

Sarah Caldwell's Daring Risk

by Richard Thorne

Give Richmond Crinkley points for daring. Assigned to produce a theatrical season for the Vivian Beaumont Theater at New York's Lincoln Center—a house that superstitious theater professionals consider jinxed—he started off modestly enough, unveiling last November a revival of *The Philadelphia Story* directed by Ellis Rabb. The play was not a startling offering nor was Rabb an unlikely steward, though (jinxed?) the production received decidedly mixed notices. Crinkley proved his daring, however, with his second offering. Almost as if to compensate for the inherent lack of drama in the first, he picked Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, come January 22, to be directed by one of Western civilization's most improbable candidates, Sarah Caldwell.

Long known as the miracle worker of Boston, Sarah Caldwell has made her reputation entirely in opera. She has never directed a straight play before. But as the driving force behind all the Opera Company of Boston's productions, Caldwell's claim to national fame has come more from her innate sense of theatricality as a director than from her accomplished conducting. For better or for worse, no matter what the opera, at some point the Caldwell magic is nearly always brought to the fore and the audience knows that here "it" comes. Her "its" have become legendary: Don Quichotte literally battled a windmill, and the sight of him going into the flies, heightened by Massenet's impetuous music, caused the audience to gasp, the sound of which Caldwell still cherishes.

In *The Trojans*, when the Greeks brought the Trojan horse into Troy, the director had a field day playing with

scale and perspective. The enormous animal towered above the proscenium on a thrust stage and, when it opened, children climbed out. On the ramparts of the wall surrounding the city, others were dressed as soldiers. "The thing I was proudest of," Caldwell beams, "was that no one in the audience had any sense that they were children because the perspective worked."

Bufs of this kind of visceral showmanship, however, may be disappointed to learn that before she went into rehearsal, Caldwell was deciding *Macbeth* didn't need any directorial and scenic conceits—any extras that

Her popularity stems from her track record, the notorious way she runs her opera company, and her manifold eccentricities.

might detract from Shakespeare's drama. "The more I study the text, the more I realize that it is in its words, thoughts, feelings, and expression of the performers that this particular play lives," Caldwell observes. "There are plays that can be helped enormously by embellishments of pantomime, color, spectacle. In *Macbeth* there are elements of spectacle—hallucinations, atmospheric things—but one has to do them sharply and swiftly and in a manner that doesn't get in the way of everything else." Such self-effacing sentiments come as something of a shock, especially from the Barnum of Opera, as Caldwell has often been called, a director famous for her conviction that

art and spectacle are far from anti-theatrical.

So there we have it. Lincoln Center's *Macbeth* is in effect a triple gamble: Crinkley's in hiring Caldwell in the first place; Caldwell's in attempting the opera-to-theater leap in the second place; and finally her plans to attempt directing in a restrained manner seemingly alien to her.

At 56, Sarah Caldwell is something of a human Cuisinart. Aggressively seeking out far-fetched, often disparate elements, she has, through the force of an omnivorous sensibility, been able to coerce them into a unified whole. Twenty-three years ago against awesome odds she founded the Opera Company of Boston. It was only three seasons ago that she finally got her own theater. Before that, she put on opera where she could: in a college gymnasium, in a flower market, in a musty vaudeville house. But by consistently pulling together the liveliest talents and imaginations she could attract, Caldwell has been able to stage a revolution against the tired tradition that opera, by definition, is not theater.

The more ingredients Sarah Caldwell has to blend the happier she is: In Boston the program lists her as director and conductor, but Sarah-watchers know that as such she is a demanding, often shrieking overseer of the chorus, the set and costume designers, the stagehands, the lighting and technical crews. And it's not merely that she's overbearing and sometimes a bully; she craves her collaborators' ideas—she's been called the greatest brain-picker alive—but will only accept them at their best and most daring.

The artists who work for her often find her demands as liberating as they



are challenging. Stage designer Herbert Senn, who together with Helen Pond has helped create some of Caldwell's most atmospheric and successful productions (they've designed *Macbeth* as well), says, "Most directors working with designers make the collaboration feel like a contest—they're afraid we'll steal the show. That's never the case with Sarah. In an age of faceless designers, she lets us have a face. And in the end, if you believe some of the critics, it looks like she's designed the scenery too!"

Caldwell calls on her collaborators to help her exhume forgotten works, wrestle with new ones, untangle the Gordian knots of the repertory and present these varied, offbeat operas in a manner that is mesmerizing and, whether one accepts the overall concept or not, never dull. Works such as *Moses and Aron*, *The Trojans*, *The Ice Break*, *Russlan and Ludmilla*, *War and Peace*, *Montezuma*, and *Don Quichotte* have become the director's calling card, but she has also had great success with bread-and-butter operas like *La Bohème* and *Aida*.

