



(L to R): Director Francesca Zambello, Deborah Voigt, accompanist Kevin Stites and playwright Terrence McNally in rehearsal for *Voigt Lessons*, Glimmerglass Festival, New York

photo by Julieta Cervantes

Multiple Choice:

Finding Resolutions in Disagreements with Directors

BY GREG WAXBERG

Disagreeing with a stage director, whether for comfort level or because it seems downright dangerous, can be stressful. But it doesn't have to be, as seasoned singers and directors share here.

“I was rehearsing a production of *Madama Butterfly* with an Asian Cio-Cio-San and a Latin Pinkerton, and both of them had very different ideas about how to approach the love scene. The staging evolved into gentle touching of the cheeks and hair—they never kissed, but we made it appear that they were in love. When the lights went down, we allowed people’s imaginations to fill in the rest. It wasn’t ideal, but I’m not going to make people do something they don’t want to do. It’s my job to help find another way.”

“In *Angels in America*, there is a costume change at the end of the opera. The director wanted me to change clothes on stage while singing, to make the next-to-last scene blend into the final scene. I tried it a couple of times, but I wanted to exit the stage and re-enter, because several years pass between the scenes, and the audience needs to see time passing. In response, the director said there was no time for me to leave the stage, so the composer added some music, because I really wanted to

rehearse the scene the way I believed it should look. Eventually, it worked, and the director agreed with me that time shifted.”

Director Garnett Bruce and baritone Daniel Belcher, respectively, provided these descriptions of challenging situations that have arisen between singers and directors. In each case, a resolution was reached through dialogue and understanding—good news for singers who question how or if they should react when directors ask them to do things that they disagree with. Conflicts can range from character interpretation to a potentially dangerous staging concept, but there is always a way for singers to express their concerns without worrying about repercussions.

The Big Picture

Every production revolves around the director’s “big view,” which directors say should be respected. “Singers need to give the director a chance to see his or her vision. I’m looking at the whole picture, while they’re looking at their piece of the picture,” Bruce says, but adds, “I

look forward to challenges and I do my homework, because I don’t have all the answers.” It is within this zone of figuring out the ultimate staging that singers have some leeway to respectfully voice their opinions—but be prepared for questions before the director makes a decision.

“I would likely ask the singer for more information about his or her view. Was it a gut feeling? Was it a piece of research? Was it a musical cue? Where is the choice coming from, and how could it be articulated or integrated into my concept?” explains José María Condemí, artistic director of Opera Santa Barbara and a stage director for major American opera companies. He has changed his mind, at times, based on “well thought-out proposals by a smart singer.”

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“Try it” is the advice repeatedly given by directors and singers who have experience with negotiating disagreements. “There’s a reason the director was chosen, so, no matter what a director asks, try it at least once to see it from the director’s

perspective,” Belcher says. “If the idea doesn’t work, you can always build from there, but at least both of you will have common ground to work from. Experimenting and negotiation need to be part of the process.”

