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Recommended Citation

Available at: https://doi.org/10.17077/0021-065X.4404

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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.