

Accidental Circumstances

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Whilst truth may be stranger than fiction, and my article last year on the deaths of composers may have supported that belief, opera often proves the exception to the rule.

'No good opera plot can be sensible, for people do not sing when they are feeling sensible.' (W.H.Auden)

When you think of your favourite operas, or indeed your favourite opera arias, the odds are that you will pick a tragedy.

'Well, basically there are two sorts of opera ... There's your heavy opera, where basically people sing foreign and it goes like "Oh oh oh, I am dyin', oh I am dyin', oh oh oh, that's what I'm doin'", and there's your light opera, where they sing in foreign and it basically goes "Beer! Beer! Beer! I like to drink lots of beer!", although sometimes they drink champagne instead. That's basically all of opera, reely.' (Terry Pratchett – *Maskerade*)

The title of my article is taken from the prologue to Benjamin Britten's opera, *Peter Grimes*. William Spode, a boy apprentice, has drowned and the coroner is holding an inquest. Despite Peter's wish to be tried properly to avoid the continuing accusation of the villagers, the coroner says that the boy died in accidental circumstances – "but that's the kind of thing people are apt to remember." Unfortunately for Peter, another boy falls to his death and in order to escape the mob (predicted so accurately in the opening scene) Peter Grimes sails out to sea and presumably drowns. This is probably one of the most realistic and heart wrenching moments in all opera. Not all opera is as believable as this; it is well known that in opera you can get away with anything as long as you sing it.

Whilst 'The opera isn't over until the fat lady sings' is supposed to refer to Brünnhilde in Wagner's Ring Cycle, it can unfortunately apply when it really shouldn't. Think, for example, of Verdi's *La Traviata* and Puccini's *La Bohème*. At the end of both of these perennial favourites, the heroine dies of consumption (tuberculosis, or the wasting disease). Does this look authentic?



So we accept that we have to suspend our disbelief, to the relief of Leah Crocetto (above) as well as Pavarotti, Caballé and others in their later years. But what of the plots themselves? Which are the most bloodthirsty? Which are the most bizarre deaths? Which deaths are the most difficult to stage? Here are a few of my favourites.

'Opera is when a guy gets stabbed in the back and, instead of bleeding, he sings.'
(Ed Gardner)

Shooting and stabbing are quite commonplace. Lensky (Eugen Onegin) and Turiddu (Cavalleria Rusticana) are both killed in duels; Klinghoffer (The Death of Klinghoffer) is shot in the head whilst in his wheelchair, Bystrouška (the Vixen) is shot by Harašta (the poacher) in *The Cunning Little Vixen* and poor Danny is accidentally shot by Myles, apparently being mistaken for an otter, in Julius Benedict's *Lily of Killarney*. Stabbings

are deeply personal and are often used in matters of jealousy or revenge. *Pagliacci*, *Rigoletto*, *Attila*, *Carmen*, *Il Tabarro*, and *Porgy and Bess* all contain fatal stabbings. Perhaps the most tragic of these is *Rigoletto* in which the title character pays the assassin Sparafucile to kill the Duke. It is only when Rigoletto has dragged the sack containing the body round the cobbled streets of Mantua and is about to throw it into the river that he discovers that it contains his daughter who has sacrificed herself in place of the Duke. What if he'd opened the sack immediately – would she have survived? We'll never know.

Views on suicide have been influenced by religion, honour, and the sanctity of life. Many religions view suicide as an offence to God, other belief systems see it as an honourable escape or even as a duty. In opera, there is suicide by drowning, fire, hanging, jumping to death, poisoning, shooting, stabbing and accidental suicide. Perhaps the most famous suicide is in *Madama Butterfly* in which Cio-cio-san commits jigai, the female version of seppuku (hara-kiri). In some operas, the death is through shame or because there is no way out: *Norma* & Pollione jump on a funeral pyre; Jocasta, Oedipus's mother, hangs herself in her chambers (*Oedipus Rex*); overwhelmed by shame, Iris throws herself into an abyss (*Iris*), Fanella does the same (*La muette de portici*), Werther shoots himself, Lucretia stabs herself (*The Rape of Lucretia*) as do *Ernani* and *La Gioconda*. In *Les Troyens* the women collectively commit suicide, then Dido climbs on top of a pyre and stabs herself with a sword once given to her by Aeneas. In Berg's *Wozzeck*, the title character slits his wife's throat and then drowns himself.

'Well, what did you expect in an opera? A happy ending?' (*Bugs Bunny*)

Just occasionally the death is seen as part of an act of redemption as in Puccini's *Suor Angelica*, where after learning of the death of her son, Sister Angelica is seized by a heavenly vision — she believes she hears her son calling for her to meet him in paradise. She makes a poison and drinks it, but realizes that in committing suicide, she has committed a mortal sin and has damned herself to eternal separation from her son. She begs the Virgin Mary for mercy and, as she dies, she sees a miracle: The Virgin Mary appears, along with Sister Angelica's son, who runs to embrace her. In *The Flying Dutchman*, Senta throws herself into the sea, thus redeeming the Flying Dutchman and they both ascend to heaven.

Tosca is often thought of as one of the most lethal of operas. None of the central characters makes it to the end alive. Scarpia is stabbed by Tosca, Cavaradossi is shot by firing squad, and Tosca throws herself to her death from the walls of Castel Sant'Angelo.