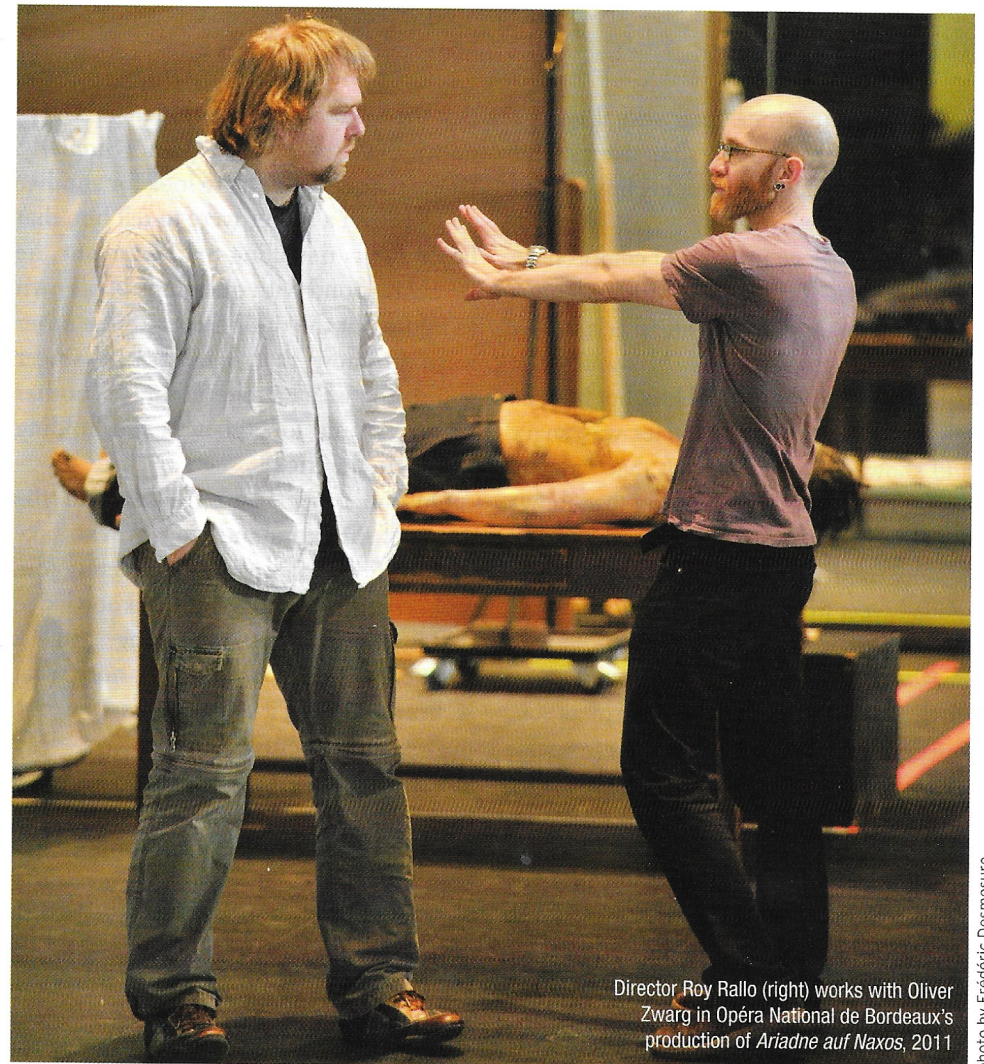
Therefore, take full advantage of the rehearsal process—after all, knowing what works is equally as valuable as knowing what does not work. “Rehearsal is a place to try things, not to be afraid of them,” says director Roy Rallo. “I have certainly had the experience of a singer not wanting to do something, then trying it and liking it, only to have it be removed by me for not liking it after seeing it—so it is an open process.”

Following Stage Directions

If you are a singer who relies on the argument of “the stage directions are written in the libretto,” that perspective may not get you very far with some directors. “I take stage directions with a grain of salt,” Condemni says. “A composer or librettist may have written something as a stage direction that he later contradicted with the music. Stage directions are also meant to convey human behavior that is believable and relatable within a set of cultural and socioeconomic parameters—some parameters hold true with time and others fade away.”

For Rallo, blindly following stage directions can make an opera seem stale. “If opera is about reproducing what we saw last time, we are missing the entire point of what theater is about,” he says. “I have been involved with enough world premiere rehearsal processes to know that the original stage directions, conceived by the composer while writing the music, are often jettisoned during rehearsal by the composer when working with a more imaginative stage director. Just because something is in the book does not mean it is good.” Rallo also speculates that if composers from centuries ago were still alive, even they might get tired of seeing the same action over and over again.

Glimmerglass Festival Artistic and General Director Francesca Zambello’s



Director Roy Rallo (right) works with Oliver Zwarg in Opéra National de Bordeaux’s production of *Ariadne auf Naxos*, 2011

photo by Frédéric Desmesure

and director Stephen Wadsworth’s views further illustrate that saying yes or no to stage directions printed in the score is complicated. Zambello likes to consider whether the directions feel natural or forced, while Wadsworth is cautious because a great production can go either way. “It is a question of style,” Wadsworth says. “All directors would do well to consider closely what the composer or librettist was getting at before going ahead with an alternative. Stage directions are often a matter of interpretation.”

Interpreting a Character

Of course, interpretation also extends to characterization, an issue that can cause problems between singers and directors for a number of reasons: characterization affects the overall mood a director wants to create, it affects how all of the characters interact with each other, and singers with history in a particular role tend to have “their” way of playing it regardless of the production.

