

The corpse at the opera house

My advice to you, if you ever get invited to play the part of a corpse in an opera, is: *Ask questions*. Here are some that I would suggest:

1. Does the plot of this opera call for the corpse to get shoved halfway off a bed headfirst by people shrieking in Italian?

2. If so, is this corpse wearing a nightgown-style garment that could easily get bunched up around the corpse's head if the corpse finds itself in an inverted position with its legs sticking up in the air on a brightly lit stage in front of hundreds of people whom the corpse does not personally know?

3. If so what, if any, provisions will be made to prevent a public viewing of the corpse's butt?

Fool that I am, I failed to ask these questions when I was invited to be a deceased person in an opera. This invitation resulted from a column I wrote concerning an animal in a Denmark zoo that died from stress brought on by hearing opera singers rehearse, I concluded that opera is probably fatal and should be banned as a public-health menace, just like heroin, or aspirin bottles with lids that can actually be opened.

This column generated a large amount of mail from irate opera lovers who:

1. Pointed out that they are far more sophisticated, urbane and cultured than I am, and

2. Used some really dirty words.

(Here is an actual quote from one of these letters, slightly modified for the family-newspaper audience: "*Così Fan Tutte* is Italian and not Spanish, you sock plucker. Duck shoe.")

But I also got a very nice letter from Janice Mackey, general manager of Eugene Opera in Eugene, Ore. (civic motto: "Eventually You Stop Noticing The Rain"). She invited me to play a corpse in Eugene Opera's Jan. 8 performance of "Gianni Schicchi" (pronounced "Johnny SKEE-kee"), a work by the famous opera dude Puccini ("Poo-CHEE-nee"), who I believe also wrote the 1966 Tommy James hit "Hanky Panky" ("Hang-kee Pang-kee"). As a professional journalist, I am always looking for new ways to get paid for being motionless, so I said sure.

Eugene is located in southwest Oregon, approximately 278 billion miles from anything. To get there, you have to take a series of "commuter" airplanes, each one

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smaller than the last, until finally there isn't room for both you and the pilot, and you have to fly yourself. "Eugene is that way!" the airline personnel tell you, gesturing vaguely. "Just look for the rain cloud!"

But Eugene Opera turned out to be a very professional outfit featuring baritones, sopranos, bassoons, tremors, mezzanines, etc. I attended a brief rehearsal, during which the professional opera singers practiced shoving me off the bed and gave me invaluable dramatic tips on playing dead ("Don't move"). They also filled me in on the plot of "Gianni Schicchi," which involves a wealthy 13th Century Florentine named Buoso Donati, who is pursued by a seemingly indestructible android from the future.

No, wait, that's the plot of "Terminator II." The plot of "Gianni Schicchi" is that Buoso is dead, and a bunch of people sing very loudly about this in Italian for 45 minutes of opera time, which, for a normal human, works out to roughly a month. I spent most of this time lying still on the bed with my mouth open. This turns out to be very difficult. When you have to hold perfectly still in front of hundreds of people, you become a seething mass of primitive bodily needs. You develop overpowering urges to swallow, twitch, scratch, burp, emit vapors and - above all - lick your lips. "YOU NEED TO LICK YOUR LIPS RIGHT NOW!" is the urgent message you brain repeatedly sends to your tongue. You find yourself abandoning all concerns about personal hygiene and praying that Puccini was thoughtful enough to include a part in "Gianni Schicchi" where the singers decide, for whatever reason, to lick the corpse's lips.



But this is not what happens. What happens is that the singers, while searching for Buoso's will, shove the corpse off the bed, the result being that I had to hold perfectly still while upside-down, with my face smushed into a low footstool and my legs in the air, through several arias ("aria" is Italian for "song that will not end in your lifetime"). Fortunately, under my nightgown I was wearing tights, so the audience was never directly exposed to my butt, which could have triggered a potentially deadly stampede for the exits.

Finally the singers put the corpse back up on the bed, so for the rest of the opera I could just lie there thinking explicit bodily thoughts. At times I also listened to the music, and I have to say that, although I am by no means an opera aficionado (literally, "guy"), I was deeply moved by one part, which was when a stagehand, Doug Beebe, crept up behind my bed, unseen by the audience, and whispered, "Dolphins 21, Chargers 8." He was updating me on an important NFL playoff game in which I had a strong artistic interest. And although the Dolphins ultimately lost, I definitely enjoyed performing in "Gianni Schicchi" and did not find the experience to be the least bit fatal, so I sincerely apologize to all the opera fans I offended.

Except for the gas poles who wrote the nasty letters.

by Dave Barry
Syndicated columnist

Atomic bombs were justified

Bombs used to end war quickly

Nearly 50 years ago the United States, under the order of President Truman, dropped two atomic bombs on Japan; one on Hiroshima, on August 6, 1945, and another on Nagasaki on August 9, 1945. The United States' hard fought war with Japan ended 5 days later on August 14.

Now, 50 years later, the debate over the dropping of the bombs is still continuing. Questions are being raised as to the United States' motive for dropping the bombs. The U.S. is portrayed as uncompassionate, brutal, racists who dropped the bomb on innocent people.

This becomes evident when two national events emerged late last year involving the 50th Anniversary of the bombs.

The first incident related to a postage stamp that pictured a huge mushroom cloud with the words "Atomic Bombs Hasten Wars End" captioned below. Opponents believe that this stamp glorified what we had done and was unfair to the Japanese people. Amidst protest by the Japanese government and President Clinton, the stamp was deleted.

A more disturbing event that occurred last fall involved a proposed exhibit in the Smithsonian Air and Space Museum. The original plan for the exhibit was to show the front portion of the Enola Gay (the plane that dropped the bomb on Hiroshima) and display reading material that described the nuclear arms race that followed. Many veterans groups felt that the exhibit was too sympathetic to the Japanese. Part of the material read, "Fearing that unconditional surrender would mean the annihilation of their culture, Japanese forces fought on tenaciously."

The most controversial item in the planned exhibit was an estimate of how many troops the United States would have lost if we had invaded Japan and not dropped the bombs. The exhibit cited a mere 31,000 casualties in the first 30 days of an assault. It also stated that 31,000 men was all that may have been needed to sacrifice in order to defeat the Japanese.

The exhibit, under pressures of veterans groups and Congress, revised the exhibit to include sections of Japanese aggression. It also changed its estimate

pertaining the number of casualties the U.S. would have incurred had the ground assault taken place. The Smithsonian raised the number to between 260,000 and one million American lives.

It is very hard to believe that such an uproar was raised over the atomic bomb stamp. The U.S. Postal Service wanted to recognize various events in World War II by pictorializing them on stamps. The dropping of the atomic bombs on Japan were two significant, if not the most significant, events of World War II. By displaying the bombings on the stamp, the Post Office was simply recognizing the fact that the bomb was dropped; they were recognizing history. I don't believe that the Postal Service was attempting to "rub it in" to the Japanese.

In addition, the words captioned below the mushroom

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cloud, "Atomic Bombs Hasten Wars End", sum up the whole event. We dropped the bombs to end the war quickly and avoid having to sacrifice our troops in a land assault. The fact of the matter is, the stamp "told it like it was"; it's just that some people can't accept the facts, or in an attempt to be "Politically Correct," they don't want to seem uncompassionate by agreeing with the U.S.'s decision.

by Brad Park
Collegian columnist