

>> ENTERTAINMENT

Lessons from an opera rehearsal room



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Let's forget the music, although I have to tell you, that won't be easy.

Not mentioning the music in a discussion of the "sitzprobe" rehearsal that I attended one evening last week for the Canadian Opera Company's production of Francis Poulenc's 1957 opera *Dialogues des Carmélites* would be like discussing a Sunday luncheon at La Tour d'Argent in Paris without mentioning the taste of the duck.

Let me just say the music at this sitzprobe was magnificent and leave it at that. Which might raise the same question with you as it did with me: what's a sitzprobe?

A sitzprobe is usually the first time that singers and musicians have come together. It is the maestro's rehearsal. It is the opportunity for the conductor — in this case, the youthfully energetic Johannes Debus — to bring elements of musical interpretation and refinement to a working meeting of the whole of an opera's musical parts.

Another way of describing the sitzprobe would be for me to say that it was the chance to sit in a relatively small room (relative to a concert hall, that is) and listen to Poulenc's austere and tragic masterpiece while being surrounded by music. Literally surrounded. Surrounded by some of the most ravishing music of the 20th century, actually.

But remember. We're not going to mention the music.

Why not? Well might you ask. But my thinking is that, in making the



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Isabel Bayrakdarian as Blanche de la Force in the Lyric Opera of Chicago production of *Dialogues des Carmélites* in 2007. She will reprise the role.

case for an increased role for arts education in our schools — which is the thought I couldn't shake while watching the focus, the commitment, the collective expertise and the professionalism that characterized the sitzprobe — you might as well not talk about art.

You might just as well accept the fact that there are people — quite a few, actually — who are of the view that art is, well, a little arty. It's fine, they suppose, when times are good. But the times are not good. And sometimes you have to make the tough calls. Sometimes you have to trim the fat. Which is usually where the arts come in.

So let's not talk about beauty. Or about spirituality. Or about the deep sadness in Poulenc's own life when *Dialogues* was about to be performed or about the fact that the great French writer, Georges Bernanos, was himself dying when he wrote the screenplay on which Poulenc's opera is based.

Let's not get into any of that stuff. And let's not talk about what relevance an opera that is set during the French Revolution can have in a contemporary age beset with its own terrors.

Let's just describe the dynamics of the rehearsal the way a management and communications

student might describe it: as an efficient and highly focused effort of a team of brilliant individuals all working toward a single, mutually agreed upon objective.

The atmosphere in the Four Seasons rehearsal room was casual in a certain sense — all jeans and sweatshirts; all friendly camaraderie — but highly formal in another.

The observations, criticisms, suggestions, orders, and refinements coming from Debus's podium were clear and they were listened to closely by every musician in the room. The rehearsal went from 7 to 10 o'clock and, except for a brief coffee break in the middle,

the pace of it was brisk and businesslike.

The sitzprobe was about communication and collaboration. It was about unity of purpose. It was about hard work. It was about setting and attaining the highest standards. It was about making rigorous demands. It was about working together and seeking inspiration in the pursuit of excellence. It was about improvement.

So this is the fat to be trimmed? This is the impractical? This is the frivolous? These are the lessons we cannot afford to let our children learn?

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