

Largo al factotum ...
The dramaturg

Roger Pines



From the age of 15 my goal was to work in opera. Undergraduate and post-graduate studies, then positions with three opera companies—Dallas (publications editor), San Diego (director of education), and Glimmerglass (surtitlist)—all helped prepare me for my current position as dramaturg at Lyric Opera of Chicago. Still more crucial was a lifetime of reading about opera, attending performances, and listening, listening and more listening. The title of this series suits me, since I've become something of a factotum here. On any given day I'm writing, editing, researching, lecturing, moderating, broadcasting or responding to questions from audience members—everything from, 'What CD of *Carmen* should I buy?' to 'Can you tell me the roles my opera-singer aunt sang in Chicago in 1930?'

In most opera companies (especially European ones) that employ a dramaturg, he or she usually functions as programme editor and also as a stylistic, textual and historical authority for productions. The former role is central to my position, but the latter entails in-depth collaboration with directors and daily attendance at rehearsals, which would be impractical for me, given my other responsibilities. Most of my other tasks, however, are common to other dramaturgs. A dramaturg in a US house is invariably a writer and public speaker. I write daily, whether for programmes, education materials, magazines, lectures, surtitles or radio scripts. The lectures are generally for season previews, volunteer workshops, or audiences in the theatre before performances. I often serve as a moderator of artist round-tables; creating questions and posing them to interviewees as thoughtful as, say, Joyce DiDonato, Thomas Hampson or Ferruccio Furlanetto makes these events a particular joy for me.

Any dramaturg must also be a researcher. For many operas I've been a one-man clearing house of historically vital information gathered for the cast and production team (I remember, during preparation for Lyric Opera's production of *Thaïs*, wading through endless microfilm of newspapers from 1894 to find reviews of the premiere). Especially exciting was a request from Renée Fleming and Susan Graham to assist with their all-French programme at Lyric last season. Anecdotal material regarding the composers, plus projected images related to the song texts, gave this event a dimension beyond the usual recital.

One departure from a dramaturg's usual tasks is my work as Lyric's broadcast commentator. It's gratifying to contribute to the intermission features with 'Legends of Lyric'—tributes to major artists from the company's early history. I'd dreamed of doing this ever since I first heard something similar on the Met broadcasts, to which I've been listening since I was nine years old. Lyric's broadcasts and the other components of my work for the company together make up what is, in fact, my dream job. Like Figaro, I truly feel 'fortunatissimo per verità'.