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Die Here

THE FRENZIED LIFE OF AN ITINERANT OPERA DIRECTOR

BY DAVID MENCONI

PHOTOGRAPH BY MICHAEL JONES

Bustling down the backstage hallway of Salt Lake City's Capitol Theatre, Garnett Bruce, A89, knocks on each cast member's door. In look and demeanor, he resembles a younger and more upbeat version of the actor Tom Courtenay in the 1983 movie *The Dresser*. Everyone answers his knock in various states of readiness, getting made up and costumed for tonight's dress rehearsal of Utah Opera's *Madame Butterfly*.

Bruce, the opera's director, is casually dressed in jeans and a cardigan, working up a sweat as he delivers last-minute polishing tips for every performer. He advises Yunah Lee, a Korean-born soprano for whom the title character is a signature role, on precisely how to fling her fan to emphasize that she won't go back to being a geisha. He tells Troy Cook, the American consul Sharpless, that he should try to look "more disheveled" upon his first entrance, and coaches Joseph Gaines, the shifty matchmaker Goro, on how to avoid tripping over his robe.

Bruce's most detailed instructions are for the tenor Eric Fennell, who plays Pinkerton, the ugly-American naval officer whose betrayal of Butterfly drives her to suicide, and has been coming on a little too strong at the end of Act I. "When you're coming together there, hands off and let her make the first move—because if you force it, that squirrel's gonna run away," Bruce says, intently looking Fennell in the eye, his voice rising as he adds a forceful hand clap for emphasis.

Out on the stage, there's more detail work, none of it too small to escape the director's attention. Bruce confers with the prop department about placement of a futon and lantern to break up an expanse of empty space. He coaches the stage manager on where

and when to drop the cherry blossom petals, and how fast to drop the curtain at the end of the first act (“just a breath slower”). He even practices walking out with the costume designer, Alice Bristow, for the opening-night bows they’ll take two nights later, so she’ll know how to negotiate the steeply pitched stage set in high heels.

All in a night’s work, and it’s even more challenging for the performers. “They have to be in time, in tune, singing in Italian and meaning what they say, wearing Japanese footwear and moving around a steep, dark stage,” Bruce tells me. “No problem! But there’s not a lot to go over tonight, mostly just small things. The main thing is for everybody to run through it in front of a preview audience to get confidence. The reason they bring in someone like me is to let everyone else concentrate on the engine running properly, while I figure out where the boat’s going.”

One cast member does require special attention, Rhys Oliver Nelson, a cherubic four-year-old who plays Butterfly’s and Pinkerton’s son, Trouble (his real-life mother, Nina Yoshida Nelson, is also in the show as Butterfly’s servant, Suzuki). Bruce deftly coaches the young man on where to be and how to move at various points, crouching to demonstrate and pointing to pieces of tape placed as marks for different actors.

The most attention-getting mark is a white piece of tape near the exact center of the stage, with handwritten instructions for Butterfly: “Die here.”

“Secret as old as time,” Bruce tells me conspiratorially, adding a droll wink. Then he purses his lips. “You have a leaf in your hair. Whenever I see something I can fix, I feel obliged to point it out.”

Bruce makes a full-time living as an opera director, one of perhaps a hundred people who do so nationwide. The job is something like a cross between football coach, circus performer, and drifter (albeit a well-dressed one), and it involves a grueling amount of travel. That makes relationships difficult.

“I was dating a real-estate developer for a while, and he had the money to travel but chose not to,” Bruce says with a sigh. “At the moment, I am the Yankee vagabond—just not leaving a trail of geishas in my wake. Lesson learned.”

Baltimore has been home since 2001, and there was a four-year stretch where Bruce’s only permanent address was a storage locker in Denver. Wherever home is, he’s gone more often than not, directing productions all over the country—*Madame Butterfly* in Salt Lake City, *Pagliacci* in Florida, *Turandot* in San Francisco—and beyond. He also teaches at the Peabody Institute and the Aspen Music Festival.

