

The End of the Third Act

by Michael Tanner

He was on his guard: these long return journeys could produce a strange mixture of elation and despondency. It was a fast stretch of road across a high plateau and there, suddenly, perhaps eight miles away and nearly a thousand feet below, were wide fields of golden stubble catching the morning sun which had broken through a veil of cloud. In a mere eight minutes he could be in that golden zone.

There must be about six hundred and fifty miles left between him and the French channel port. Already he was sloughing the skin of the last few weeks and assuming a new one, like one of those bright little lizards that basked amongst the wall vines of the Basses-Alpes left behind.

Suddenly, the car radio reception dramatically improved and a wonderfully clear, soprano voice emerged. His heart leapt with instant recognition of both the song and the singer: the aria "Vissi d'arte" was from Puccini's Tosca; the voice, freely giving everything that the aria demanded, was Rosie's.

He swerved off the road onto a gravelly verge, switched off, tilted his seat and lay back. The singer delivered all the passion and pain woven into the music. She had become Tosca. At the end, he did not take in the presenter's words, did not even register that the radio had lapsed back into its muffled reception. For several moments he contended with the lump in his throat, then lowered the window to take a deep breath.

On his left was a sombre forest of tall firs and pines and on his right, down there, far below, the sunlight. A wren challenged the silence. There was no-one else in the world. Thin white smoke trailed across the distant golden stubble. Sometimes premonitions are not immediately recognised

There were long periods when he did not think of her at all and then, suddenly, something would vividly resurrect her image and her voice from deep inside him Rosie Smith, as he had once known her, long since celebrated throughout the world of Opera and Operetta by the name of Louise Mansfield, for her rendering of Puccini, Lehar, Strauss. Oh Rosie of the violet-blue eyes, tilting face, golden hair, smiling lips! Rosie of the voice that ranged so easily from high lyrical down to mezzo soprano and took you back up to heaven in clear, glorious flight! HIS Rosie, he had once believed, until he understood she was ultimately no man's, belonging only to her art. That voice, which from the same sweet mouth could be that of angel or of old crone, cackling at the foot of the guillotine. That voice which, over the phone, still bore the faintest trace of her Nottinghamshire roots.

He sat motionless, regrouping his thoughts: that first image of her, almost, forty years previous, several days before he actually spoke to her, when as a fresher of seventeen he had climbed the imposing stone staircase in the university building and seen her waiting by the lift entrance, lost in thought. Her pale, sad face contrasted with the red of her gabardine. Even in those green and ignorant days he had sensed the huge talent that was nursed in the girl's head and heart. For him, from the outset, she bore herself as a queen without any pretentiousness

Just a week or two later, at a student Operatic Society performance he recognised the girl's face and heard the voice which held such promise. At the end of that performance, he had resolved that this was the girl he would one day marry. Oh youth! Oh ignorance! Then she had been playing the role of Princess Ida in the G & S opera of that name, and gave more than a hint of her ability to hold everyone in the great hail with her voice and her acting. He had hardly known who Gilbert and Sullivan were.

And she was kind, genuine, off-puttingly down-to-earth, had a great sense of humour. But he was too slow to realise her quiet, indomitable dedication to the arts of acting and singing. They were the *raison d'être* for her attending that University, the very first in the country to actually boast a Drama Department linked to a professional theatre.

Whence came such gifts? From her coal-mining father, her tiny milliner mother, her small coalfield town background? Had some commissioned angel descended one day to the small, redbrick maternity hospital tucked away between coalmine headstocks and redbrick houses and lightly touched the infant diva as she lay in her mother's unsuspecting arms?

A gigantic lorry laden with tree-trunks made a huge rush of wind as it swept past. He roused himself out of these reveries and restarted the engine. There were a good three hundred miles yet to cover before Poitiers, where he would stop for the night. And he must find the opportunity to email his publishers. The draft of his latest work on socio-linguistics was complete and overdue. He had every right to suppose it would get a good review. John Pascoe, Emeritus Professor of Linguistics at a respected English University, had already established his own reputation. His recent meeting with an old colleague at the University of Grenoble had enabled him to give just the finish he required to the draft of his new work, "Songs without Words."

Poitiers came and went and, after a blur of familiar names and landmarks, driving on auto-pilot, he found himself, the day following, on board the ferry at St. Malo and crossing one hundred and fifty miles of well-behaved water.

Somewhere in the sleep which followed his exhaustion he dreamt that his late wife, Mary (dead now for five years) was telling him off for wearing pyjamas when delivering an important lecture. His own laughter had woken him and he was conscious of the ship's Tannoy announcing imminent arrival at Portsmouth harbour.

Just over two hours later John Pascoe was relaxing with a mug of tea in one hand while the other slowly turned the pages of one of several newspapers he had forgotten to cancel. He was too tired to really take in much, and had to flick back to the obituary page he had just glimpsed: something had lodged on his retina - not words, but the photo of a beautiful woman performing an operatic role: the caption read: "Louise Mansfield's Last Tosca".

It was a shock, but one that was cushioned by the broadcast of Tosca's aria he had heard in the car two mornings before.

The paper outlined her celebrated achievements in roles ranging from Floria Tosca and Manon Lescaut to the Merry Widow, played at the world's great opera houses. It paid special tribute to her rare possession in equal strength of the two skills of acting and singing. Louise (nee Rosie) had died after a period of failing health at the Tuscan villa of her husband, Italian impresario and opera critic, Count Alberto di Stefano. They had a daughter, Rosa.

"God Rest, my darling" were Pascoe's inaudible words as he lowered the page and stared before him.

The impressive ivory toned envelope caught his attention. He sensed it had some connection with Rosie, who always kept a special place for him in her heart though he had not seen her for many years. They had lived together for two years following his return from national service abroad, when she had begun to make her mark at The Royal Academy and Wigmore Hall and, in her sad wisdom, knew it was either marriage and a family or her career in opera. At their separation, she had eased his pain and hers, as only she could have done.

The envelope, embossed with the arms of the Italian Embassy, bore a personal message begging to inform him of the death of the Countess Louise (two weeks before) and requesting that he accept the enclosed invitation to attend a memorial service in her honour in Tuscany and the reception which would follow. It was signed by the Count himself

A month later, after a solemn and moving service, he had climbed the wide marble staircase to a splendid ornate hall. He entered alone and stood a moment adjusting to the bright chandeliers. There were already more than a hundred persons in the room, producing a subdued hum in several languages from small groups upon the patterned marble floor. He was so intent on

studying the crowd and the surroundings that a quiet voice at his side almost made him jump.

“It is John Pascoe, isn’t it?” He half turned, stuttering something in his confusion; a young woman dressed in simple but elegant black stood there; she held herself like a princess; though he had never before set eyes on her, he knew exactly who she was.

Her voice was warm, clear, musical. Smiling, she held out a hand, “I am so pleased to make your acquaintance. Signorina Rosa di Stefano at your service.”