

# AN EVENING WITH BABBLE AND DOODLE

*Presentations of poetry*

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*We may call them, if the terms are  
thought dignified enough, babble and  
doodle.*

—Northrop Frye, *Anatomy of Criticism*.

**M**ORE THAN A YEAR AGO a première took place in Toronto at Hart House Theatre with which I was intimately involved in many ways. The première was that of John Beckwith's chamber opera *Night Blooming Cereus* for those libretto I am responsible, and it was also the first time my *One Man Masque* had been produced. From my own point of view, the evening certainly contained revelations as to writing poetry for music (babble) and writing poetry for a masque or a spectacle (doodle). Perhaps the best way to go about this is simply to tell the story, as they say, of *it all*.

It must be ten or more years ago that John Beckwith asked me to write him the libretto for a short chamber opera, one hour in length. He had set my "Great Lakes Suite" and was rash enough to invite another experiment. Immediately, having just got home from another winter on the prairies, I sat down beneath a large elm tree and wrote out a libretto. Up to that moment opera had meant Saturday afternoons as a boy scrubbing the kitchen floor (my Cinderella phase) and listening to the blast from the DeForrest Crisley as Wagner or Verdi came in from New York. I also knew that if an opera was sung in English you never understood the words. But all of this did not deter a very rapid start.

My first thought was double-yolked — to write something that would match what I thought I heard at the heart of John Beckwith's music; also (sneaking in) to write something that I thought I heard in myself. Since I can remember John suggesting I might do a satirical libretto on Penelope and her suitors I used to

feel rather guilty about this. My greedy eyes were fixed on *Night Blooming Cereus*. Now a librettist has awesome responsibilities, since the musical setting of his words demands a great deal of sheer hard slugging on the part of the composer. All of that work may go down the drain if the librettist has not laid down a framework that an audience will accept or rather can accept. Baroque opera suffers from libretto trouble which no amount of ravishing music can ever quite save. The librettist can sterilize the composer; in the case of Wagner this might have been a good thing if you are one of those who regard his operas as being too long and fertile.

What was the “Night Blooming Cereus” idea? From childhood I can remember reading now and again in the local newspaper that last night in the village of Blankville neighbours gathered to watch Mrs. So & So’s Night Blooming Cereus come out, which only blooms once a century and then only after midnight. In reality, of course, the Cereus plant blossoms every year and in Hawaii they’re so big and ordinary that they’re used for fence posts. But operas don’t thrive on fence posts. Imagine too — and this is important — the kind of world in which the blooming of a flower is important enough to get into the newspaper. So what I was really presenting to the composer was a pastoral village world in which people sing hymns while they’re washing dishes, hear Sam Slick Connecticut clocks strike the hour, listen for the train whistling as it goes down to Toronto and from time to time rock rhythmically in rocking-chairs.

What was the plot line to be that led up to the blossoming of the flower? To some of our opening night critics who were fond of *Pagliacci* or *Cavalliera Rusticana* our plot line seemed rather dull and tiny. But we don’t live in Italy. The North American story equivalent to *Pagliacci* is Lizzie Borden, and the verbal problems surrounding the key words “Lizzie” and “axe” are too much for this librettist. To me the plot that came naturally out of the rather quiet North American musical landscape (hymns, rocking-chairs and clocks) was something deliberately untense and unpassionate. From high school memories I took an austere old woman out sickling dandelions in front of her weather-beaten cottage. She owns the flower. Long ago her daughter quarrelled with her and ran away. The very night the Cereus blooms her daughter seems to return. But Mrs. Brown thinks she’s a ghost and will have nothing to do with her. At the end of the opera the old lady dares to accept her visitor’s reality and is rewarded with a mixture of grief and joy; the visitor turns out to be Mrs. Brown’s grand-daughter come with the news that the runaway girl has just died. Throughout half of the opera the grand-daughter Alice stands in the shadows waiting for Mrs. Brown to accept

her, to touch her. As she waits, other visitors come in, sing and wait around for the flower. So when the girl eventually presents herself to her grandmother and is accepted the image is that this resembles the flower blossoming. For the most part all of the event here is interior mental event. Since it is so rich a storehouse of mental patterns and variously coloured moods, music should be particularly good at illustrating this kind of story. It does seem to me that there has to be a logical reason for inviting music to complete a story's effect. The libretto's inwardness was here that justification. And if the reader will start counting on his fingers the number of anywhere near successful North American operas he may also begin to realize that there is some mysterious problem here concerning libretto and native musical landscape. At any rate only more opera will make the problem less mysterious.

