

Orf '86

drawings and story
Norman MacAfee

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1

Tomorrow I begin assistant-directing an opera, Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice*, about me. I am of course curious and dubious. The overlay of a particularly deadly form of operatic tradition has not yet even begun to be scraped away in the New World, and especially not here in New York. But I will bring my own ideas to the task, ideas that have been with me thousands of years, since my birth and death, and through countless rebirths.

2

Back home after my first day and evening with the company. Amazing coincidence! The conductor is from my hometown. He has even been inside the house I spent my first decade in, which my grandparents built, and the song of whose loss I've performed all my decades since. Soon after we left, it became a Guidance Center for the high school that was built on the fields I played on in front of our house.

The fields.

The Elysian Fields.

3

The conductor and I become fast friends. "Wonderful workmanship in that house, the banister, the grand staircase, the front porch, the indoor porch..."

I smile sadly. When a family moves from a house, the child born in the place loses it more acutely than even the adults who built it. The child owns all those realms too low or narrow for the mature—the spaces underneath the furniture, behind the bushes.

So those fields that would be replaced by generations of students like the Conductor—I remember them suddenly when the Director asks the company members to think what the Elysian Fields should look like.

I say,

"Well, working from what I was saying to you a minute ago about

how Pasolini did his *Oedipus*—very autobiographically—I would quote from a moment in my childhood. It is Christmas, I am six or seven, I have been given an English bike, and my father takes me out onto the fields in front of our house. It is a sunny late afternoon, not bright sun, and the light is pink and violet reflected on the icy field, which is untouched, pure reflection, all pink and violet.

“Suddenly in the distance some older boys approach on bikes and start cutting up the purity. I yell and go after them. It is pure esthetic response, also pure ownership, lording it over the rough trade. So, the fields, my fields I would be losing three or four years later, along with the boys on them, my erotic life as a boy, my Elysian fields would be the white and pink and violet of that Christmas afternoon.”

Is it part of the collaborative process that when I see this scene the first time two weeks later, the lighting is the pink and violet of that Christmas afternoon, the costumes of the blessed spirits white as that icy field?

4

I am in despair. The director's concept is much too conventional to be at all interesting, and I continue to be appalled that he seems to keep forgetting that Orfeo is not just a great singer, but Orpheus, the first poet.

5

I am in the director's office. I doodle my favorite singer, who has been interviewed in the latest issue of an opera magazine. Her first starring role was in this opera, as Orfeo, in Zurich. The figure is on the right of a horizontal sheet of a sketch book.

Later at home, brooding, with pen, colored pencils, I'm designing a poets' *Orfeo ed Euridice*.

The director's production uses thousands of yards of painted parachute-like material as backdrop for an involved scene change from inferno to apotheosis. I shudder at all the things that can go wrong with such a contraption in a low-budget production like this.

Adjoining the figure I'd drawn at the director's office, I sketch in the stage. The figure will use the parachute material, which will represent the cloak of the lost Euridice, always present on the side of the stage, three times lifesize, visible to the audience but not to the players, a welter of cloak on a metal frame, like a classical Greek statue, with a mask of the face of the soprano singing Euridice atop it.

