



LYRIC OPERA OF CHICAGO

A CONVERSATION WITH *BEL CANTO* LIBRETTIST NILO CRUZ

*Nilo Cruz is a Cuban-American playwright whose work has been produced widely around the United States and Europe. In 2003 he won the Pulitzer Prize and the Steinberg Award for Drama for his play **Anna in the Tropics**, which was nominated for a Tony award. Cruz is a frequent collaborator with noted composer Gabriela Lena Frank. He recently wrote a set of orchestral songs, "La Centinela y la paloma" (**The Keeper and the Dove**), for Dawn Upshaw and the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra. His new set of songs, **Farhad and the Secret of Being**, composed by Jim Bauer, will be performed next season in New York, as will a series of songs for the San Francisco Girls Chorus. Cruz is also writing the screenplay for the film **Castro's Daughter**, starring Antonio Banderas as Fidel Castro. He lives in New York City and Miami.*

Q: You have a number of song projects and now the libretto for *Bel Canto*. As a playwright of considerable repute, what draws you to music?

NC: Collaborating musically is something I love. In the beginning moments of creating, just to sit down with the composer and share ideas, to get inspiration from the music, makes my work so much easier instead of being on my own. Also when I begin writing a play I try to find a musical composition that will inspire the world I'm about to enter.

Sound triggers images and situations and prepares the listener for what is to come. It is like aroma. It travels really fast, faster than an image. It provides beautiful and graceful transitions on the stage. I tend to use music often in my own playwriting, and script it to move from one scene to another.

Q: Would you say you're moving in new directions?

NC: Life is taking me more in this direction of "musicalizing" dialogue. Working with a composer feels innate. It's illuminating to find ways to tell a story through music. I'm thrilled to be writing songs and opera because I think my language lends itself to music, because my dialogue tends to be lyrical.

Q: How did you become involved with Lyric?

NC: The director Stephen Wadsworth called and asked if I would be interested in doing the adaptation of *Bel Canto*. I've always liked the book, but I was sort of in shock because Stephen is a director I really admire. Then I found out Renée Fleming was involved in the project. She's the person who always came to my mind as the opera singer in the book. The fact that she's making this happen at Lyric – that she's bringing this to the stage – I think is so beautiful. It's sort of blessing the material. Jimmy [López] I didn't know. I told Stephen to let me explore a bit more, read the novel again and see what this material evokes in me. Four days later I called him back and said I definitely want to do this.

When I met with Jimmy, our conversation began with questions like, "What do we hear? Are we going to use arias? What is the music of the explosion when the terrorists come into the embassy?" This evokes images, words, lyrics.

What is really good with *Bel Canto* is that there are existing words and I'm not creating from scratch. This is a piece that actually exists. But we're also exploring. I got three books from Jimmy in Spanish that were based on the actual event as a way of exploring that world that may bring more colors and possibilities of different sounds and music and aromas.

Q: What is *Bel Canto* about? What appeals to you about this story?

NC: It's about how music is able to bring together people who would not actually coexist. I'm referring to the most extreme groups of people: terrorists and hostages in a moment that is elevated to great heights through music as they are caught in a situation from which there is no exit. I think this piece is about the transformative power of art.

Something that lures me to this material is that at the center of the book there are a couple of love stories. Whenever there's love, there's the possibility to sing and to create soaring music. And the clash of people from two different social stratas – the conflict – offers great dramatic possibilities.

Q: What is special for this project, in your mind as librettist, about Jimmy López's music?

NC: I think Jimmy's music is very powerful. It also brings with it a very specific world, which is from the Americas. Specifically for this material, for *Bel Canto*, those sounds are vital. It immediately situates us. With this kind of opera we need to be constantly reminded that we're not in North America, but in South America. We're in another land. The novel itself has elements of magic realism, and I read that Ann was inspired by the writings of Gabriel Garcia Márquez. Jimmy uses some instruments beyond the traditional ones in an orchestra. Other South American composers are doing that, too, like Golijov.

Q: How do you envision adapting Ann Patchett's words to the stage?

NC: From the moment they asked me to do this project, I felt a real affinity for Ann Patchett's language. There's humor in this material, there's lyricism and an enormous amount of beauty. She's not afraid to be emotional, and I'm not afraid to be emotional at all! My writing is very warm and emotional. I just connect with this kind of material, and I really want to honor it. There are lines I may leave exactly as she's written them, that lend themselves to music, that sing.

Q: What is it like to be collaborating with Lyric and this artistic team?

NC: I feel an enormous amount of responsibility. It's intimidating, but it's scary in the way that every time I begin writing a project there is always fear – and fear is a good thing, because from fear you gain courage. I'm also feeling very courageous! It's a challenge and it means that I'm going to work harder to make something beautiful and powerful, which is what opera is all about for me.

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