“One of the tricky things about working with artists who have that history is that they bring, understandably so, ‘character baggage’ with them,” Condemni says. “They may have done 20 very different productions of *Tosca* on three different continents, and they may arrive to work with me with a hybrid version of what they liked in each one. In such cases, the process becomes more about editing the wealth of options and opinions that the singer brings, rather than creating the character anew.”

Sometimes, the unexpected happens to improve the portrayals, as occurred recently when Zambello was rehearsing a production of *Siegfried*. “I was working on a scene with Nina Stemme and Jay Hunter Morris, and the scene started out very stiffly because we were working to find the right energy, but it wasn’t quite working,” she explains. “Later in rehearsal, Nina and Jay were wrestling with each other playfully about who was stronger, and I chose to incorporate that into the show as

a way to demonstrate their sexual energy for each other. The messing around and playfulness ended up changing how we felt about the scene.”

Bruce relates an instance of compromise between him and soprano Monica Yunus while rehearsing the Countess’ aria in Act III of *Le nozze di Figaro*. “I wanted the Countess to sound sad and lost, but Monica felt strongly that the character was angry and showed me why she felt that way,” he says. “We agreed on an ending that shows the Countess’ confidence and nobility. So, Monica went from ‘anger’ to confidence, while I went from ‘lost’ to confidence.”

Personal Standards

Along the same lines as interpretation, singers might feel inclined to disagree with a director who asks them to commit to an idea that makes them uncomfortable, such as a married singer not wanting to kiss another singer or, to use an example cited by one director, a Jewish singer not wanting to wear a cross when singing *Carmen*. Even though directors want singers to feel comfortable on stage, they seem to have mixed feelings about how to deal with these wishes—some respect them, while others consider them more of an obstacle.

“Anyone’s personal convictions must be respected,” says Wadsworth. “My attitude after many years of working with actors is

that the solution to the problem is always better than the original plan.” Similarly, Bruce is always willing to look for another approach. If a singer were to tell him that he or she is unwilling to kiss anyone, he would respond with questions of his own to figure out the options: Are there other ways to show that love? Is the singer willing to kiss a hand or embrace another singer? Would long glances and holding hands do the trick?

On the other hand, Rallo is in the camp of directors and singers who take the position that singing is an acting job, and that singers need to acknowledge that opera involves taking on a character. “More often than not, what is trumpeted as a standard is to some degree an insecurity,” Rallo says. “My job as director is to guide singers toward finding a place in themselves where they are freed from fear and useless inhibition in service of creating a character and a performance that serve the production as a whole, rather than servicing a list of their predetermined objections.”

Yunus has jumped in pools and run around barefoot and, through all of these perhaps unconventional scenes, she knows that “singing actors” need to maintain open minds. “In the case of new productions, directors spend months of preparation on a concept, so

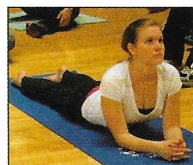
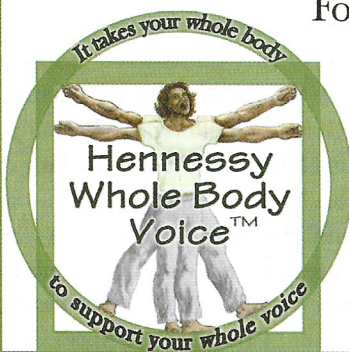
you’re signing up to bring a concept to fruition,” she says. “And keep in mind that, if something about the staging is bothering you, you could discuss the problem with someone other than the director.” In the case of running around barefoot, asking the stagehands to make sure that the stage is clean and devoid of something dangerous like nails brings peace of mind. If the difficulty pertains to a wig or costume, perhaps a discussion with that department can clear up problems.

Communication is really the name of the game for any disagreements with directors—considerate dialogue based on mutual respect will improve the process and make it more artistically satisfying for everyone in the room, from the singers to the director to the conductor to the stagehands. Make the most of the rehearsal process, be willing to compromise, and try to understand other points of view. As Belcher puts it, “You’re revisiting an old friend, not *re-creating* that old friend. Theater is a living art form—you don’t have to do things the same way again.”

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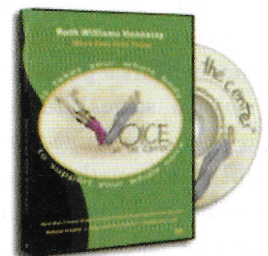


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