

OFFENBACH IN FOUR ACTS

(A talk given at *The Palace of the Legion of Honor, San Francisco, 1996*)

Offenbach -- a tiny, frail, odd-looking person who weighed about a hundred pounds and seemed to live entirely on nervous energy. "God's gift to the newspaper caricaturists of his day," he might have been easily mistaken for "a bizarre character escaped from one of his own operettas." My favorite description: "a cross between a bantam rooster and a grasshopper."

Despite his fame as a composer, the bulk of his work is still barely known, a situation that for twenty years Pocket Opera has been doing its utmost to rectify. But today I want to talk a bit, not about his work, but about his life. And in deference to his lifelong passion for the theatre, I propose to cast it in a form dear to his own heart: a four-act drama.

ACT I: humble origins and early struggles. ACT II: spectacular success, fame and fortune. ACT III: catastrophe and ruin. ACT IV: redemption and apotheosis. All in all, it's quite a show.

Often thought of as the quintessential Frenchman, he was in fact born in Cologne, of German Jewish parentage. Not Jacques, but Jacob. His father, from the small town of Offenbach, tired of being called simply the man from Offenbach, or the Offenbacher, gave in and changed his name to -- guess what. A modest musician, but an ambitious father, he recognizes and encourages his son's early musical inclinations, and sets his eye on the prestigious Conservatory of Paris, a goal that is worth any sacrifice, the only place where his son's gifts can be adequately nourished. The Conservatory is headed by the distinguished but starchy and xenophobic composer Cherubini -- also an immigrant, be it noted -- who has laid down the strict ruling that foreigners need not apply, a rule that only a few years ago has resulted in the rejection of young Franz Liszt, one of the most astounding prodigies in musical history. One presumes that young Jacob is granted an audition only by dint of his father's making a thorough nuisance of himself. Nonetheless, on the strength of the boy's performance on the cello, within minutes he is accepted into the Conservatory. An unprecedented honor! Scene II: a few months later. He drops out of the Conservatory, claiming that they aren't teaching him anything. Also convinced, I suspect, that the world of academic music is not for him. And setting a lifelong pattern for boldness, independence, and some might add, recklessness.

Fifteen years old, alone in Paris, on his own, he soon locates his real classroom -- the theatres, the music halls, the cabarets, the boulevards. Of the latter, those who have seen the film *Les Enfants du Paradis* may have some inkling. By this time he knows his true vocation: he is a composer. The theatre is his dream, his obsession, and his goal is the Paris Opera Comique, the obvious natural home for his talents, surely eager to open its arms to a gifted innovator. Think again.

Unfortunately, the next episode of our drama -- still Act I -- lasts about twenty years, and one must admit that it is tiresomely repetitious. A good deal of it is spent knocking at the door of the Opera Comique. Twenty years of rebuff and rejection, commissions that never come, promises that never materialize. The guardians of this august institution evidently regard themselves as the defenders of a fortress, heroically staving off the invasion of the comic spirit, which by its nature tends to take potshots at the status quo.

Understand that a composer for the theatre is uniquely dependent on having a theatre for which to compose. He cannot work in a vacuum. At the age of thirty-five -- an age by which the careers of many of our greatest composers have ended -- Offenbach's career has barely begun. Increasingly frustrated with knocking at the door that refuses to open, he finally faces the fact that in order to compose for the theatre, he is going to have to start his own.

This time luck is with him, and the next episode indeed sounds like something from the world of operetta, if not the Arabian Nights. He discovers a tiny, abandoned wooden structure, in disrepair, concealed between two trees, on the *Champs-Elysees*, no less. No doubt materialized from a bottle. Later referred to as a chocolate box, a comic sketch of a theatre, a doll house, it has a capacity of fifty, in seats so steeply raked that the audience seems to be seated on the rungs of a ladder. At the top are tiny box seats where one can remove a coat only by opening the outside door.

It suits Offenbach to a tee, and the time is ripe. Opening in midsummer, 1855, within two months it becomes a Parisian institution: *Les Bouffes Parisiens*, presenting one-act operettas, sketches, skits, revue numbers, etc. mostly by Offenbach, but serving also as a showcase for other like-minded composers: Bizet, Delibes, Mozart, Rossini, etc. It is the talk of the town.

Offenbach's career briskly makes up for lost time. A fever of activity follows, and during the next two years alone he turns out no fewer than twenty-five one-act operettas. Incidentally, one that I find especially intriguing is entitled *Madame Papillon*. Puccini, take note.

It must not be supposed that his activities are confined to composition. He is business manager and stage director as well, responsible for casting, rehearsing, conducting, book-keeping, hiring technicians, garnering librettists, cajoling and threatening singers. Librettists are a particular problem, in that he invariably composes far more quickly than they are able to provide words. In fact, he has a lifelong problem: tunes come so quickly that it is difficult to get one down on paper before it is crowded out by another.

