



NOSTRUM REMEDIUM

Christopher Milligan

Most sightings in Music Hall reached a peak in the mid-1980s with regular reports of seeing a female figure in a white gown. I heard such stories myself when I was an intern with the company in 1989 and 1990. A woman with dark hair pulled back in a bun, wearing a white dress and sometimes carrying a candle. She was only ever seen at night when the building was dark and empty – passing in a distant hallway, vanishing into the auditorium from the lobby, or watching from around a corner. My paper tonight is related to these sightings. It's a story that has not been told, and by the end, you'll understand why.

For the sake of clarity, I've organized my paper in ten brief sections. Also, for the sake of clarity, I'll tell this story chronologically, though I learned some of the earlier details much later.

Part 1. Natalia's medicine show

The singer's name was Natalia. She joined the chorus of Cincinnati Opera at some point in the 1970s. But, since she never participated in any performances, her name doesn't appear in any of the company's program books from the period. I'm guessing it was either 1977 or 1978 based on those I know who met her.

Descriptions vary somewhat. She was in her 30s and was strikingly beautiful. She had an accent that some say was Croatian. She had long dark hair that she always wore up. She claimed to be a descendent of the Italian composer Giuseppe Verdi. By all accounts, she was an excellent singer.

It was at the third or fourth rehearsal of the season that she became a problem.

She arrived at the rehearsal with a carpet bag. And at the first break, as other singers stretched, compared notes, and drank coffee, Natalia carried her bag over to a table and removed a black leather case, which she opened to

display its contents.

There were at least two dozen small glass vials. They contained special preparations she had made—cures for common maladies. They offered the promise of reducing hair loss, relieving indigestion, boosting energy, effecting weight loss, and more. She said these were secret family cures passed down from her father, and she offered them for sale.

Soon, there were complaints from fellow choristers, and the management at the time instructed her to stop. At first, she apologized, seeming genuinely contrite. But as it turned out, she just changed tack, approaching chorus members individually with her cures. It was when she began cornering visiting principal singers that she crossed the line. She was fired from the chorus and asked to leave.

Of singers and superstition

A streak of superstition has long existed among theatrical performers. One must never say the name of Shakespeare's Scottish play in a theatre, you know. And a flawless final dress rehearsal is seen as a bad omen for opening night.

Among opera performers, whose success or failure can depend on a single high note, the belief in good luck, bad luck, rituals, and talismans is common. Luciano Pavarotti, for example, would scan the backstage floor for a bent nail to put in his pocket before going onstage. The obvious placement and careful cleanup of these nails became part of the stagehands' ritual whenever the great tenor was to perform.

Before an opera performance, one never says, "Good luck" or "Break a leg." One says, instead, either "Toi, toi, toi," a reference to spitting three times to ward off evil spirits, or "In bocca al lupo!" which means "Into the mouth of the wolf!" It acknowledges the potentially adversarial relationship between performer and audience, to say nothing of the fact that a theater does look like a voracious maw from the vantage point of the performer. And, similar to how comedians say that they "killed" after a good stand-up routine, opera singers respond to "In bocca al lupo" with "Crepì il lupo," - I will slay the wolf.

Almost all singers are very health-conscious. They are acutely aware that

congestion or a sore throat threatens their ability to make a living. Many have their own recipes for dealing with common ailments, and they share these with each other. I once received a recipe for a salt gargle that included hydrogen peroxide and sodium bromide.

All this said, Natalia's traveling medicine show went well beyond any normal, occasional sharing of natural remedies. I later learned that her nostrums came from her father, a traveling peddler who would, in his native country, offer tonics and elixirs as cures for what ails you. Whatever you needed, whatever you wanted, he always had the perfect thing or could produce it within a day or two.

Part 2: An old letter

The incident with Natalia would have remained in the past, were it not for the discovery of an envelope in 2017. Cincinnati Opera had moved its offices out of Music Hall—temporarily, while the Grande Dame of Elm Street was undergoing an enormous renovation. We set up shop on the 7th floor of the old Cincinnati Club building on Garfield. Performances that summer took place at the Aronoff Center.

Most mornings had a familiar routine. I'd arrive at my office, hang up my blazer, change out the water in my espresso maker, and log in to check email. The first email I would look for as I drank my morning caffeine was the performance report. The Aronoff's house manager was diligent about completing and sending it before she left for the evening. Often, that meant the email came in well after midnight.

