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Trionfo Rusticana: An Opera Buffa

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Trionfo Rusticana An Opera Buffa

by Roberto Marshak, October 15, 1984



At convocations, commencements, and on other solemn occasions, our good President, Sheldon Hackney, has been known to use popular comic strips or movies, with remarkable effect, to inform, or to express a point of view. I now seek to follow his example. But for me, owing to a life-long passion for opera and because the School of Veterinary Medicine and the Metropolitan Opera are both just 100 years old, it seems natural on this solemn occasion to use opera the way the President uses *Peanuts* and *Doonesbury*.

To begin with, I am convinced that the great 19th century composers and librettists would have fought like cats and dogs to get their hands on Dr. John Martin's new book about the School of Veterinary Medicine entitled "A Legacy and a Promise—the first hundred years". I tremble to think what Verdi and Piave would have done with it. In some respects, today's opera, *Trionfo Rusticana* (Rustic Triumph), is modeled after Verdi's *La Forza del Destino*—the force of destiny—but in length, it is more like a Pergolesi opera in miniature, intended for performance between the acts of a major work. In the 100 per-

formances since its debut, there have been nine peerless conductors—the deans; countless general managers—the University's central administrators, all tone deaf; a roster of 955 faculty singers—800 tenors, baritones and basses, 21 castrati, and 134 sopranos and mezzos, all prima donnas—and a great chorus of 4000—the student body.

As the curtain rises on the Prologo, the year is 1807. The set consists of a large, wood-paneled Board room. Gas lamps flicker on the walls. Seated around an oval table are ten well-nourished gentlemen in advanced stages of cortical release—they are the Trustees of the sixty-seven year old University of Pennsylvania. An elderly man, Dottore Beniamino Rush, is admitted and addresses the group in the famous aria "*Bisogniamo una Facolta di Medicina Veterinaria*" (I need a veterinary school).

The Trustees, two basses and eight castrati, respond with the rollicking chorus "*Pronto,*

Pronto. Siamo Pronti". Raising their glasses of Madeira in a toast, they make an unsuccessful attempt to rise. The delighted dottore *Rushes* from the room to spread the good news as the curtain falls.

Act I, Scene I—seventy-seven years have passed; it is 1884. The curtain rises on a scene in the City of Brotherly Love. We see a long shed with stalls for large animals. A few horses and cows are being led about by mustachioed men in aprons and derbys. Il Rettore Guglielmo Pepperoni (Provost William Pepper), a severe-looking man, is holding his nose while in conversation with il primo preside della facolta di Medicina Veterinaria (the first dean of the School of Veterinary Medicine). In the immortal aria "*Non avere Denaro per momento*" (at the moment we're out of cash), he explains that while he and the Trustees dearly love the new veterinary school, the school must nevertheless function as *uno tino su fondo* (a tub on its own bottom).

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"TRIONFO RUSTICANA"

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A canzone picchietto or patter song follows in which Pepperoni and il preside argue heatedly—the only discernible words are No!, Si!, No!, Si!

As the patter subsides, Pepperoni exits left, picking up a small stick on the way to clean some substance stuck to his shoe.

The students now stop their work and join the animals in the celebrated neighing and mooing chorus. The melody is reminiscent of the Hebrew slaves' chorus in Verdi's Nabucco. The curtain falls.

Act I, Scene 2—sixty-eight difficult years have passed. It is 1952 and il ottavo preside, dottore Marco Allam, has just been anointed. The Veterinary School is at a dangerous crossroads because of its cramped, antiquated physical plant, a small overworked, underpaid faculty, and a dismally small operating budget.

As the curtain rises, il preside and five young professori are sitting around a glass table in the garden of dottore Allam's house. Approximately a yard from dottore Allam's chair is a large crater. Every few moments a tongue of flame leaps from the crater. At the far edge of the crater, Donna Lila Allam sits on a stool turning a roast impaled on a long iron pole.

In the great moving aria "*Essere o non essere*" (to be or not to be), dottore Allam asks his astonished guests if the Veterinary School should continue or be phased out.

During a recitative, in which animated discussion seems to favor the phase-out option, dottore Allam is seen to be tottering at edge of the abyss.

