



The Canadian Opera Company rehearses Verdi's *La Forza del Destino*.

## Anthony Azzopardi's Making Opera

Cinematic adaptations of primarily theatrical experiences have often held the dubious distinction (no matter how well-intentioned) of being stodgy, stagey and downright tedious. The opera, however, has often survived the traditionally intrusive translation through the camera eye. The recent Franco Zeffirelli film adaptations of *Othello* and *La Traviata* are perfect examples of this fact. Both films display a consummate blend of stage and screen, exquisitely capturing the sweep and grandeur of the original medium and translating it quite vividly onto celluloid.

A current addition to this fine tradition of blending stage and screen can be found in Anthony Azzopardi's feature-length documentary, *Making Opera*. With grace, keen sensitivity and a great deal of economy, Azzopardi painstakingly details the Canadian Opera Company's production of Giuseppe Verdi's "*La Forza Del Destino*". Taking us behind the grand image, with occasional flash-forwards to the

final product, *Making Opera* is a fascinating and thoroughly accessible look at the creation of a massive artistic undertaking.

Azzopardi trains his camera on numerous aspects of the production — everything from the mundane to the glorious. Appropriately, the film begins during the early stages of rehearsal and leads us chronologically to the final product.

On the first day, we are treated to the chorus music rehearsal. Then, on the third day, Azzopardi focuses separately on the principals' music rehearsal. In both cases, the principals and the chorus are dressed casually in street clothes. As the days of rehearsal progress, the film then focuses upon such practical, behind-the-scenes aspects as costume-design, wig-making and fittings. At this point, we begin to see those same actors and singers in various stages of attire, some in street clothes, others in a blend of costumes and street clothes. This technique of carefully detailing the behind-the-scenes growth of the production not only adds a human element to the proceedings (wigs not fitting, costumes too big or small, actors and seamstresses joking about it), but contributes to the film's duality. There are, after all, two stories being told here: the making of an opera and the opera itself. As well, all of this "technical" detail is underscored with music and occasional

interviews with the principals. This keeps the film from being dry or tedious.

In fact, one of the film's greatest strengths is its almost universal appeal. *Making Opera* informs, but it also entertains. The approach to the material is without snobbery. Azzopardi goes out of his way to etch a compelling portrait of 500 people collectively gathered together to create — with love and passion — a work of unparalleled beauty. There are clearly no stars in the making of this opera; no one person is singled out for their overwhelming commitment over any other participant. Azzopardi addresses every aspect of the production with incredible balance. The carpenters, seamstresses, extras and stage managers are afforded as much attention as the principal performers, directors, conductors and designers.

Perhaps the most interesting thing about *Making Opera* is its reflection of the impact of music upon visuals. As mentioned earlier, the opera seems to be one of the few, if not, ultimately, the only theatrical art which can truly survive cinematic adaptation. At one point, Azzopardi focuses upon the opera's stage director John Copley, who states, "I respond to the music... [as opposed] to the rather ordinary text." Later on, during an actual rehearsal, where Copley is discussing character motivation with his principal performers, one of his colleagues remarks that "Copley motivates his work by making sense of the musical score." What's particularly important here is that Azzopardi basically provides the main reason why opera and film can be a perfect marriage. Almost from the beginning, the musical score has influenced the art of film. Whether it be the tinkling piano accompaniment for the silents, or Max Steiner's sweeping orchestral backdrops for innumerable cinema spectacles; or Giorgio Moroder's grinding, pulsating *Midnight Express* techno-poppers, film has always relied upon music to add depth and feeling to the visuals.

At another point, Azzopardi interviews the opera's set designer Robin Don, who remarks that he is attempting to capture the quality of Goya's etchings "as if the whole stage is breathing and has a life of its own." This is what Azzopardi has accomplished with *Making Opera*: two worlds in one — each living and breathing with the energy of life, commitment and fulfillment — all of this accompanied by a Verdi score.

Quite simply, *Making Opera* is breathtaking.  
Greg Klymkiw •

**MAKING OPERA** p./d. Anthony Azzopardi assoc. p. Jack Morbin sc. Anthony Azzopardi d.o.p. Ron Stannett ed. Jack Morbin mus. Giuseppe Verdi sd. Stuart French, John Thompson, Patrick Rowan sd. ed. Gary Oppenheimer, Jack Morbin l.p. John Copley, Maurizio Arena, Stefka Ebstatieva, Allan Monk, Judith Forst, Ernesto Veronelli, Peter Strummer, John Cheek, Yuri Marusin. Produced and distributed by Cineroutes Productions Inc. With the financial participation of Telefilm Canada, CBC, TVOntario, Ontario Arts Council, Ontario Ministry of Culture and Communications. 16mm, colour, 88 minutes.

## Marcel Simard's Le Grand Monde

**L**e *Grand Monde* was born as a decision of the administration council of Action-Santé, a group affiliated with the Point St. Charles Community Clinic in Southwestern Montreal. The idea was to produce a film which could help sensitize the public to the issues faced by ex-psychiatric patients who are attempting reintegration into society — as well as simply demystify and encourage an understanding of them.

The first interesting twist is that the members of the administration council are, themselves, mostly ex-psychiatric patients; in the last three years they have taken over control of the 15-year-old alternative resources center. Participation in the responsibilities becomes a part of their own self-administered therapy.

The second interesting thing is that once they had found a director for the project (Marcel Simard), it was these same people who worked on the script. Constructing roles based on themselves, they wrote their own parts, their own stories in collaboration with Simard — who edited it all into a story, adding some scenes of his own. Finally, with the addition of three professional actors (who are subtle enough to fit into the picture and add to it, without standing out), it is the same group which forms the cast, incarnating their stories and characters for the screen as only they could.

The result is an unqualified success. The action revolves around Action-Santé itself where we see a group of very isolated individuals who work at bridging some enormous gaps in their social relationships to function with a degree of unity. Most of the themes touch on control — the real and perceived lack of it — and a constant inner debate on the futility or worth of trying.

At one point, Emile comments on the subject of authority, on the habitual expectation of all of them that a greater authority will always intervene to resolve their problems. He convinces his friends that each of them must see themselves as the sole authority in their lives, and that this is the only way they can grow and feel a measure of freedom... So they lock out Pierrette, the community worker in charge, and begin an adventure of solidarity and responsibility — eventually getting recognition from the community clinic as an autonomous body.

This is the one big unifying story of the movie, and it is an important one; the film itself is in fact an extension of that story into our lives — a concrete manifestation of the true course of development which stands behind the fiction. But just as important are all the separate moments which flow together so well and reveal so much. Emile, who turns away Marie-Josée's sexual advances because he can't make love when he's on drugs... Marie-Josée, subsequently talking to Pierrette about being "easy"