There were always incidents—a drunken or disruptive patron, complaints about temperature—from patrons who thought it was too hot and just as many others who thought it was too cold. Some of these required follow-up. As the company's managing director, I was always looking for system issues—things that malfunctioned and needed fixing—double seatings, usher protocol problems, safety concerns. Just as important, of course, were injuries or illness. Every season, we seemed to have two or three patrons who would faint during a performance. The cause was remarkably consistent: they had done yard work in the hot sun, neglected to stay hydrated, and came to

the theater, enjoying a chardonnay or champagne when they arrived.

I skimmed the report for June 22, 2017. One ticket-taker was late. One of the video monitors in the lobby was malfunctioning but was scheduled for repair. A patron fell and was treated by the onsite EMT. In the Other Notes section, it was mentioned that one of the stagehands turned in an envelope that had been found in the Music Hall shop as prep work was being done for a new floor. It was hand-addressed to James de Blasis and, remarkably, still sealed. This was odd as Jim had not been with the company since 1996, when he retired after serving as artistic director since the early 1970s.

I was in regular communication with Jim. So, I sent him a quick email, mentioning the envelope and asking for his permission to open it.

About the Renovation

Before the recent renovation of Music Hall, there were many legends and tales about the building. Beyond the oft-repeated ghost stories, the building itself was just curious. There were hallways that ended abruptly, staircases to nowhere, and forgotten spaces that went unused for years. In the public areas, there were artifacts older than the building itself. For example, a very fine 15-foot mirror was fastened to the wall in the North Hall. It had been salvaged from the 1850 Burnet House, a grand five-story hotel at the center of 19th-century metropolitan life in Cincinnati. With its flag-topped central dome making it appear like a state capital, this was where Oscar Wilde stayed during his visits to the Queen City in 1882. In addition to attending a meeting of this august group, Wilde also saw a performance of a then-new opera called *Aida* at Music Hall. Many other famous guests are likely to have taken notice of their appearance before the mirror during their stay at Burnet House, but the most famous was Abraham Lincoln.

Music Hall was also home to numerous statues, busts, and paintings. Of particular interest to this story is the bust of Max Rudolf, the German conductor who led the CSO and May Festival in the 1960s. It was presented in 1968, near the end of Rudolf's tenure with the Orchestra. A curious tradition began around this bronze sculpture.

There is an open chamber at the back of the head, making it possible to reach around and into, well, Max's head. Several years ago, I learned of secret tradition associated with the sculpture from the Opera's longtime historian—our "official unofficial" historian, as he and I liked to say. The tradition was placing notes inside the head. Music lovers would write of their Music Hall memories and place them inside the bust.

Part 3: Reading the letter

Within about an hour of my email, Jim replied.

"You're right. That is weird. I've been gone for twenty years! Go ahead and open it. I'm interested to know who it's from, though I'm sure it's nothing. Probably an old invitation for an event twenty-five years ago or more. I wonder if I went! Or maybe it's an apology from a critic who now recognizes my genius. Who knows. Anyway, let me know what it says. Thanks for reaching out."

I turned the letter over in my hand and ran the letter-opener along the envelope's fold. Inside was a notecard with a single line of text:

I have what you need. Look inside the maestro's head.

Pace, Natalia

At first, this made little sense. I read it again, "I have what you need. Look inside the maestro's head. Pace—or "Peace"—Natalia" Who was Natalia? What did she have? And what might have been in "the maestro's head"? Then it struck me—that tradition of placing notes inside the bust of Max Rudolf.

Part 4: A Visit to the Warehouse

My schedule was clear for the afternoon, so I left my desk for my car. I took I-75 up to Roselawn, where the Opera's warehouse is located. There, sets and costumes from past productions await their ride downtown to Music Hall and the bright lights of appearing onstage. The warehouse is also where the Society for the Preservation of Music Hall was storing some of its artifacts. I hoped to find the bust of Max Rudolf among their items.

The keypad chirped as I entered each of the five security numbers to turn off the alarm. I closed the door and flipped

on the light. I made my way through the garage area where we kept our opera truck, past the shop, around the elements of the sets for *Salome* and *Cinderella*. I saw the roping first and then the sign: Music Hall Artifacts/Do Not Access Without Permission." There were framed paintings, old posters, several boxed items, benches, the comedy and tragedy masks from the old South Hall, and gold stanchions with red velvet ropes. Then, there he was. I saw the bronze bust of Max Rudolf partially wrapped in foam rubber and tape. I peered around to the back of the head and reached in. Nothing. I tried again, repositioning myself for a better angle and, reaching up, I could feel with the tip of my fingers a rolled-up piece of paper. I gently pulled it out and carefully unrolled it.

