano he could have had, he chose *you*. That's how special you are.'"

#### Challenges of, Benefits of, and Advice for a Comprimario Career

That story demonstrates one type of support that Laciura enjoyed with many singers. But his other relationships with singers reflect the major challenge of being a comprimario singer: knowing one's own music and studying everyone else's music, not only to know what other characters are saying, but also to be able to react convincingly to the lead singers' words and actions. "As Spoletta, I had to know Scarpia's part and understand how Tosca's part relates to Scarpia so that I could be involved with those scenes," he says. "You have to have a relationship to make the action look as natural as possible. When *you* are comfortable on the stage, the audience is comfortable. You want to blend in." Laciura also emphasizes the importance of understanding how body movement relates to the music, discovering a character's attitude, and making sure the audience understands what you are trying to convey when you are not singing.

Baritone Dwayne Croft, who sang with Laciura in *Le nozze di Figaro* and *Turandot*, among other operas, is amused just thinking about Laciura's comic interpretations. "His onstage acting was the best. His characterizations were so funny and well thought out. There were

**“You have to have a relationship to make the action look as natural as possible. When you are comfortable on the stage, the audience is comfortable.”**

many times in *Marriage of Figaro* when he was going to crack me up if I looked at him too much,” Croft says. “He not only sang comprimario roles very well, but also inhabited the characters and always made them memorable.” Offstage, Croft considers Laciura a kind and supportive colleague who always gives of himself. “You couldn’t ask for a more giving colleague, so friendly and welcoming. He listens to you and cares about you.”

Laciura also speaks of the challenge of simultaneously rehearsing and performing different styles, like Wagner and Verdi, and then adjusting to the attitudes of the


rehearsal environments—from Laciura’s perspective, some rehearsals of Italian operas were quite relaxed, while rehearsals of German operas were much stricter. For example, in one afternoon, he might have prepared for Spoletta and David, two completely different roles with two directors of different temperaments. However, between all of this rehearsing, performing, and establishing of rapports, directors and conductors came to rely on him.

Director Franco Zeffirelli was one of those people. In the Met’s previous production of *Tosca*, after Tosca jumps

from the Castel Sant’Angelo, Laciura runs up the stairs adjacent to the angel to look down at Tosca’s body. When he runs back down the stairs, he stops to face the audience, uses his right hand to whip his cape over his left shoulder, then whips the cape back behind himself before running off stage. “People who watched the DVD have said to me [with admiration], ‘What you did with the cape!’ The story of the cape was that, when the production opened, Zeffirelli said to me, ‘At the end of the third act, when you run up the stairs, do something with the cape.’ Well, I did!” Laciura says, happily.

Mezzo-soprano Susan Graham—who has sung with Laciura in *Le nozze di Figaro*, *Falstaff*, *Der Rosenkavalier*, and *The Merry Widow*—describes Laciura as the consummate scene stealer. “I mean that in the very best way—as in, you can’t take your eyes off him,” Graham says. “His total commitment and clever characterizations have enthralled me to


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Laciura as the Novice in the Metropolitan Opera's 1988 production of *Billy Budd*

photo by Metropolitan Opera Archives



the point that I nearly forgot that *I* was onstage, too. Whether just a twinkle in his eye, a raised eyebrow, or a broad vaudevillian shtick, his timing is always impeccable and perfectly articulated.”

The only physically challenging aspect of frequent rehearsals and performances in the same day was fatigue. “I got tired and needed rest to stay healthy,” he remembers. “I exercised and continue to do so. Fortunately, after a day of rehearsals,

I was able to fall asleep in my dressing room, shower, eat, vocalize, and be ready for the evening, regardless of the role. Most of it has to do with your mindset and knowing that you love what you do. The schedule was challenging in a very positive respect. I was learning more and adding to my repertory, which allowed companies to rely on me.”

### Learning New Roles

How often did Laciura add a role? That answer was often decided by the Met or other companies, depending on their casting needs. When he was offered a new role, Laciura researched the music to determine if he was vocally comfortable with a part and could make it come alive on stage. About six years ago, New Orleans Opera asked him to sing Mime in *Das Rheingold* and *Siegfried*, roles that he had waited a long time to sing because he never felt the timing was right. He consulted with Graham Clark and Heinz Zednik, both of whom sang Mime at the Met, and they were confident in his abilities.

“I realized I was ready, and I had a wonderful time with Mime because I could act and sing it,” Laciura says. “As a comprimario, I always made sure that I *sang* the roles, no matter what. In my first year at the Met, I was singing the Sergeant in *The Barber of Seville*. There was a rehearsal one day, and the performance was that night. I said to one of my colleagues, ‘I hope we finish early because I’d like to get some rest at home before tonight’s performance.’ He said, ‘What are you singing tonight?’ I told him I was doing the Sergeant. ‘Oh, that’s all?’ I said, ‘Excuse me?’ He said, ‘You’re just the Sergeant. You don’t have to worry about that.’ I said, ‘I’m singing the Sergeant in

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*The Barber of Seville* at the Metropolitan Opera. Four thousand people are paying a lot of money to be entertained and thrilled by great music and singers who are interpreting the great music. I can't believe anyone would make a statement like that. Does singing at the Met not mean anything? The Sergeant is much harder to sing than Almaviva, who gets to keep singing, so his voice stays warm and supple. The Sergeant has a few measures here and there—that's not easy."

