

# ROMÉO ET JULIETTE

OPERA REPORTAGE

ANDREA BOCELLI  
LE OPERE

by Giorgio De Martino

ROMÉO ET JULIETTE  
TEATRO CARLO FELICE, GENOVA

February 18, 2012

Andrea Bocelli and his partner Veronica are welcomed by the euphoric sight of a water city that all of a sudden is covered with snow. The première of “Roméo et Juliette” is still a month away (planned for 24th February) when the dream machine starts to move: below the tower of the lyrical theatre, on the 3rd floor, the preparations begin.

The roads of the city centre are covered with posters promoting the event. The masterpiece by Charles Gounod has been missing from Genoa for one hundred years and this strange, disenchanted port city of Northern Italy finds itself waiting with trepidation for the return of the most moving love story of all times, the greatest lesson of love of all times.

Steep, in between the mountains and the sea, underneath a blanket of snow, the capital of Liguria softens its sharp corners (consisting of rocks, intertwining alleys, millenary churches): Genoa holds its breath and muffles the arrogance of its everyday voice. Therefore, in a unique, lactescent magic, it welcomes its very own Roméo.

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Andrea Bocelli's career is a crescendo of challenges, and there is no artistic adventure that has not been sealed by success. Once again the bet is one of those that, as Dante would have said, “makes our veins and wrists shake”: the clothes of the protagonist of the most binding opera by Gounod, in a role that requests almost total presence on stage, from the first to the fifth act, in a role full of acute notes and steps stubbornly made on the most arduous part of the voice, the so-called “passage”.

Rather than enjoying the well deserved return of the media following the recent and triumphal concert in Central Park, immortalised in a DVD that has travelled the world, Andrea went back to his studies straight after. First of all, thousands of words and notes and then the shades established by his predecessors (the most important interpretation being the one by his beloved friend, Franco Corelli) and, finally, identification of his own personal phrasing and interiorisation of the character.

This is it, mystic and carnal music at the same time, just like the long life of Gounod, marked by strong religious instincts and, at the same time, by an expressive sensuality that can be easily found in the production of operas. It is not by chance that the lyrical project related to the Shakespearian tragedy represented joy and torment, as far as the composer was concerned, from his youth right through to his old age.... Otherwise, what could be more sensual, intoxicating, totalising, but at the same time innocent, even mystical, about the attraction between the two youngsters, other than their first great love?



ANDREA BOCELLI  
*in Concert*

The Carlo Felice theatre, destroyed during the Second World War and rebuilt just twenty years ago, evokes a square. The scene that can be seen by each one of the two thousand armchairs of the hall, surrounded by marble and imposing balconies, below a starry sky of spotlights is basically a night landscape.

At -3 the setting loses in terms of poetry but earns in terms of concreteness: this is where every step is defined, every gesture of the protagonists, this is where the producer Jean-Luis Grinda and his singers will spend the first days of the trial, with a daily average of seven or eight hours. Anonymous and white, as large as the stage itself, the large room is fitted with soundproof panels and overlooked by the visible air conditioning system. In the middle, a diamond shape platform placed on a higher level (just how the Verona square will be, beyond the curtain) the temporary arena for the Shakespearian tragedy, revisited by the musical sensitivity of the second half of the French nineteenth century, can be found.

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Love is a picklock, it shatters the chains of hate, it extracts secular rivalry from the mud. The origins of "Roméo et Juliette" reveal to us how a similar story had been narrated in ancient Greece, subsequently to migrate, first of all to Verona, and then to medieval Siena. A Tuscan kindred that adds another small legitimisation to this happy consonance between Andrea Bocelli and Roméo. The fact is that the creative tailoring of Gounod, one hundred and fifty years in advance, it appears to have sensibly prepared the role based on the specific vocal characteristics of Andrea. A voice that must move, seduce, know how to suffer and fascinate, shine with all its new power of an adolescent character, it must have the buzz of the hero ready to die for his desperate love.

Tears are a gift from above, the lyrical opera is the ideal gym for invaluable regeneration of the soul that emotion triggers. Even at -3, where an old vertical piano replaces the orchestra, where Roméo and Juliette sing dressed in jeans and the setting is a white wall, with tears apparently rolling down. It is not the newcomers of easy suggestion but authorised personnel, colleagues of Andrea, artists who know the score, note by note.

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Fifth act: Roméo is in the crypt of his loved one. He thinks that she is dead and, desperate, he swallows a deathly concoction. While awaiting proof on the stage, Andrea extracts it from a cruet from the company canteen. This, at the moment, is what the accessories department has to offer. Yet the magic of the scene, the musical summit of an opera that always leaves its audience with a frog in their throat, remains intact. Perhaps the laugh before or immediately after. During the music they suffer softly.



“I do not like dying, not even when I’m acting... At the same time, I consider myself a lucky man: requirements that cannot be renounced such as having to kiss young and beautiful colleagues!”

Fun, interpreted as a positive energy, like the certainty of a coral tension towards a mutual objective, can be perceived as soon as the main door has been crossed (if and when they have survived, unharmed, from the labyrinth of lifts and corridors, in the heart of this strange theatre).

It is just like the smell of laundry, inexpressible yet recognisable at the first breath: merit goes to everybody, but first of all it goes to the producer Grinda, who put it together with extreme care and respecting all of the artists involved.

The love scenes are sparks for pleasant moments of hilarity. If the producer demands a moment of affectionate frenzy, Andrea obeys and then quickly asks with a simulated professional rigour:

“Veronica, how was I? Just like when I’m with you? Perhaps a bit looser?”.