It was a black-and-white photocopy of a photograph. And that photograph showed a sheet of manuscript paper—the kind a composer would use with 20 staves filling up the page. The sheet had no musical notation on it, just handwritten text. Across the middle in large letters was the title and composer: *King Lear* and G. Verdi. Impossible, I thought. This was not supposed to exist. Anyone who knew anything about opera would immediately recognize that what I was seeing was either a forgery or a miracle—and the most significant musicological discovery of the last century.

About Giuseppe Verdi

Opera stages around the world are dominated by the work of five composers—four Italians and one Austrian. The Italians are Rossini, Donizetti, Verdi, and Puccini. And the Austrian is, of course, Mozart. Last year, their operas comprised two-thirds of the repertoire that appeared on opera stages. And of the five, it's Giuseppe Verdi that dominates with the most performances.

Verdi flourished throughout the second half of the 19th century. Most of his operas premiered in Italy—particularly Milan, Rome, Naples, and Venice. But he became an international sensation with commissions for new works in St. Petersburg, Paris, and Cairo.

He wrote 26 operas—beloved works like *Aida*, *La Traviata*, and *Rigoletto*; and three operas based on Shakespeare: *Macbeth*, *Othello* and *Falstaff*, based on

The Merry Wives of Windsor.

There was very nearly a fourth Shakespeare opera. It was a work that haunted him. It was the one that got away. Verdi himself had engaged a writer to do the adaptation in 1850. They went back and forth on which characters to keep and which to cut. Soon, the text was completed. But Verdi would live for another fifty years and never set it to music.

There are other such "almost" works in opera. Puccini, for example, had considered an operatic adaptation of *Oliver Twist*. But the big "almost" work was Verdi's *King Lear*.

Part 5: An Exchange with Evans

Evans Mirageas is the artistic director for Cincinnati Opera, a role he assumed in 2005. I called his mobile phone on the way back downtown.

"Hi, Evans. Are you at the Aronoff?"

"I'm in the theater."

"I'm on my way there. I have something you have to see." I said.

I parked on 7th Street near the entrance to the Weston Art Gallery and met Evans in the lobby of the Aronoff. I told him about the note found at Music Hall, my exchange with Jim, and my trip to the warehouse. Then, I handed him the photograph.

"Bloody hell," he said. Evans had spent a good part of his career working in London.

"I know," I said. "I'll connect with Jim as soon as I get back to the office. I'm sure he knows something."

We turned to leave. "You know what," Evans said. "Wasn't there a chorus member years ago who claimed to be a descendent of Verdi?"

Jim, who had recently turned 86, was living in Omaha. I emailed him a photo of the note and the score with the explanation of where I'd found it.

About Jim de Blasis

Jim de Blasis was born in 1931 in New York City. He attended Carnegie Mellon University and, after graduation, taught drama in Syracuse. When he was 37, he arrived in Cincinnati as a stage director for Cincinnati Opera's 1968 Summer Festival. He returned in subsequent seasons and assumed leadership of the company in 1973.

In the 1980s he won the attention of national and international music critics

with revivals of two forgotten Italian operas: *Resurrection* in 1983 and *Zazà* in 1985. Both productions were reviewed by the *New York Times*. De Blasis did attempt a third revival but this time went a different direction—a Czech opera with the unlikely title, *Schwanda the Bagpiper*. The *Times* review for *Schwanda* was generally positive, but it was critical of the music, writing that the “cymbals and triangle are positively abused, and some of the orchestral climaxes might make John Williams blush.”

Alas, *Schwanda* was not the hoped-for box office success, and leadership change was soon in the wind. One wonders what might have been if de Blasis had been able to follow his two Italian revivals with the world premiere of a lost Verdi opera.

Part 6: A call with Jim

“Natalia Babic. She was a weird one,” Jim de Blasis said when I reached him on the phone. “I heard her audition in New York. She was amazing. I mean, she seemed wacko, but she had a beautiful voice. The kind of voice you hear only every five years, something like that. But, she seemed a little, I don’t know, off. Of course, I don’t have to tell you—she’s a singer; they’re all a little crazy.”

“You know what happened with her, I suppose. She shows up to rehearsal with some kind of traveling medicine show. I wasn’t having it. You can’t sell Amway or Avon or whatever during rehearsal breaks. Not in my theater. I put an end to that right away and sent her packing.