Such facility has sometimes been sniffed at by high-minded believers in agony and struggle, but as someone said of an equally facile writer named Shakespeare, "If it were not easy for him, it would be impossible."

Rossini, another adopted Parisian, dubs him “The Mozart of the Champs-Elysees.” And like Mozart, he seems to work best amid bustle and commotion. Stimulated by chaos, he likes to be in the thick of things, surrounded by lively conversation. His pen never stops moving.

And surely he is buoyed up, energized by the exhilaration of riding the current. The times are with him. The Second Empire of Napoleon the Third is a perfect setting for operetta. The royal court, pretentious, pompous and absurd, provides daily real life theatre. Paris, soon to become the City of Light, is the cultural center of the world, fertile ground for spreading the gospel of pleasure. The waltz, the polka, the cancan are insidiously infecting the land.

Yet Offenbach is laboring under one onerous restriction. Even those most sympathetic to government oversight have to acknowledge that regulation can sometimes go beyond mortal comprehension. Offenbach’s license allows him a cast of no more than three singers on stage -- later to be expanded to four. Until this limitation is lifted, as it eventually is, there is no chance of staging the full-length operettas that he dreams of -- an art form, incidentally, very much in its infancy.

But clearly the tide is irresistible. Even bureaucrats cannot forever withstand a rhythmic beat. Three years later, transferred to a larger theatre, Offenbach is set to go full steam ahead.

Orpheus in the Underworld launches a new era and changes forever the status of Offenbach, providing his first real outlet from poverty, his entree to fame and international recognition. And it is merely the beginning of a fabulous decade. His operettas soon conquer Europe as well as Paris. Vienna capitulates and becomes his second capitol. Here he gives encouragement to young, untried Johann Strauss, suggesting that he try his hand at operetta. London, Berlin, and New York fall without resistance.

One triumph follows another in unbelievably rapid succession: *La Belle Helene*, *Bluebeard*, *La Vie Parisienne*, *Perichole*, *The Grande Duchess of Gerolstein*, which breaks all previous records. By 1867, no less than five Offenbach successes are playing in Paris simultaneously, and productions are sprouting up throughout Europe and far-away America. During this decade alone, Offenbach has composed forty operettas, twenty of them full length. Many of them have been forgotten, including *The Princess of Trebizonde* and other Pocket Opera favorites: *The Bridge of Sighs*, *The Bandits*, *The Cat that Turned into a Woman*. But almost all of them are greeted with delirious delight, and it seems that Offenbach is infallible, blessed with an inexhaustible supply of melody. The Second Empire acquires a new label: the Age of Offenbach.

It also marks the fulfillment of a cherished dream: he becomes a naturalized French citizen -- by no means a simple achievement for a foreigner, however successful or famous. A rousing finale to Act II!

But alas! Act III is already in the making, a drastic reversal of fortune. Storm clouds have begun to gather. Rumbblings of distant war, echoing in Paris, grow louder and louder as the decade progresses. From Italy, from Austria, from Germany -- sounds of menace. Prussia, under Bismarck, known as the Iron Chancellor, is rapidly building up its military machine. And in France itself, the darker social realities are increasingly visible under the glamorous trappings of Empire.

After a long build-up, the Franco-Prussian war erupts in 1870. France is quickly defeated. Paris is occupied. Starvation is rampant. All entertainments are banned. Theatres are turned into military hospitals.

Offenbach is in despair at seeing his world collapse. Aside from the general suffering from which he is not immune, his sorrow has a personal edge to it. For the first time, as a German Jew, he is regarded with hostility and suspicion. And his work is inescapably identified with the discredited regime that has crumbled. Indeed, it is held up as a symbol, the very essence of that corrupt era, a product of evil Empire.

Excoriated as a German, he is forced into exile, but back in his homeland he is excoriated for having abandoned it in the first place. Overstrained and exhausted, his work comes to a halt.

The dust eventually settles; conditions slowly return to normal. But Paris is no longer the old Paris. The Second Empire, intoxicated on champagne, is replaced by a somewhat hungover Third Republic bent on repentance and reform. Decidedly a new terrain. Offenbach, the recharged warrior, must launch his next campaign with a different strategy.

To meet the challenge caused by the change in the public mood, he again takes on the management of a theatre. Since the public appetite is no longer receptive to his real talents, he tries to meet it halfway, by embracing the very qualities that he has previously shunned: the grandiose, the spectacular.

Again, *Orpheus*, his first big success, comes to the rescue, but *Orpheus* transformed! A revival is now mounted on a mammoth stage, featuring a chorus of 120, a *corps de ballet* of 68. Even this is dwarfed by the revival of *The Bandits* that soon follows, boasting of 300 bodies on stage. For its own revival of *The Bandits* a hundred and ten years later, even Pocket Opera succumbs to the lure of grandiosity, with a record-shattering cast of eighteen.

