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Irene Dalis and Nicole Birkland chat about the role of Azucena in Verdi's 'Il Trovatore'

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Irene Dalis is a San Jose native, a former Metropolitan Opera diva and the founder of Opera San Jose. This fall, the company will begin its 30th season, which will be Dalis's last as general director. An iconic figure on the South Bay arts scene, Dalis, 87, recently announced her retirement, effective July 2014.



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Two weeks ago, I sat down with Dalis (a mezzo-soprano at the Met from 1957 to '77) and Nicole Birkland (an up and coming mezzo and resident artist with Opera San Jose) to discuss Giuseppe Verdi's "Il Trovatore." Why? Saturday, Birkland stars in the opening-night cast of the company's new production of this classic tale of love, murder and revenge. She sings the role of Azucena (pronounced: Ah-zoo-CHAIN-ah),



Irene Dalis and Nicole Birkland are photographed at Opera San Jose in San Jose, Calif. on Friday, January 25, 2013. As a mezzo-soprano, Dalis, 87, sang on some of the world's greatest opera stages before returning home to San Jose where she founded Opera San Jose nearly thirty years ago. Beginning next month, Birkland, also a mezzo-soprano, will sing in Opera San Jose's production of "Il Trovatore". She will sing the role of Azucena, which Dalis had done fifty years ago at the Metropolitan Opera in New York. Dalis also just announced her retirement as general director of Opera San Jose. (Gary Reyes/ Staff) (Gary Reyes)

a poor Gypsy woman. It's a role that Dalis made her own at the Met.

Here's what you need to know to follow this conversation: As the story goes, Azucena saw her mother burned at the stake by the evil Count di Luna. Later, as revenge, she grabs a little boy and tosses him to his death in a fire. She thinks this boy is the Count's son. In fact, she has accidentally thrown her own child into the flames. Plausible? Hey, this is opera.

Here's an edited transcript of our conversation:

Question: Ms. Dalis, let's talk about your history with "Trovatore" and Azucena. You were in some storied productions at the Metropolitan Opera.

Irene Dalis: The first time I ever did Azucena was at the Met, and I was in my early 30s. That was 1957. But it's the '61 production which will go down in history, because it was the one with which Leontyne Price and Franco Corelli made their debut at the Met -- which I won't forget.

I remember telling Robert Merrill (the famous baritone, also in the cast), "If we went out on stage and put bags over our heads, I don't think anyone would notice," because to have two such singers making a debut at the same time was unusual.

Q: Were you nervous singing Azucena next to those two superstars?

Dalis: My dear, I was nervous for 25 years. I really was. I'd sit in my dressing room, looking at myself in the mirror, thinking, "What are you doing here?" Until I was called onstage -- and it was like a steel rod was put through my body. Nothing could bother me. Adrenaline was what I needed, like a horse getting ready for a race.

I was not fun to be with backstage. I did not tolerate jokes. I really had to focus on what I had to do. I would sit at my dressing table and write out the role in Italian. Instead of speaking it, I'd write it.

Q: How about you, Nicole? What's your pre-performance routine?

Nicole Birkland: This will be one of the first major roles I've done. I sit and I look at the score. I go through all my stage directions. I do a warm-up, and I go into make-up and costume. I don't really talk to anyone.

Dalis: Nicole is born to this role.

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Q: How would you describe Nicole's voice?

Dalis: It's a dark, full dramatic sound. When I heard her, I thought, "Oh, now we can do "Trovatore!"

I've been waiting for this kind of voice -- a real dramatic mezzo is not that easy to find. It takes a little bit longer for that kind of voice to arrive, usually around age 31 or 32.

Q: Let's talk more about the demands this role places on the mezzo.

Dalis: "Il Trovatore" has been recognized as one of the greatest operas ever written. Musically, however, it's not that difficult, really. But it shows the potential of a dramatic mezzo-soprano voice; it calls on every aspect of that voice.

By the way, Nicole, do you take the high C or not?

Birkland: I do.

Dalis: Good girl! Not every mezzo takes the high C in the cadenza.

Q: Let's step back. In the second act's first scene, Azucena sings these two big numbers, "Stride la vampa" ("The blaze is crackling") and "Condotta ell'era in ceppi" ("She was led in chains"). What's happening in the first number?

Dalis: What she describes is a flame, which keeps rising up and up and up. It's more or less an introduction to her feelings. And she is obsessed with this feeling, with this flame.

Q: Is she a complex character?

Dalis: I considered her to be demented. The poor woman lives daily with this horrible thought in her mind of when she saw her mother burned at the stake -- and she thought she had thrown the Count's son into the fire as revenge. But she had thrown her own son into the flames.

Many people say she's so complex. I didn't find Azucena complex, because really all she thinks about is getting revenge.