Before moving on to operas which are positively bathed in blood, *Tosca* is one of those operas about which there are many anecdotes, probably apocryphal, but nonetheless entertaining. All of them involve the famous ending where Tosca throws herself to her death.

At one point it was thought that she threw herself into the Tiber, but that would have been a superhuman feat, even for opera, as can be seen from the picture above. Some Toscas have been large ladies and needed extra help in making sure they landed safely behind the scenery. Imagine being in the audience at the time where a trampoline or perhaps an extra springy mattress was placed to break the fall and witnessing the reappearance of Tosca, again, and again, and again... That one can't be true, can it?

There is apparently evidence of the time when local schoolchildren had been brought in to fill the uniforms of the pursuing guards at the very end and had, in lieu of rehearsal, been hurriedly given the standard stage instruction, "exit with the principals." So, when they saw their Tosca leap from the parapet, they dutifully lined up. And as the curtain came down, the audience was treated to the sight of the soldiers, in an orderly line, leaping to their death one by one.

If you think *Game of Thrones* is good at killing off its characters, what about *Lucrezia Borgia*, *Dialogues des Carmélites*, *Lulu*, and *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* (*Katerina Ismailova*), *Ali Baba* and the *Ring* cycle? Those familiar with the stories surrounding the Borgias will not be surprised by the poisoning of Orsini, Liverotto, Vitellozzo, Petrucci and Gazella as well as Gennaro - Lucrezia's son. Heartbroken, Lucrezia mourns the loss of her son, and she too, dies. In Poulenc's *Reign of Terror*

opera, most of the Carmelite nuns are executed by guillotine, in Shostakovich's *Lady Macbeth*, Boris Izmailov eats a meal of mushrooms, laced with rat poison, Zinoviy Izmailov is strangled and finished off with a blow on the head from a candlestick then Sonyetka & Katerina Izmailova fall into an icy river.

Lulu is the drama of a young woman who sexually and emotionally dominates a wide range of willing victims, both male and female. Lulu's first husband, a physician, dies of a heart attack, her second – the Painter – cuts his own throat, she fires five shots into the back of her third husband whose son is then killed by an African prince. Lulu and her friend the Countess are both killed by Jack the Ripper.

'My thanks to the people who showed me that opera was stranger than I could imagine.' (Pratchett – *Maskerade*)

Then there are the more unusual stage deaths. In *Adriana Lecouvreur* (Cilea) the heroine dies after eating poisoned violets; in *The English Cat* (Henze) Tom (a cat) is murdered by his lawyer's clerk (a fox); and in *The Makropulos Affair* (Janáček), Elena Makropulos, who has been alive for over 300 years, decides not to continue taking her potion, for her life has been marked by boredom and loneliness. In Birtwistle's *Punch and Judy*, Baby is thrown into a fire, Judy is stabbed, the Doctor is stabbed with an oversized hypodermic syringe, the Lawyer is stabbed with a quill, Choregos is somehow sawn in half with a bass viol case and the Hangman is tricked into lynching himself. In *Ali Baba* (one of the feeblest things Cherubini ever wrote, according to Berlioz) the robbers hide in bales of coffee which are all burned, and in the huge *Ring* cycle, Fafner kills his brother Fasolt, Hunding finishes Siegmund off with a sword, then is killed by Wotan's glance, Siegfried kills Fafner (as the dragon) then Mime, and in the final instalment Hagen kills Siegfried, then

Gunther. He is then drowned by the Rhinemaidens. All the gods perish in Valhalla as it burns, and, as the comedienne Anna Russell says, you're exactly where you started twenty hours ago!

And finally, the most bizarre and painful deaths in opera. *Aida* and *Radamès* are buried alive, as is *Don Carlo*. Rachel & Eleazar are thrown into a cauldron of boiling water in *La Juive* and, of course, the Witch is burned alive in *Hansel and Gretel*. Don Giovanni, Bertram and John Wellington Wells are dragged back to hell in *Don Giovanni*, *Robert le Diable* and *The Sorcerer* respectively. In Rimsky-Korsakov's *Le Coq d'Or*, King Dodon is pecked to death by a cockerel who pecks his jugular in a show of loyalty and in *Le Grand Macabre* by Ligeti, Nekrotzar bites Mescalina's neck, killing her, although she reappears from the tomb towards the end of the opera, whereupon he shrinks until he is infinitesimally small and disappears.

Perhaps, even more interesting to stage are Dame Ethel Smyth's *The Wreckers* in which the two young lovers, Mark & Thirza, are to be left chained in a cave as the incoming tide gradually fills it; Handel's *Semele* in which the flames of Jupiter's power burn Semele and she dies, Bacchus is then born from her ashes; and for those of you who read this before the concert on September 2nd a special treat – an aria from *La Wally*. Catalani's opera is set in the alps and at the end, Haghenbach calls to La Wally, setting off an avalanche that sweeps him away. In despair, Wally throws herself after him into the abyss.

Somehow, in Mellieħa, I think it will be a concert version, and not staged. As a footnote, I notice that parts of *La Wally* were recently staged in the USA in a double bill with a new opera called *Everest* (in which the chorus were those who had died on the mountain).

The Alps and *Everest* in one evening on stage? Something we're unlikely to witness at Teatru Manoel!