Another time, an opera company offered him the Four Servants at the same time that *Billy Budd* was going to be in repertory at the Met, but Laciura had not been cast as the Novice. He informed Met management that he wanted to accept the Four Servants, unless the Met felt he could sing the Novice. The result? The Met offered him the Novice, which kept him at home and allowed him to sing a new role.

Such a variety of characters in his repertory enabled Laciura to surprise people with his versatility and, for the most part, he chose his roles—so, for both reasons, he did not have to worry about being typecast in a certain type of role. "Companies appreciate your honesty if you do not want to accept a role," he says. "Wherever you go, the company deserves your best. If you can't give it in one particular role, you could turn it down or offer another role. I was also always fortunate with my management, who took the time to research roles for me. I was never expected to do the same kinds of roles."

Due to the fact that, for years, the Met has been expanding the operas in its repertoire, and combining those opportunities with roles at other companies, Laciura never had trouble finding work throughout the year. In the 1990s, preparing for its premiere production of *The Makropulos Case* in 1996, the Met offered him the part of Hauk-Šendorf. During his research, Laciura was excited to discover the beauty in the character's vocal lines, and his collaboration with the Met's Czech coach brought the role to life. For his debut with San Francisco Opera, he sang the Schoolmaster in *The Cunning Little*

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Lacitura (left) as Eddie Kessler and Steve Buscemi (right) as Enoch "Nucky" Thompson in HBO's *Boardwalk Empire*



Photo by Abbot Gesner, HBO

*Vixen* and loved the part. "I couldn't wait to learn new roles," he recalls, "and those new roles influenced my performances of my older roles, so I kept reinventing."

### Singing outside the Met

Although the Met was his home company and he was there every year for the full season, the company accommodated Lacitura's requests to perform elsewhere when he was not cast in a production that was currently in repertory. In the arrangement, he was on the Met roster as a member of the Planned Artist Program, which offers weekly pay and benefits and guarantees the Met a crew of house singers. "I was able to sing somewhere else during the season without losing the pay, so I always kept myself active so my mind stayed active," he says. Thus, Lacitura appeared at many other theaters including Santa Fe Opera, Los Angeles Opera, and many companies overseas.

### Life after the Met

Eventually, after over a quarter century at the Met—including numerous

radio and television broadcasts and recordings—Lacitura decided to retire. "It is time to teach younger singers, and it is so rewarding and exciting to pass along what I've learned and observed and give the next generation a chance at comprimario and leading roles," he says. "It's incredible that an entire career can be based on tiny tissues in a human being's throat that produce these glorious, unamplified sounds that can make the room vibrate, like what Pavarotti was able to do. My students benefit from everything I observed about the leading singers."

In addition to coaching singers at his private studio in Teaneck, New Jersey (where he and his wife Joel have lived since 1986 after living in New York), Lacitura is a professor in the William J. Maxwell College of Arts and Sciences at New Jersey City University in Jersey City, and he has also directed productions at Phoenix Opera and Di Capo Opera, among other companies.

His biggest project since leaving the Met, however, has been a supporting role on *Boardwalk Empire*, a Golden Globe-

nominated HBO series that centers on Enoch "Nucky" Thompson, a political figure who controlled Atlantic City during the Prohibition era. Lacitura plays Eddie Kessler, Nucky's German assistant and butler. "I was not necessarily in the right place at the right time to get this part," he says, "but Eddie is simply a miracle—yet another miracle in my life."

Lacitura says that the chance to star in *Boardwalk Empire* came out of nowhere because, although he had met the series' producer Martin Scorsese at the Met in 1998, he has no idea if Scorsese remembered him when the time came to cast the series. "For the character of Big Jim Colosimo, who gets shot in the pilot, they were looking for a big actor," Lacitura recounts. "They called my former manager to find out where they could find me. During that conversation, they asked my manager what I look like. I didn't match what they wanted for the part of Big Jim, but there was another role they couldn't cast. They asked my manager if I can do a German accent, and my manager said, 'He can do any accent you want.' After I did two screen tests, the second one for Martin, the casting director called to offer me the role of Eddie Kessler. It's a true comprimario part without singing—it's comic relief."

With a chuckle in his voice, Lacitura comments that Eddie is a role 47 years in the making, combining his years at the Met and his years of performing prior to the Met. One thing is certain: the numerous techniques he developed as a comprimario will greatly contribute to his portrayal of Eddie, and even Graham and Croft are delighted that Lacitura has a new outlet for his acting talents.

"I have had one amazing opportunity after another. Everything I have done has been a gift," Lacitura says.

*Greg Waxberg, a writer and magazine editor for The Pingry School, is an award-winning freelance writer specializing in classical music and opera and a program annotator for opera companies. He can be contacted at GregOpera@aol.com. ©*