A classicist at heart, Bruce puts on straightforward productions focused on the music and story at hand rather than showy gimmicks, and he does it surpassingly well. Scan his reviews, and they laud him for his craftsmanship: “nearly flawless” (San Francisco Opera’s *Der Rosenkavalier*, 2007), “authentically rendered” (Madison Opera’s *La Traviata*, 2011), and “impeccable” (Utah Opera’s *Carmen*, 2010).

Most years, Bruce directs seven productions and spends about thirty weeks on the road. The killer year was 2007, when he did ten and was barely home at all. “I had a lot of opportunities to do big things I could not say no to that year,” Bruce says. “They were transformative, but also exhausting. One that came up at the last minute was a revival of

John Adams' *Doctor Atomic* in Chicago. A thorny modern opera—thank God it was at least in English. I gained fifteen pounds I have yet to shed. Grew an entire jacket size in six weeks, which I think was my body trying to hold on to everything it possibly could.”

Bruce has staged *Butterfly* seventeen times, and the production in Salt Lake City isn't one of his more complicated productions, with cast and staging that's a fraction of what epics like *Carmen* involve. Except for young Trouble, all cast members have played their roles before, and all has gone smoothly in the run-up to opening night.

That's not always the case. Bruce has plenty of war stories about dress rehearsals that left him with a long to-do list. And he has endured his share of disasters both natural and manmade, from outdoor rainouts in Copenhagen to the time the city of Houston accidentally cut power to the theater on opening night of Richard Strauss's *Arabella*. The company tried to rally with emergency lights and batteries, but they finally had to give up and cancel. The cast party was, in Bruce's words, “muted, somber, and candlelit.”

Then there was the night in Washington, D.C., when a half-dozen male cast members of *La Bohème* all came down with food poisoning and caused a panicked search for replacements. As pulled off on the fly by Bruce, the last act brought together four performers who had never met before. “But they all knew the music, and somehow the show went on,” Bruce says. “That was during Plácido Domingo's first season there as artistic director, and he was in front of the crowd telling them about it while I was behind the curtain frantically working on staging.” He adds: “Opera is glorious as can be, and the flipside is the catastrophes are equally dramatic. But once you live through something like that, you feel like you can do just about anything.”

Two nights after dress rehearsal in Salt Lake City—opening night for *Madame Butterfly*—Bruce has donned a sharp dark gray suit (accented by a bright red tie) to make his backstage rounds before curtain. This time around, he offers not advice but encouragement, and reassures the cast he'll be out there applauding. Like most people in theater, he superstitiously avoids the words “good luck.” One of his standard sign-offs is “*In bocca al lupo*” (Italian for “Break a leg”). Or he'll simply say, “Have fun.” Gregory Pearson, who plays Butterfly's angry uncle Bonze, already is: he showed up with a gift for the four-year-old, a *Star Wars* stormtrooper doll that's as tall as the young man.

Making his way to his seat out front, Bruce crosses paths with Robert Tweten, conductor of the fifty-five-piece orchestra, who informs him that the principal second violinist is sick and the harpist has lost a heel. “Other than that,” Tweten says brightly, “everything's great!”

The director isn't worried. “There are a lot of people here who are very clever at problem solving,” Bruce says. “A stage manager in Austin used to call it ‘MacGyver skills.’ They'll do some of that, and the show will go on.”

Bruce himself is renowned for problem solving, and for hitting just the right balance between big issues and small details. Sometimes it's as simple as remembering people's names, a skill Bruce is blessed with (and which comes in especially handy when there's a cast of hundreds).

Ward Holmquist, artistic director of Lyric Opera of Kansas City, is a huge fan. “The best directors are able to take both a micro and macro view and switch between them,” he

tells me. “Garnett is one of those directors. His talent and breadth of experience allow him to focus in on lots of details that can add up to making a great production, and he also has a masterful eye for the most important story to tell. Some directors get lost in all those details, but not Garnett.”

Bruce started singing at a young age and had his earliest musical experiences as a choirboy at the National Cathedral, in Washington, D.C., where he appeared in the first opera he ever saw—Benjamin Britten’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, as Fairy Boy Number Five. Singing in the cathedral choir came with a scholarship to St. Albans School. His imagination fired, Bruce applied for a study grant in which he proposed to trace the evolution of opera through changes in opera-house architecture. There were ten halls throughout Europe that he wanted to visit. And while he didn’t win that grant, by now he has made it to all ten venues. “Only worked at four of them, though,” Bruce says. “My German had better get better before I do the other six.”