But the trouble with giant spectacles is that failure can be equally spectacular. Ask anybody in today's movie industry. And it cannot be denied that among Offenbach's many gifts, hard-headed practicality is not among them. A background of early poverty and struggle often induces people to hold on anxiously to money once they have acquired it, fearful that it will fly away. But occasionally it has just the opposite effect. The starved soul suddenly finds himself seated at the banquet table. Eat up, enjoy while you can! Such is Offenbach, generous, extravagant, and ever inclined to take a gamble. But apart

from any personal lapses, there's no getting around it: the theatre is earthquake country. One shake-up can be devastating.

And Offenbach's theatre suffers not one but several. Suddenly he finds himself forced into bankruptcy -- a shattering blow, the humiliating end of a long road. Nor does it help that he is now widely regarded as a relic of a past era.

Die Fledermaus is now the rage, composed by the young man that he once encouraged, the book written by his own long-time staunch collaborators, Meilhac and Halevy, and starring his favorite protege, Zulma Buffar. The products of Vienna continue to crowd out the Offenbachiade for years to come. *The Grande Duchess of Gerolstein* was the centerpiece of the great Exposition of 1867. Ten years later, Paris is now gearing for another Exposition. Offenbach is not even asked to participate.

Again facing the spectre of poverty, he vows to start anew, and to use every penny of his future earnings beyond basic necessities to repay his debts -- a goal that he indeed achieves, after seven years of grinding servitude.

It is America that eventually provides the key to financial liberation. Luckily behind the times, word has not yet reached our shores that Offenbach is a failure, a has-been. He is extended a lucrative offer to pay a visit -- an offer that he accepts with great reluctance and only out of dire necessity. Apart from the pain of being separated from his beloved wife and children, he has a horror of crossing the vast ocean, sharing the opinion of Dr. Johnson, who described life on an ocean liner as "a prison confinement with the added possibility of drowning."

But the great sacrifice pays off. He returns to France, a free man clear of debt, and enormously boosted by the rousing reception he has received. A crowd of fifty thousand were waiting in the street to welcome him when he arrived at his hotel in New York. Rather like the good old days.

And now begins the final act. I have not yet mentioned the most difficult, the most prolonged struggle of Offenbach's life: an incessant battle against physical pain and illness that has lasted for more than twenty years, indeed throughout his entire career. Incredible as it seems, the boundless energy and exuberance that fills every bar of his music may have been his release valve from nearly unbearable pain.

But long illness by now has taken its toll. Emaciated, racked with pain, weak to the extent that he has to be carried up a flight of stairs, he is fully aware that time is running out. Now an old man at sixty, he is haunted by a fear that he has created nothing of lasting value, that his great talents have been squandered. Orpheus, Bluebeard, Helen, the Grand Duchess were triumphant in their day, but their day is past. Despite all of his work -- over a hundred operettas, bear in mind -- he has not created an enduring opera.

The Tales of Hoffmann has been in the back of his mind for many years, in fact for three decades, from the very beginning of his career. He is drawn to the feverish,

haunted world of its ill-fated hero, in pursuit of mirages that he mistakes for love, goaded on by an evil genius, and finally left empty-handed. Offenbach is convinced that this will be the masterpiece that will be his legacy, if only he is granted time to finish it. The race with death begins.

Parenthetically, it should be mentioned that another composer, named Hector Saloman, is already at work on an opera based on the same libretto. In a rare, unparalleled display of deference and magnanimity, he withdraws his own work in order to leave the road clear for Offenbach. May his name remain forever immortal, along with that of Michael Puchberg, who so many times rescued Mozart from the abyss.

The story in fact strangely parallels the last weeks of Mozart's life when he too is racing with time to complete the Requiem Mass that he is convinced is for himself. It is a race that neither composer is to win, though Offenbach comes considerably closer than did Mozart.

His one wish is to survive long enough to attend the opening performance -- ironically at the Paris Opera Comique, the forbidden fortress that he has spent so many years trying to enter. "Hurry up," he writes. "I haven't much time." They promise a production by mid-winter. Too late.

Offenbach dies in early October, before his final wish can be granted. Except for the orchestration, which is merely sketched in, the opera is essentially complete, though in something less than a final form, which typically takes shape only during rehearsals, and often even after the first performances. With *The Tales of Hoffmann*, this refining, reshaping process of course never takes place, and directors have ever since used this as an excuse to exercise their own creativity, with predictably mixed results. However, a strong work can withstand a good deal of mauling about. *The Tales of Hoffmann* has survived.

Offenbach has achieved his masterpiece, a lasting legacy. Yet to my mind, this was achieved long before: an even greater legacy that is still waiting to be discovered. I like to picture those fifty people clinging to the rungs of the ladder in *Les Bouffes Parisiens*. They were the first explorers of a new world.