

1995

The American Opera Company

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Recommended Citation

Boruch, Marianne. "The American Opera Company." *The Iowa Review* 25.1 (1995): 151-152. Web.
Available at: <http://ir.uiowa.edu/iowareview/vol25/iss1/29>

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THE AMERICAN OPERA COMPANY

Forty years running, it boiled down by then
to one backdrop—a garden
faded to an afterlife of flowers—
rolled up in Madame's
little studio. Below, the lesser end
of Chicago's elegant
Michigan Avenue, and beyond such muted glitter,
the ancient lake. My brother, just
a kid, 14, came every Saturday
to be Aida's king or Boheme's Rodolfo.
And the tiny Madame Del Prado,
squeezed in behind her giant grand, played
each riff—again, Michael!—a hundred times.
Then those sandwiches she'd make, something
out of a tin, deviled ham
or corned beef, so salty
they dazed on the thick brown bread.
And of course, this triumph
or that—Venice, Frankfurt,
three cities in New Jersey, 1933—such
hopeless radiance on stage, even the men
would weep.

Is it the gasoline air that makes this
dark and sweet? We all went home in that.
But my brother alone, the el and two buses,
his whole head maybe, a pure B sharp.
Over and over her note at the piano—here Michael,
here—and he'd hit it
and keep it. How strangers burned away.
My brother telling me
years later, the train's odd sad pitch—E flat—
and braking at the grimy stations, a low D
so sudden and eerie. Real, it happened,
but now this much a story: one boy, mid-century,

silent except for singing
in that room of ghosts. The old woman
rapt with—what?—not herself,
not even music. I saw that backdrop once,
how the path lost itself in flowers—nothing to do
with the plot, or with the bursting,
chanting mob downstage,
oblivious, on and on.