Birkland: "Mi vendica" -- she says that throughout the show: "Avenge me," an interesting phrase. I try to put myself into her situation, to realize what that would mean to me personally. I'm on stage for the entire "Anvil Chorus" (a popular choral number earlier in the scene), so I have all this time to sit there and think about the fire and the flames and get into that moment.

Dalis: When Nicole came to me to talk about the role, my answer was, "All you have to do is sing every note the way Verdi has written it and follow every dynamic and all the accents he puts on certain notes. The character is in the music.

Q: Ms. Dalis, do today's singers approach the role differently than in your day?

Dalis: One thing I've thought about is that, in my era, there were not supertitles, so we used to do a lot more exterior motion, more gesturing. Now it's more internalized. It's more in the face and the eyes, which I like better. It works better.

In the old days, when Azucena asked, "Don't you see the finger of death on my forehead?" I would point. (Here, Dalis pushes a finger into the middle of her forehead.)

Q: A little heavy-handed?

Dalis: Oh, yeah.

Q: What are some of the role's other special aspects?

Dalis: You can't always sing full-voice. There are moments that are more internalized than the others, so they have to be softer. But she's not that hard to understand. This poor woman has this same thought all the time: "Il figlio mio, mio figlio avea bruciato!" -- "I burned my own son." That's the high point, and that's when she collapses. To tell you the truth, I get goose flesh when I think about it.

Birkland: I try to channel her when I'm on the stage. I covered this role in English a few years ago at Chautauqua Opera. Two summers ago, I worked on the scene with (mezzo-soprano) Dolora Zajick, and I had been singing "Stride la vampa" for a while, and I'd also been singing the "Condotta," preparing it for a year.

Q: Have you looked at historic performances on YouTube?

Birkland: Yes, it's great; we can go back and listen to all those performances. Also, I've seen "Trovatore" once at the Met, once at Chicago Lyric. It's one of my favorite operas; I listened to it, like, three times yesterday.

(At this point in the interview, we take out the Sony Masterworks CD of "Trovatore," recorded live at the Met on Feb. 4, 1961, with Dalis as Azucena, alongside Corelli, Price and the rest of the cast. Fausto Cleva was the conductor.)

Dalis: Cleva was a marvelous conductor, and demanding. Verdi writes these dotted rhythms (a dot after a note lengthens its duration by half), and they had to be absolutely on -- exactly how it was written by Verdi.

And after opening night, where everyone went crazy because of Franco Corelli and Leontyne Price, he called us all in for an extra rehearsal before the second performance. And I'll never forget it, because Corelli came in with a camelhair coat swung over his shoulder; he just swaggered in. And Leontyne came in as if she were going to a ball. And Cleva said, "Get comfortable, we're going to do this the way Verdi intended."

(Now we listen to Dalis's rendition of "Stride la vampa" from the CD. Her voice is darkly colored and powerfully dramatic. Wow.)

Q: Ms. Dalis, what goes through your mind when you hear that?

Dalis: (Pauses). I don't like my voice, OK? I'm telling you, Nicole's much better than that.

Q: You don't like anything about your voice?

Dalis: What I like about it is, it's musically correct, with the dotted notes, which makes it sound more urgent. But the voice; I'm surprised that she had a career.

Q: "She," meaning you?

Dalis: Yes. Look, that's 50 years ago. I feel like I'm hearing somebody else. I've been running this company longer than I was on stage, and I look at this as my life's work, not my (singing) career.

Q: I'd say your singing is very emotional, not just musically accurate.

Dalis: The emotional parts came to me innately, frankly. I came from a family where we laughed when we laughed, and cried where we cried -- Greek and Italian. Emotions were always out in the open. That helped me onstage, because what we have to do is communicate something to the audience. It's not just standing there and looking beautiful.

Q: Do you agree, Nicole? How do you feel about this role?

Birkland: I just love it -- all the melodies and the orchestration and how the dramatic points are really strong and all the soft points are really exquisite.

Dalis: When you learn a Verdi role, it remains with you forever. That doesn't happen with all composers. With me, it was only Verdi and Wagner.

Q: Ms. Dalis, what does it mean to you, hearing Nicole sing a role you yourself sang 50 years ago?

Dalis: Yesterday, I watched a rehearsal, and I teared up. I thought, "She's marvelous. It's exactly what I would want to be able to do."

It made me think a little about the first time I did Azucena, and I was an absolute nervous wreck. After the first performance, I passed Rudolf Bing (then the Met's general manager), who said, "That was just beautiful." And I turned around and answered him, "Well, then you have no idea how good Azucena can be!" That was my boss.

Q: Nicole, what's it like to have Ms. Dalis watching you?

Birkland: It adds another level of excitement -- oh man, she knows this so well and has done it so often! And I hope I'm going in the right direction. It's my first shot at it.

Q: Does the history of the opera weigh on you -- all those other performances by earlier mezzos?

Birkland: I don't really think about the history. I just think, "What am I trying to portray to the audience, and what's on the page, and what am I singing about?" I'm more in the moment.

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