**T**HERE WERE STILL other difficulties to be overcome in the libretto after one had disposed of main image and plot line. Who were the villagers to be who came to Mrs. Brown's cottage to see the flower come out? This problem was solved by a sort of literary trigonometry. There is a rule in literature which says that to any tea party, or gathering of any sort, the Four Living Creatures of Ezekiel's vision attend. Actually at this time one of the few sentences of literary symbolism that had sunk through to me was Carl Jung's division of the human soul into four parts represented by an old woman, an old man, a young man and a young girl. The old woman is shadowy and terrifying, the old man is wise and helpful; the young man seeks the young woman but cannot find her until he has come to terms with the older pair. From real village life I plucked a telephone operator (not very shadowy she, but if one pays attention to her role she is always saying that the flower doesn't mean anything), the village orphan — a changeling girl, the storekeeper's discontented young son and, last of all, an old wise nursery man who brought a small tree with him. All four of these have to arrive and thoroughly express themselves before old Mrs. Brown will recognize Alice or the flower bloom. One of the benefits this procedure conferred was an organized variety among the characters which the composer could grab hold of and do something with. There is a tendency in opera (particularly some of the C.B.C. commissioned radio operas I have heard) for the music to swallow everything. Perhaps it's the librettist's duty to give the musical boa con-

stricter a rabbit that has angles to swallow. There are difficulties you should not put in his way, which I'll touch on later, but you surely are hired to give the composer a work out — a chance to write black music, red music, purple music and green music. *The Magic Flute's* libretto is ideal in this regard: you have the terrifying older woman, the austere old wizard, and not only a sweet young girl but two kinds of young men: one plays a glockenspiel and the other plays a flute.

As a story, what I have so far told you needed an introduction; at this stage I was so ignorant as not to know that this is called an exposition scene. My solution was a preliminary scene before the curtain where Alice the grand-daughter gets off the train and asks the way to Mrs. Brown's place from two village hoydens who tell her all the village knows about Mrs. Brown. This solution was criticized on the ground that the exposition could have been dovetailed into the later scenes. However, granted my solution was primitive, perhaps that can be seen as part of the whole piece's simplicity.

After the exposition scene snow begins to fall (stage snow is an obsession of mine) and a vision of the Night Blooming Cereus appears in the sky (John's idea to balance its later appearance). As Alice walks off the curtain rises to reveal Mrs. Brown in her cottage.

The next scene is simply Mrs. Brown washing dishes, sweeping floors, rocking and sewing. This made fierce demands on both singer and composer but it was worth the risk. If Wagner can show you giants and dragons who make sense in music you ought to be able to manage the other extreme, the simple world of the kitchen where the Rhinemaidens become dishes in a dishpan.

At the very beginning I was so incredibly stupid as to write the libretto all in prose with the lyrics in some rather wobbly versification. Since my poetic affairs were in a very muddled state at that time I hadn't a very firm grasp of technique or of what constituted a technical problem. John Beckwith, after coping with yardfuls of words in the exposition, demanded something more rhythmic and I was galvanized into, at the time and for me, incredible labours of counting syllables, making parallel lines exactly the same length and finding good clean, clear and sonorous rhymes. From those Manitoba fall nights spent in a fantastic house that had mushrooms growing down from its ceiling I date my birth as a craftsman in words. And once you have learnt how to build up verbal structures, each one of whose sounds has been weighed and patterned, you're never quite the same for other people's poetry again. I'm still constantly amazed at poets who expect you to read something they themselves have not read twice.

Metaphors become a problem in writing poetry for music, and in rewriting I

tried to take some profitable line. Stravinsky told Dylan Thomas not to have too many conceits in the libretto for their opera, alas never finished. Since the librettist is supposed to write something which the music completes and extends, the lines have to be cleaned and scraped until there is nothing to stop the music flowing around them. At first Mrs. Brown's second hymn was a jungle of private symbols. They had to go until one well-tended public symbol remained. Gradually the whole libretto became a pattern of sounds, some of them repeated many times, an arranged stream of babble ready for the composer to use in his mill; a stream in which banal words were tucked away, or were supposed to be, in the centres of lines safe from sopranos singing in High C about rats; a stream in which there were occasional feminine rhymes, a good variety of long and short lines and always rhythmic differences that would head off monotony. Consonants, so far as I can see, are never really sung; it is the vowels which the singer really sings; consequently the libretto becomes a chain of vowels outlined by a consonantal murmur and hiss. My rhymes were straight out of Moody-and-Sankey's hymn book; good old foursquare monosyllables. And accordingly, if I had ever felt any attraction to writing involved, complex intellectual lyrics, I absolutely forgot about it. As a librettist you can't be what you want; you must be what he (the composer) wants and what *it* wants.