An embrace normally ends with a passionate duet, and from the faces joined at the position of the hands (that should or should not cover the face of the partner), everything designed in every detail ... And Andrea: “At my age I have to learn to kiss”.

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Veronica smiles, she is in the furthest corner of the room but she does not miss even a second of the trials. The fact that she is eight months pregnant does not allow her to have similar rhythms. However, she does not give in, she listens, she takes notes, she remembers every request, every indication given by the producer (things that she will discuss separately with her partner). She knows every note of the opera, and just like Virginia, who is not allowed to judge but takes part in the eight hour trials, protected by her mothers’ womb.

“A production born under a funny star”, reflects Andrea out loud, during a coffee break: “despite a few initial logistic mishaps, the trials are running smoothly, there is huge enthusiasm, a strong desire, a wonderful energy and things move very fast. An important thing is that the choir mainly consists of young colleagues. I am probably the oldest of the group”.

The two Juliettes that alternate on the stage, Maite Alberola and Alessandra Marianelli, are both Vocally solid and expressively generous. With Alessandra, from Tuscany, the figure of an adolescent, perfect for the role, and a cascade of blond hair, Andrea tried hard and achieved an excellent harmony. On the other hand he has been working for a few hours on the scenes with Maite: Bocelli comments, “she also has a beautiful colour, she has a kind of vibrato that is very tight and that I personally appreciate very much and it helps me a lot in my duets, where I create an empathy capable of triggering a vicious circle and, at the same time, virtuous”.

The love scene of the fourth act is repeated. This time the static electricity charges the lov-



ers of Verona and in an embrace, a jolt makes them jump. “Juliette has truly been turned on by love”, Andrea laughs, together with his staff. In the meantime the first three hours of work of the day have literally flown by, the producer says that it is time for a break.

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The rhythm of the trials, often extended to an evening musical session, do not even leave any time for a visit to the town centre (the largest in Europe). For now Genoa has succeeded in winning over Andrea Bocelli through some delicacies, such as lasagne with pesto sauce (a dish that is extremely popular) or “farinata” (chickpea bread). As far as wines are concerned, even though he is a great connoisseur, he strictly abstains throughout the period. Not even a drop of his favourite,

“Sciacchetrà” from the Cinque Terre, a yellow wine for meditation that can open symphonies of feelings. “The day that I give in, betraying this rule that I have imposed on myself, will not be a good sign”, he confesses, answering to the insistence of his commensals.

Genoa, with its glorious medieval and renaissance past, with huge riches accumulated in a less glorious manner (through the activities of bankers) is an engrossing and complex city. Its orography does not make it easy to cross: full of drops, it climbs in just a few minutes from the quays of the port to the mountain paths.

The extremely low temperatures of this recent period whet social contradictions: at night the railway stations are left open to provide shelter for the homeless. During the day there are many disorderly lives that create a bitter framework to the distracted landscape of the Genoese, on the edges of the pavements and under the arcades in the city centre. Along the way, in between the entrance reserved to the artists and the hotel, Veronica and Andrea bump into an old lady with a cluster of ruffled white hair. she is talking to herself, her appearance betrays her state of poverty. Veronica accompanies Andrea and after just a few minutes she returns alone, she approaches her and she suggests a much more comfortable shelter, that she refuses.

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Thursday 9th February , the trials end at six o'clock, while a car awaits Andrea outside to drive him to the airport. A twelve hour flight awaits him, and three important, awaited concerts in three American locations: Friday in Austin, Texas, Sunday in Orlando and Tuesday in Fort Lauderdale, in Florida. The following day, in the middle of the month, he will be in Genoa once again to continue with the trials, with the orchestra and with the podium of Fabio Luisi.

For the first time Veronica, after many years, will be forced to stay at home. With her pregnancy almost terminated, she really cannot take an intercontinental flight. Alberto Bocelli



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will be alongside his brother together with one of his dearest friends, Verano. They were intensive days, full of music and information to be memorised. The scenes of Eric Chevalier have been finally prepared and the last hours of the trial can be carried out on stage.

“This opera An endeavour that does not forgive: it requires the energy of a twenty-year old, and if you do not have vocal chords of steel and an extremely solid training, you will not survive”. It is true to say that those like Andrea who do not make any savings, sing the opera more than twice from the top to the bottom, every day. In the case of a technique that is not very solid, the vocal chords would have surrendered after a couple of days.

“If I stop to think that the première is in just a few days I will start to become nervous and have sleepless nights: the secret is to not think about it!”. The person writing, repeats that he has overcome much more difficult trials, in a career of almost twenty years. And Andrea replies: “The lyrical world is very special, there is always someone lying in wait, at the first hitch. I matured my tranquillity in the commitment that I put into things every day, in the seriousness with which I have prepared myself, in the tranquillity of having carefully carried out the trials.... The secret is having a clean conscience and having a passionate love for his work”.

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The time has come for goodbyes. The production by “Roméo et Juliette” is now ready. The producer frees Andrea. He jokes and thanks, saying “I could hug you”, and Jean-Luis Grinda plays the same game and approaches, miming what had been jokingly requested. The trial ends with happiness.

During these first fifteen days of collaboration, the cast and staff of production have developed an affectionate form of complicity that has a vague family touch. Obviously this is only an interruption of one week. But this discharge, just like a general trial of the next leave, will close the opera once the last performance has been archived. This is the nice and horrible part of this strange profession: friendships can be created for long and intense periods, resulting in daily visits. You acquire confidence with your travel companions, you experience side by side emotionally totalising moments, of joy, fear, fatigue and euphoria. Then quickly say goodbye and disappear again in the world.

Luckily in the adventure of this “Roméo” prefigured memorably, we are half way through the trip.

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