“Oh, she pleaded with me. She sent letters. She left messages. Tried to stir the pot with the union reps. She never got over it. She was obsessed. People said they saw her outside Music Hall early in the morning.”

I mentioned the score.

“So, this photo you found. Ninety-nine and forty-four one-hundredths percent positive it’s bullshit. But try to reach her, if she’s still around. You never know. Here’s my warning: once you make contact, she’ll never leave you alone.

“By the way, we kept that carpet bag. Well, she took the medicine case, but she left the bag. It was gorgeous red and gold. We used it as a prop for years!”

I thanked Jim.

“Let me know what happens!” he said.

We hung up.

On Ghosts at Music Hall

Two elements combine to inspire ghost sightings at Music Hall. First, it’s an old Victorian building. Ghosts tend to be from this period for some reason. Second, so much has happened at Music Hall. So many significant performers have appeared there: Enrico Caruso, Richard Strauss, Jascha Heifetz, Sergei Rachmaninoff, Maria Callas, Luciano Pavarotti, among so many others. They appeared before sold-out crowds of thousands. Such vitality and intensity must leave behind some kind of preternatural energy.

Though I myself have not experienced ghosts at Music Hall, I have heard stories. There was the security officer, a retired sheriff’s deputy, who was hired to stand guard next to a valuable automobile through the night. In the silence sometime after midnight, he heard whistling. No one was found.

A member of the housekeeping staff witnessed a female figure glide across the lobby and pass through him.

An opera staff person showing his young son the empty and dark theater watched his son wave farewell in the direction of the house left box seats. “Who are you waving to?” he said. “That man who waved to me,” he replied. There was no one there.

A former opera employee who worked in the finance department told of coins being disturbed overnight in the locked drawer she used for petty cash. If she stacked them neatly, the next morning she’d find them toppled. If she left them scattered, she’d find them neatly stacked.

Some smelled perfume suddenly or heard the rustling of crinoline or heard footsteps in the distance.

And then, of course, there were multiple stories of a woman in a white dress, silently gliding about the building at night, holding a candle.

Part 7: Talking with Carolyn

With Natalia’s last name from Jim, I turned to my keyboard and typed in the Google search bar: Natalia B-A-B-I-C Cincinnati. I tried a few other spellings and combinations but came up with nothing.

Jim had suggested I reach out to a longtime member of the chorus named Carolyn Martin for more information on Natalia. Carolyn joined the chorus right after graduating from CCM. I reached her on her mobile.

She remembered Natalia and recalled the incident. She said, “It was pretty weird. We called it Natalia’s Nostrum Nonsense.”

She said Natalia was one of the best singers she’d ever worked with and described her appearance. “She looked like a dancer. Which, of course, all of us other girls hated. And she wore her hair like a dancer—pulled back in a bun. She always wore these flowy cream-colored dresses.”

When I asked Carolyn where Natalia was from or if she knew anything about her family, she recalled only one thing—her saying she was related to Giuseppe Verdi and could prove it.

“We never believed it, of course,” she said. “But she was pretty intense. I think she married some retired judge, or something like that. I lost track of her.”

“Where did she live?” I asked.

“You know, I have no idea,” she said. “Somewhere near Music Hall, I’d guess.”

About the Hidden Room

Music Hall is a huge building. It’s about twice the size of the Biltmore Estate in Asheville, North Carolina. Several years before the building’s 2017 renovation, preparation work had begun. This included drawing up a proper set of building plans, which would take months and require a thorough canvassing of every square foot of the building.

In the creation of these drawings, there were a few curious discoveries. One of these was particularly strange: the discovery of a hidden room. Not much larger than a closet, the room was on the same level as Corbett Tower. It was accessed through a closet that had a sliding panel at its back. Though it was small, the space offered a spectacular view of Washington Park. And most surprising, someone had been living there. Among the items found there was a box of battery-powered candles—the kind used in theatrical productions or church services.

Part 8: Natalia

With the information about Natalia's marriage to a judge, I was able to find her last name. She had married a man named Harold Roth in 1986. He was twenty years older.

Natalia Roth was now in her mid-80s and living alone in Sarasota. After a few attempts, I reached her by phone.

"Natalia, this is Chris Milligan calling from Cincinnati Opera."

"Yes, this is Natalia."

I explained that we had found her note and the photograph. There was a long pause.

"That was a lifetime ago. Did you find the score?"

"No. In fact, that's why I'm calling."