What can I say of John Beckwith's music except that it furthers and matches all the images I have been talking about? During rehearsals I was continually amazed at how the music picked up a word, even a whole character, and made it soar, made it seem gigantic. I guess this is what opera is all about. Opera takes grubby Nibelungs, fat tenors, Spanish satyrs, maniacs and shambling Wozzecks, it takes them and floats them like kites, kites blowing in the winds of harmony and counterpoint. All of reality — this old woman — suddenly shows itself as being acquainted with things we thought only the angels of symphonies knew.

SINCE THE OPERA was to last only an hour John suggested that I read some poems to raise the curtain. I decided that something more than just a reading was called for, and now we come to the doodle part of this story, since I ended up writing another libretto for a masque — masque in the sense of a series of tableaux and spectacles, or stage images. I had been working on a series of poems that presented a subject in various keys: you start out with Dwarf,

modulate to a poem about a Baby, proceed to one about a Dauphin (baby Prince) and eventually fly from it all with that baby among the birds — the humming-bird. This suggested a stage picture that started out with a cradle, proceeded through chair, table, bed, rocking-chair to coffin, turned back again through the purgatorial world with rain barrel, hall tree, dresser and mirror, tree branch, ladder and cardboard box. At the beginning of the recital you could put the cradle beside the coffin and at the end of it you could, as the dead child was reborn, take the cradle back again. The poems could be read at different points of this big circle since they too moved in a circle through Life, into the world of Death, coasting perilously near Eternity, then back into the world of Death and so into Life again. I had always observed in poetry readings that the great difficulty was the spaces between poems. If there were no spaces at all the listeners tended to suffer from over intake of image. Moving about from prop to prop would help here but I decided also to write a series of comic and macabre monologues to be performed in between the poems. These ranged from children talking to themselves to an old scavenger who collected bottles for his living. The old scavenger found a skull in the coffin which he put in the battered-up old baby carriage with which he collected his bottles. Eventually the old man fell into the coffin to reappear as a man with dark glasses carrying a blue flashlight. The man in dark glasses spoke through a megaphone and recited blood curdling poems about ghosts and the executioner of Mary Stuart. Eventually the baby's cradle was found and Life started again.

Just in listing the props, I've shown you the doodles or designs that accompanied the poems. There was the added problem here of how to perform all this. One does not go usually to poetry readings to hear poems well read or well acted; what one must often be satisfied with is the personality of the poet and the fact that his intonations no matter how inaudible or squeaky can help a great deal in clarifying his poetry since he does *know* what it means. So the actual performances were going to show, I hoped, not necessarily the best performance but the most authoritative performance. Of course I wasn't an actor. If I had been I'd never have written *One Man Masque*. Since I was playing myself, any fluffs or mistakes could be built into the performance. Even if I forgot everything, with the help of the visual props I could improvise it all over again for the audience. Originally I had wanted mannequins on stage with me who would float up on wires at the end of everything, because they were enlightened I guess. This couldn't be managed, so I carried a garbage can lid of lighted candles at the very end and put it on top of my head.

Since I can never quote anything, and have a recurring nightmare in which, after filling in unsuccessfully for a sick actor, I'm pursued by a lion back to a dressing room which can only be entered by a ladder and a very small scuttle, opening night was not the calmest evening I've lived through by any means. The masque turned out to be ten minutes too long, so I dropped some poems by the way. Getting into the coffin, putting on dark glasses and getting out happened all right. At rehearsal I'd got stuck. And the candles didn't set me ablaze. I particularly enjoyed directly attacking an audience with my poetry rather than getting at them privately and secretly in a book.

Naturally we've embarked on another opera, this time a percussion opera called *Shivaree*. It starts off with a church bell ringing and we'll have an actual band of rustic serenaders with their noisemakers on stage. As to more masques, I'd like to do something with acres of gold paper and / or huge newspaper dolls that the poet converses with. But no matter how thrilling the first night of *Shivaree* is, if and when, it can never quite match the excitement of that other night when so many experiments with babble and doodle, sound and sight, were tested. I can remember leaving for the theatre that evening and seeing on Pamela Terry's directorial desk the small slide on which the *Cereus* blossom was drawn. It would be projected twice during the evening by magic lantern. There it all was.