Her formidable controversial reputation has been painstakingly concocted over the past two decades from a heady combination of clever public relations and hard work. She is surely the most visible opera director in this country—even rising recently into the distinguished ranks of ex-senators and

sports figures who have asked, "Do you know me?" for American Express. Her popularity stems from her professional track record, the notorious sui generis fashion in which she runs her company and prepares an opera for public consumption, and her personal eccentricities, which are legion.

There is a widespread body of lore known, only sometimes affectionately, as "Sarah stories." These oft-repeated tidbits, no matter how humorous or how cruel, intertwine her personal and professional existences, stressing the undeniable fact that her life is her work. She frequently labors around the clock, oblivious to the fact that she may not always be in the most benevolent humor. Meanwhile, she is usually eating junk food that is a good deal more fattening than nourishing, and she never seems to have realized that a filthy theater is not the most restful place in which to get a good night's sleep.

In the kind of frenzied and chaotic

whirlwind life she assigns herself, Caldwell prefers casting her operas at the eleventh hour and then rehearsing them nonstop until opening night. Insiders never judge a Caldwell opening as more than a final dress rehearsal. And yet, despite these seemingly undisciplined practices, any number of splendid singers and designers return repeatedly for more of the same.

All the Caldwell regulars are resigned to the fact that there's no

changing her in any case. She has been functioning this way since she left Arkansas, where she spent her childhood (she was born in Missouri), to study at Boston's New England Conservatory of Music. She staged her first opera at Tanglewood before she was 20, and later left her post on the music faculty of Boston University to create her own opera company. As Richmond Crinkley, well aware of Caldwell's forbidding reputation, diplomatically says, "Everybody who is any good has an unusual mode of operation. A producer must know how to ride these ups and downs."

Crinkley, who has known Caldwell since 1975 when they first found solace in one another's company at a dull conference, has wisely assigned Caldwell a Shakespearean as opposed to a contemporary play. "I have no doubts about the switch for Sarah, which I would actually call a transition," Herbert Senn says. "Shakespeare is some-

where between opera and theater. Ultimately it's spoken opera, so it will be an easy transition."

Perhaps not as easy as Senn predicts. When she was casting *Macbeth* in October, Caldwell notes, she suddenly found herself behaving peculiarly—listening far more than she was looking. "I became increasingly conscious of the vocal sounds of the performers and the need for a variety of them—tenors, basses—in the company," she says,

flashing one of the disarming grins known to soften the hearts and loosen the purse strings of the most formidable of Brahmins. "I tried somehow to squelch those feelings, but they unsquelchably kept coming back. Maybe it was a subconscious wish that the actors were really singers."

As she delves deeper into the differences between theater and opera, Caldwell says, she feels like "someone in a slightly foreign land noticing the exotica as I find it. Actually, the differences are becoming quite clear to me. What one does not have in the spoken *Macbeth* is a built-in inflection. That means any single phrase can have a variety of meanings, depending upon the way it is inflected. Silence becomes a very important tool, as does the amount of time it takes to do a certain action.

"In opera, since inflections and timings have been pre-decided for you by the composer, a great deal of the emotional undercurrent has also been decided. I am used to working from the point of view of creating movement, visual images, a sequence of impressions which the music will function with. A lot of that is like making a good soup: You put in a little salt, taste it, put



Caldwell, left center, at work on designs for *Macbeth*, with (left to right) designers Carrie Robbins (costumes), Herbert Senn and Helen Pond (sets).

in a little more. It's an empirical thing; you recognize the dosage when you hit it. If you have added too much of one ingredient, you recognize that too because it suddenly becomes ludicrous.

"These are the thought processes I am familiar with in directing opera. Many of these helpful ingredients are no longer mine, but I feel confident that the process is not so dissimilar. One recognizes the result—it either will or will not work.

The director has staged Verdi's setting of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* twice and recognizes that the words and ideas in the play offer far more opportunities to explore the many complexities that motivate the characters. And even before an actor had set foot on stage to rehearse, a Caldwellian touch could be discerned in the casting. Philip Anglim, who became something of an overnight sensation for his portrayal of the title character in *The Elephant Man*, will be *Macbeth*. He is 27. His lady will be portrayed by Maureen Anderman, last seen on Broadway in a revival of *The Man Who Came to Dinner*. She is 34. Anglim and Anderman are unusually young for their roles.

"I think their youth makes it an infi-

nately more interesting play," Caldwell observes. "It is a deeper tragedy if someone young is destroyed by ambition in such a needless way.

The degree to which she can coax performances of style and stature out of Anglim and Anderman will, inevitably, make or break Caldwell's theater debut—especially if she holds her famous instinct for the spectacular in check. Predictably, perhaps, Caldwell downplays this instinct. "I can say

that we have never, ever tried to do something just to be different," she insists. "All the ideas, well-inspired or poorly inspired, have come from studying the piece we are doing and have grown out of that.

"If they are employed subtly and successfully, the art of the scenic designer, costume designer, and director will disappear. Whether in opera or theater, the process is like a mosaic. You have to put little details in place. Then, hopefully, there's a fusion of these elements. I feel if I've done a good job with *Macbeth*, when the audience leaves the theater, they'll still be absorbed in the play and the players."

