

Surprise! Last-minute understudies



© LeoPatrizi/ iStockphoto.com

Baritone Luca Salsi recently managed two performances in one day after being called in to cover a cold-ridden Plácido Domingo. The show, after all, must go on! Tenor Christopher Gillett blogs about the perils of being called in to understudy with minimal notice.



When Luca Salsi got the call that he was needed at the Met *prontissimo* to replace [Plácido Domingo \(/uk/learn/artists/placido-domingo\)](#) in the matinee of *Ernani*, he was pottering along Broadway. Given he was already due to sing in *Lucia di Lammermoor* that night, I imagine he'd just had a late breakfast and his plan for the day included no more than a stroll, some coffee, lunch, a nap, a few episodes of *House of Cards* on Netflix... the usual rhythm of a singer's performance day.

It's not clear if Salsi was the designated cover. It doesn't sound like it, or else he should already have been on standby, given that Domingo had a cold.

Whatever the circumstances, I hope he didn't have to hear a massive groan from the 4,000-strong audience when the announcement was made that Domingo was ill and wouldn't be singing, as so often happens when the star goes down. It's not exactly confidence-inspiring to witness the full force of an audience's collective disappointment just a few minutes before you step out and perform to them, especially as Domingo was standing in the wings at the time. (And why wasn't Domingo tucked up in bed with a hot water bottle and a Lemsip? Perhaps he felt the need to demonstrate he wasn't pulling a sickie.)

Every singer has their tale of being unexpectedly thrust into the limelight

The last-minute call to arms is a regular feature of opera life, and every singer has their tale of being unexpectedly thrust into the limelight. Mine pre-dates the mobile phone. I was on tour in Plymouth with the late-lamented Kent Opera, singing Gaston and covering Alfredo in *La Traviata* on two nights of the week

while singing Arnalta in *The Coronation of Poppea* on two other nights, both conducted by Ivan Fischer.

I booked a cottage on Dartmoor for the week and on the day of the first *La Traviata*, with nothing more strenuous than the small role of Gaston in prospect, I went for a long walk with the dog on the moor, stopping for a large lunch and pint in a remote pub. [Verdi \(/uk/learn/composers/giuseppe-verdi\)](#) was a long way from my mind, as was my contractual obligation to find a pay-phone and ring the company manager by midday to say I was in the area and fine for tonight's Gaston. Eventually, at about four o'clock, I got back to the digs, found a phone and rang the company manager.

The company manager hailed me with 'WHERE THE F#*% ARE YOU?!'

Before I could even murmur the words 'Oops' and 'Sorry', Jamie, the company manager, hailed me with 'WHERE THE F#*% ARE YOU?! I'VE BEEN TRYING TO FIND YOU ALL DAY, YOU PILLOCK! YOU'RE ON AS ALFREDO!'

My wife Lucy Schauer's tale is even more colourful. She was covering Suzuki in *Madama Butterfly*, her very first job at the Met. Having been told that the ever-reliable mezzo doing the role was in good health, Lucy decided she'd do what any self-respecting New Yorker might do with an empty day on their hands: she gave colonic irrigation a whirl.

Fully irrigated, and just as she was paying for her treatment, Lucy's mobile rang. 'Hi, honey,' the company manager said, 'how would you like to make your Met debut and sing Suzuki tonight?'

Now if it had been me – not that I'd be within a country mile of anyone offering to irrigate my colon – my first thought would be: 'Thank God I had that procedure BEFORE I got the call.'

But then Lucy has a calmer head than I. And a cleaner colon.

Read more of [Christopher Gillett on Sinfini Music \(/uk/features/blogs/christopher-gillett/singers-on-the-road-with-dogs\)](#). The tenor's own blog is christophergillett.co.uk (<http://christophergillett.co.uk/>).

Recommended



Scraping The Bottom

Christopher Gillett

[\(/uk/store/products/1291543473\)](/uk/store/products/1291543473)

Buy

[\(/uk/store/products/1291543473\)](/uk/store/products/1291543473)





Who's My Bottom?

Christopher Gillett

(/uk/store/products/1447674936)

Buy

(/uk/store/products/1447674936)