She explained that the score was a gift from her father for her fifteenth birthday. He knew of her love for music. He told her they were, in fact, proud descendants of Giuseppe Verdi and that Verdi had entrusted her grandfather with a secret, unpublished musical score for safekeeping. This was the reason she had pursued opera. And this was how she knew her father loved her even though he had left her mother soon after that fifteenth birthday, never to make contact again.

She was told to keep the score hidden and wrapped until one hundred years after Verdi's death. (Verdi died in 1901.) And she did, opening it only once to take a photo of the title page.

"You know I never did get an apology from the company," she said. "I sent that note as a peace offering, hoping someone would reach out. But, eventually, I gave up. I gave up on opera. I moved on."

I apologized. I explained that we had only very recently discovered the note. And that we, like her, want to make sure the score is properly protected and secure.

"Where did you leave the score?" I asked.

"It was in the bottom of my bag," she said. "Just below the fabric lining. Wrapped in paper and tied with twine."

Part 9: Back to the warehouse

I remember asking Ashley Tongret, then the company's PR manager, to join me on another trip to the warehouse. I explained the whole thing on the way.

At the warehouse, there are shelves upon shelves of props. These include

floral bouquets, Madonna statues, crucifixes, spears, swords, daggers, revolvers, goblets, champagne glasses, wine bottles, two roast pigs on chargers, battle flags, and lanterns. There are hat boxes, briefcases, doctor bags, suitcases, trunks, and carpet bags. We found four carpet bags. One of them looked promising.

We took it into the paint shop, an open room with natural lighting.

The bag should have been empty, but it felt heavy. I placed it on the table and located a pair of fabric sheers.

"OK," I said. "Ashley, I want to record this. Can you film with your iPhone?"

She removed her phone and turned it horizontally. With a nod, she signaled me to begin.

"I am Chris Milligan," I said. "I have here a bag that may contain something very valuable. We just retrieved the bag from storage—a shelf in Cincinnati Opera's warehouse. It is part of the Opera's props collection."

Narrating for the video, I gave a play-by-play for each step. I made a snip by the seam at end of the fabric, lining the bottom. After a few more careful snips, the slit was wide enough. I held up the cut piece with my right hand and reached in with my left. I extracted a large, weighty package tied in twine. I took a deep breath and breathed out.

With Ashley filming the whole thing, I placed the package on the table. I cut the twine, set down the scissors and pushed them aside. With two hands, I slowly turned the package on its face and pulled back the wrapping paper to reveal the backside of the bottom sheet.

"I'm now going to remove the document from its wrapping," I said for the recording.

I grasped the top and bottom of the stack of manuscript papers, lifted it from the wrapping paper, and set it face up on the table. Immediately, we saw the title page. It read *King Lear* and below that, G. Verdi.

"Ashley, are you still recording?"

"Yes, still recording."

I turned to the score. "I'm going to set aside the top page," I said. I did so with two hands. The second page was blank.

Again, same careful grasping, lifting, and placing. Same result: another blank page. And again, the same. The removal of each blank sheet revealed another of

its kind. No notation, no lyrics.

No overture. No earnest aria for Cordelia explaining to her father that she "cannot heave [her] heart into [her] mouth." No raging baritone Lear on the heath in the storm, "Blow, winds, and crack your cheeks! Rage! Blow!"

Ashley turned off the recording. Our hearts sank. We were sad. Sad for opera. Sad for Verdi. Sad for Natalia.

Part 10: Farewell

A few days later, I sent a note to Natalia. Not hearing a reply for several weeks, I tried to reach her, again by phone.

"It's a good day at Villa Palms. This is Maggie."

"I'm trying to reach Natalia Roth. This is Chris Milligan calling from Cincinnati."

"Hello, Mr. Milligan. I have your letter here. I was hoping you'd call. I'm sorry to say that Natalia passed away earlier this month."

"Oh, I'm sorry to hear that," I said. I thanked her for telling me and said she could discard my letter.

As you might imagine, I had carefully considered what to tell Natalia regarding the score. In the end, I simply wrote, "Dear Natalia, I hope to have more news soon. But for the moment, I'll just say, your father loved you very much."

Epilogue

Music Hall has been quiet since the renovation. And our fragile hope of presenting a lost masterpiece has become a distant memory. Nevertheless, whenever it seems our art form has lost some of its vim and vigor, I can't help thinking that a newly discovered opera by Verdi would be just the remedy we need.

Written and read by Christopher Milligan at a virtual meeting of The Literary Club on April 20, 2020, during the State of Ohio's stay-at-home order aimed at reducing the spread of Covid-19.

The portion of the story related to Natalia is imagined.