Caldwell may indeed do a good job. But it's worth noting that while numerous theatrical directors have proven adept, even inspired, when they tried staging opera, few if any opera directors have made the reverse transition to non-musical theater. Which clearly lengthens the artistic odds riding on the triple gamble in this month's *Macbeth*. Still, there's no likelier gambler to take on the challenge than the redoubtable Sarah Caldwell. ■

Richard Thorne has written about cultural issues for a number of national publications.



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Gerald Cantor's Rodins

by Vicki Goldberg

In 1974, B. Gerald Cantor gave away about \$5 million worth of Rodins, an astonishing gesture seldom matched even by bequests. He gave 10 pieces to the Museum of Modern Art in New York, 39 to the Los Angeles County Museum, of which he is a trustee, and 87 to the Stanford University Museum of Art. Over the years, he estimates he has given away several hundred works of art. The L.A. museum has built the B. G. Cantor Sculpture Garden and also has a gallery full of Rodins that once belonged to Cantor. He's given Stanford "about 150 objects in all," and he's still at it.

Despite this lavish flow of bronze from his hands to museums, Mr. Cantor still owns what is probably the most important Rodin collection in private hands. "I'm always buying," he says. "If that stops, I'm in trouble." To accommodate their sculptures, Bernie and Iris Cantor rebuilt their New York apartment, designed their California apartment for art, and redesigned his California office. Rodin's over-life-size "Adam" makes the troubled passage into life in the hall of their New York duplex, opposite a small version of "The Kiss." "The Thinker" broods in the living room; "The Naked Balzac" and "Eve" preside over dinner. Mr. Cantor looks up from his library desk, past a TV screen that reports the international financial news, at shelves lined with the small, expressive hands Rodin fashioned for himself. In the bedroom, three passionately embracing Rodin couples, one on a platform that rises mechanically to reveal the television set, are displayed opposite a canopied bed. (The housemaid was once heard to mutter, "Don't they ever finish?") Even

in the bathroom, a mirrored wall above the tub is filled with small bronzes.

In the New York office of Cantor, Fitzgerald Group, Ltd., a financial holding company, the "Monument to Balzac" rears its massive bulk in the reception room, and smaller Rodins sit on the windowsills, the floor, the desk in the office of B. G. Cantor, chairman of the board. It is his business acumen that has enabled Cantor to afford his passion. A native of the Bronx, New York, Cantor as a young teenager sold hot dogs in Yankee Stadium, but only at double headers, when he could make more money. At New York University in the mid-Thirties, with jobs scarce, he decided on law as a career. One day, seeing a friend of his who had recently won his law degree working in the street with a pickaxe, Bernie Cantor changed his mind about law, landed a job as a junior analyst on Wall Street, and attended school at night. When, at the beginning of a new semester, he discovered that his teacher would be a man in the firm he worked for, he quit school. "I thought I knew more than he did," Mr. Cantor says, "and I was right." After World War II, he set up his own firm; today Cantor, Fitzgerald has offices in New York, Beverly Hills, Chicago, and Dallas.

Mr. Cantor's giving spree began in 1974 when he was writing his will. Today, Mr. Cantor consults a computer printout to determine which artworks he has where. While the printout contains the names of many major artists from the Belle Epoque to the present, Cantor's abiding passion as a collector has been Rodin.

Rodin has always been justly considered one of the great sculptors of all

time, although for a while he fell out of favor with formalist critics who thought his work too sentimental, too 19th century for our era. Until the mid-Fifties, the Museum of Modern Art did not own a Rodin, and the Metropolitan Museum showed only his marble sculptures, keeping his bronzes in the basement. Yet the marbles were made by skilled professional carvers from Rodin's models, the sculptor himself merely supervising and approving the results. Rodin's true media were the clay and plaster he modeled. His output was enormous—he made 22 studies for Balzac's head, seven for the nude body, 16 for the clothed statue. His devotion to the nude body and, in his early works, to symbolism links Rodin to the 19th century, but his determination to celebrate what he called "that poignant struggle which is the basis of our existence and which brings to grips body and soul" speaks directly to an age of anxiety.

Bernie Cantor encountered his first Rodin, "The Hand of God," in the mid-Forties at the Metropolitan Museum. In an instant, he was converted, smitten by this artist whose work struck him as "strong, sensuous, and different." Several months later he chanced upon a small version of the same sculpture in a shop and bought it for less than \$200, at a time when Rodin wasn't in vogue. That "Hand" whetted an appetite that his income wasn't yet ready to satisfy.

When he was starting to collect, he would stay in Paris for days after a business trip, haunting the Musée Rodin. Cecile Goldscheider, then the curator, became in effect his adviser, as

Mr. and Mrs. Cantor in their New York apartment living room with Rodin's "The Thinker" and "Dance Studies."