

A singer's view of humiliation



Production of Turandot © Ludwig Olah/ State Theatre of Nuremberg

You know those dreams where you're about to sit an exam and suddenly realise you've forgotten to put any clothes on? Well, singers have their own special versions of those dreams, says Christopher Gillett – and sometimes they find themselves wearing no clothes in real life, too.



Ask any professional singer and they'll tell you about the singer's recurring nightmare – and I'm talking about an actual nightmare, not a teenager's description of a holiday with their parents. It's always a variation on the same theme: humiliation.

Mine is entirely typical. It goes something like this: I've agreed to sing a vaguely familiar (yet highly unsuitable) role at Covent Garden (<http://www.roh.org.uk/>) with no rehearsal. I can hear my cue, but I can't find my costume and I can't find my way to the stage. When I eventually make it, long past my cue, the audience is waiting silently for me to start. The band strikes up and the best I can come up with is: 'La donna e mobile, lum dum di da di-da...' And so on and so on. Not a clue what I'm doing. It's a dream about being found wanting, about being exposed as a fraud.

Many people have said: 'How could you do that? It must be so humiliating!'

In real life, I've just finished a production of *Turandot* in which my costume consisted solely of an adult disposable nappy (a 'diaper' for our American friends). Many people have said: 'How could you do that? It must be so humiliating!' Curiously, I found it anything but humiliating. In the context of Calixto Bieito's brutal production, it made perfect sense. I enjoyed the theatricality of it and the opportunity (not usually provided by the role of Emperor Altoum) to go to a dark and difficult place, to do some proper acting, to play a man who was dying, demented and riddled with cancer.

No, the only time I was remotely embarrassed was when I had to take my curtain call. Now, I was no longer a character (the portrayal of whom meant a lifetime's struggle with doughnut addiction was suddenly something of a bonus) but back to being a flabby bloke called Chris, naked but for a nappy in front of hundreds of people. The [Barihunks](http://barihunks.blogspot.co.uk/) (<http://barihunks.blogspot.co.uk/>) website certainly won't be bashing down [NI Opera](http://www.niopera.com/) (<http://www.niopera.com/>)'s door for photos of *that* curtain call to share with its readers.

That isn't to say there aren't directors who seem to get a kick out of humiliating their singers. By all accounts, Bieito isn't one of them. I wouldn't know as I have only met him once, at the first night in Belfast, when he watched the performance from the prompt corner (an assistant revived our production, which originated in Nuremberg). Though someone did tell me he'd spotted Bieito playing *Angry Birds* on his phone during the show, which seems highly unlikely. I'd have thought *Grand Theft Auto* was more his thing.

Some directors and conductors – sorry, I can't name names or I'll never get work again – have a habit of zeroing in during rehearsals on whomsoever they perceive to be the weakest and making their lives a misery. I really don't know what they aim to achieve by this. Possibly they think that they can get the singer sacked and replaced with someone better, and that occasionally happens. Perhaps they think a climate of fear and division is good for the show (it's not, in my experience). Or maybe they're just self-absorbed megalomaniacs. Now we might be getting warmer.

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Only once, as far as I can remember, has a director picked on me. It was clear from the moment this director clapped eyes on me that he thought I was miscast, too young and inexperienced. He had the look of a child who, expecting the latest top-of-the-range Xbox for his birthday, is given an Etch A Sketch. He spent the next three days trying to break me; he nearly succeeded and I toyed with asking to be released from the contract. But stubbornness got the better of me and I just continued to turn up to rehearse until he eventually ran out of new things to chuck at me. It was like breaking in a horse – although, to be honest, I'm not sure which of us was the horse. In the end, we got on just fine.

The very worst humiliation a director can impose on a singer is to leave them 'out to dry'; in other words, to be so inept as to leave the cast floundering about, not knowing what to do, in a production bereft of ideas and skill. More often than not, it's the singers who end up rescuing the show in this situation, thus saving the director from the humiliation of being found wanting, of being exposed as a fraud.

I wonder what the director's recurring nightmare is. Huh. As [my first experience in that field approaches](http://uk/features/blogs/christopher-gillett/an-opera-singer-turns-director-for-the-first-time-2015) ([/uk/features/blogs/christopher-gillett/an-opera-singer-turns-director-for-the-first-time-2015](http://uk/features/blogs/christopher-gillett/an-opera-singer-turns-director-for-the-first-time-2015)), no doubt I'll soon find out.

More opinion from [Christopher Gillett on Sinfini Music](http://uk/features/blogs/christopher-gillett) ([/uk/features/blogs/christopher-gillett](http://uk/features/blogs/christopher-gillett)):

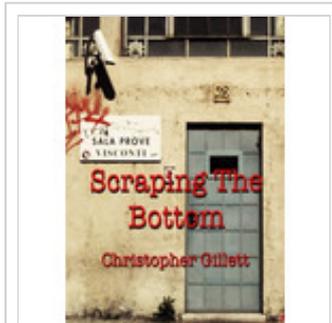
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