Suddenly, a distant boom is heard: a rocket flashes into the heavens. The startled group stands in silent awe. A harp begins to play an angelic air. As the abyss slowly closes, swallowing Donna Lila's roast, she screams, but dottore Allam is heard to exclaim joyously "*Salvazione, Salvazione, e Sputnik*".

As if by magic, a tall lean man with a white beard, tall hat and striped suit appears in a corner of the garden. He strides to the table, deposits a large stack of papers, turns and disappears silently through the garden wall. Dottore Allam picks up the paper and sotto voce sings—"*Instituti Nazionali di Salute—grazie zio*" (thanks, uncle).

The young professori take out pens—each then takes uno modulo di richiesta (application form) from the pile and begins to write. Dottore Allam reaches into his coat pocket, pulls out a golden zauberflöte (magic flute) and begins to play a melody with a pulsating rhythm. As the tempo quickens, the professori write faster and faster and faster.

As the curtain slowly falls on Act I, the sun is seen to rise, and paper lira, like confetti, drift slowly down from a cloudless sky.

It is now intermission and the intermission feature is a commentary by the il nono preside—the ninth Dean. He has been warned by the general management not to ask the nationwide audience for contributions.

After commenting that, though probably ahead of its time, the opera, artistically, is like a dish of warmed-over schmaltz, he takes pains to praise the librettist for historical accuracy and poetic fluency in Italian. He then presents the following well-researched program notes:

"Indeed, one *can* identify 1952 as the year in which an enfeebled Veterinary School began its steady ascent to excellence. Along the way, there were many fearful upheavals and soul-searching moments, many bruising and dispiriting conflicts. To some, the School's survival seemed inherently improbable. But there were also indomitable leaders and incalculable and fortuitous events. The little group of professori in Act I, Scene 2 trusted their lot to La Forza del Destino, and the improbable happened. Animated by a common vision, the dean, a master of realpolitik, and his loyal faculty, began to comb out the tangles. Ignoring current fashions, they defied conventional wisdom and accepted beliefs. They exercised the greatest tolerance for new ideas and maximized their opportunities. Friends—in agriculture, in State government, in the horse and dog world, overseers and benefactors—all rallied round, contributing generously to the School's mixed economy.

A great basic science faculty was assembled. Clinical specialization and clinical investigation flourished. The School became a center for research in comparative medicine. A revolutionary curriculum was put in place so that scholarship and research could be integrated into all aspects of veterinary medical education. The panorama of veterinary medicine was extended to include a Center for the Interaction of Animals and Society, a national program in aquatic veterinary medicine, and other new fields. And, owing to the Faculty's biological breadth and medical disciplines, the School began to enjoy a special place in the University, interacting in significant ways with the faculty of Arts and Sciences, the Schools of Medicine and Dental Medicine and other Schools.

The style and the achievement changed the face of veterinary medical education in the western world."

At this moment, chimes are heard, signaling that the intermission is over. An announcer steps in front of the curtain to say that because the general management feels that the second and third Acts are a threat to the established order, they have been omitted from this performance. Instead, we go directly to the Epilogo.

The curtain rises on a bisected stage—on stage left, an urban scene—many red brick buildings. A large courtyard is clearly visible through an immense archway. Men and women in white coats pour into the courtyard. Some carry cats; others carry dogs.

On stage right is a rural scene with low farm-type buildings—cows, horses, and sheep are grazing in fenced pastures. Contadini (peasants) dressed in white or green suits are drinking beer from earthen mugs. A large contadino named Papageno strides about, a sick chicken in each arm. The chickens sneeze rhythmically, first one, then the other.

Suddenly, the partition separating the two scenes appears to give way—brilliant red and blue banners flutter in the breeze. Some of the peasants and city folk, members of the Company's La Ballet Comique, begin to dance a fandango. The peasant chorus breaks into lusty song:

*The 100th year is well nigh past
Our sky no longer overcast
Ring down the curtain on '84
Grant us all one hundred more
Bravi horses, bravi cows
Bravi dogs and cats and sows
Bravi chickens, sheep and goats
and all the wild things in fur coats
Bravi colleagues, bravi friends
and so Trionfo Rusticana ends!*