Bruce came to Tufts to major in history, a subject that fascinated him, and he quickly figured out that theater was the best way to understand how and why people do the things they do. He worked in scenery, lighting, sound, and stage management for most of the 1987–89 productions, as well as playing a supporting role in Vaclav Havel’s *Largo Desolato* in 1988.

It did not take Bruce long to figure out he was too much of a control freak to submit to the will of others. That led away from acting and singing and toward directing. Senior year, he directed two Leonard Bernstein works: *Candide*, in Cohen Auditorium, and the one-act opera *Trouble in Tahiti*, in the Arena.

That doesn’t mean his directing style is dictatorial. “I like collaboration, but there comes a point where theater can’t be democracy,” he says. “You hold on as long as you can, set boundaries and priorities and goals, and—you hope—get everybody on your side. It’s a question of everyone respecting everyone else’s opinion. Still, I know where the lights and scenery will be, and that’s the end of it. They’ll sing beautifully, and I won’t jeopardize their performance. Some people are perpetually unhappy. A very wise stage manager once told me there are three categories: things that are my problem, things that aren’t, and things that *really* aren’t. Learning the difference is a survival skill.”

Right out of college, Bruce got an internship with Bernstein, one of modern music’s strongest personalities. Bruce worked for Bernstein during the last year of the maestro’s life, a tenure that was not always pleasant: Bruce found that Bernstein “needed to be the constant center of attention.” But the job was always interesting—like the time Bernstein heard a rap song and stopped everything to deconstruct it in an attempt to understand the form. “That lifelong curiosity was a really good example of how you should never stop asking questions,” Bruce says.

After Bernstein’s death in 1991, Bruce worked for a series of opera companies in Santa Fe, Dallas, Houston, and Omaha. Nowadays, he’s essentially a freelance contractor who goes where jobs take him. Having earned a reputation as one of the best (and easiest to work with) directors in the field, he keeps busy. His productions have won honors including a Wilde Award for Michigan Opera Theater’s *Turandot* in 2014 and a Regional Emmy for Austin Lyric Opera’s *La Cenerentola* in Texas in 2008.

“The great thing about having Garnett around is he’s been doing this such a long time

and is so highly regarded,” Christopher McBeth, Utah Opera’s artistic director, tells me. “You get all this rich history and storytelling from other experiences he’s had, which is why he’s constantly working. I’m already looking forward to having him back next year.”

The *Madame Butterfly* opening is a success, deemed “excellent” by the *Salt Lake Tribune*. That same review would single out the staging of the final scene, when four-year-old Trouble appears wearing Pinkerton’s naval hat as his father holds Butterfly’s dying body, calling it “chilling.” The hat was Bruce’s touch. “There’s a key change in the music of that final moment that I thought called for something dramatic,” Bruce says, walking with friends to the cast party. “So that’s what I came up with.”

The cast party is at a nearby brewpub, with hugs and handshakes all around—although Bruce is checking his watch. He has a morning flight to Chicago for his next job, directing *Porgy and Bess*.

Then young Nelson, who is nearby struggling to operate his *Star Wars* doll, catches Bruce’s eye. So he gets down on the floor with the child and shows him how to work it. A director to the end.

“My strength is built on collaboration, creating environments where artists can take risks and feel supported but also edited,” Bruce says. “A couple of years ago, I was trying to find more European options and met with an agent there. ‘You tell stories in a logical manner,’ he said, ‘and I can’t sell that over here.’ They want skateboards and punk and rocket ships, and I’ve done some of that before—like assisting on a Verdi *Macbeth* in Texas with a lot of spangles and boots and fringe and a giant orange vinyl sofa as throne of Scotland. But the pendulum will swing back to storytelling.” He has nothing against experiments, he says, “but I think opera wants to be grand—this great accumulation of music, dance, singing. Those are the challenges and the rewards, to figure out how to pay for it and keep audiences coming.”

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