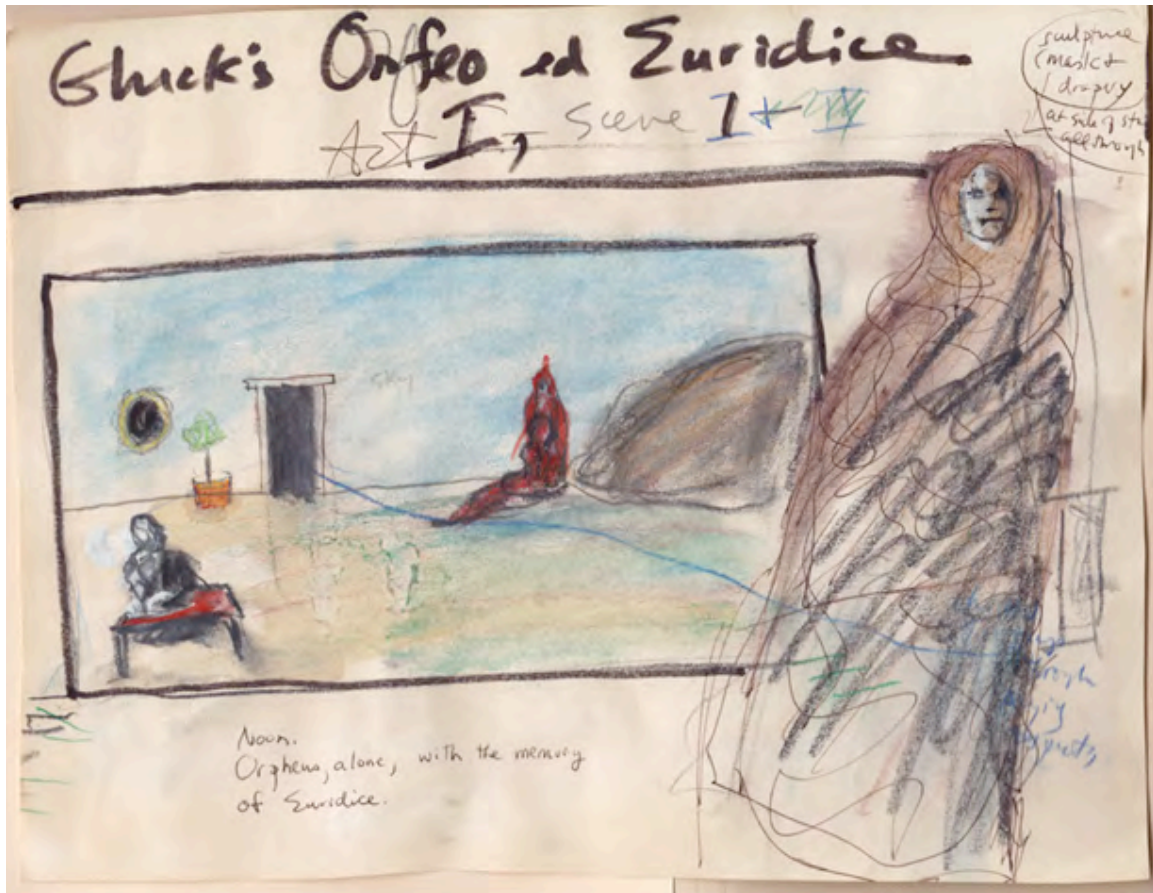
Drawing #1

Gluck's *Orfeo ed Euridice*

Act I, Scene 1

Noon. Orpheus alone, with the memory of Euridice.

Sculpture—mask and drapery—at side of the stage all through the performance



The set. A backdrop wall with a simple post-and-lintel doorway a quarter way from stage right. To stage right of it, a live dwarf tree in a pot; further stage right a round gilt-framed mirror through which Euridice can look from backstage out at Orfeo. A large pile of earth, stage left rear, is optional. This is the set for the entire opera, but each scene will have radically different lighting.

Overture. Morning. A brilliant blue sky lights up the backdrop. Dressed in black, part punk, part businessman, the Poet is stage right front at a low Chinese laminated table. He is writing the poem of his love.

His wife, dressed in a long red cloak, appears on the other side of the wall mirror. He stands up, turns around, goes to it but she disappears and he sees nothing but darkness in the mirror.

Act I. Scenes 1 and 2. Noon. Through the doorway, the ensemble—singers and dancers—in black mourning clothes, from 1940 or 1910—enter, singing, the last holding the red cloak. They file past Orpheus, who remains at his desk writing as he sings. They offer condolences and exit the way they came. As the last goes by Orpheus, the Poet reaches out to the cloak and takes it in his arms. He hangs it on a hook on the wall between the doorway and the earth pile.

Drawing #2: Orpheus the poet in suit, and in leather jacket; Euridice the mystery woman



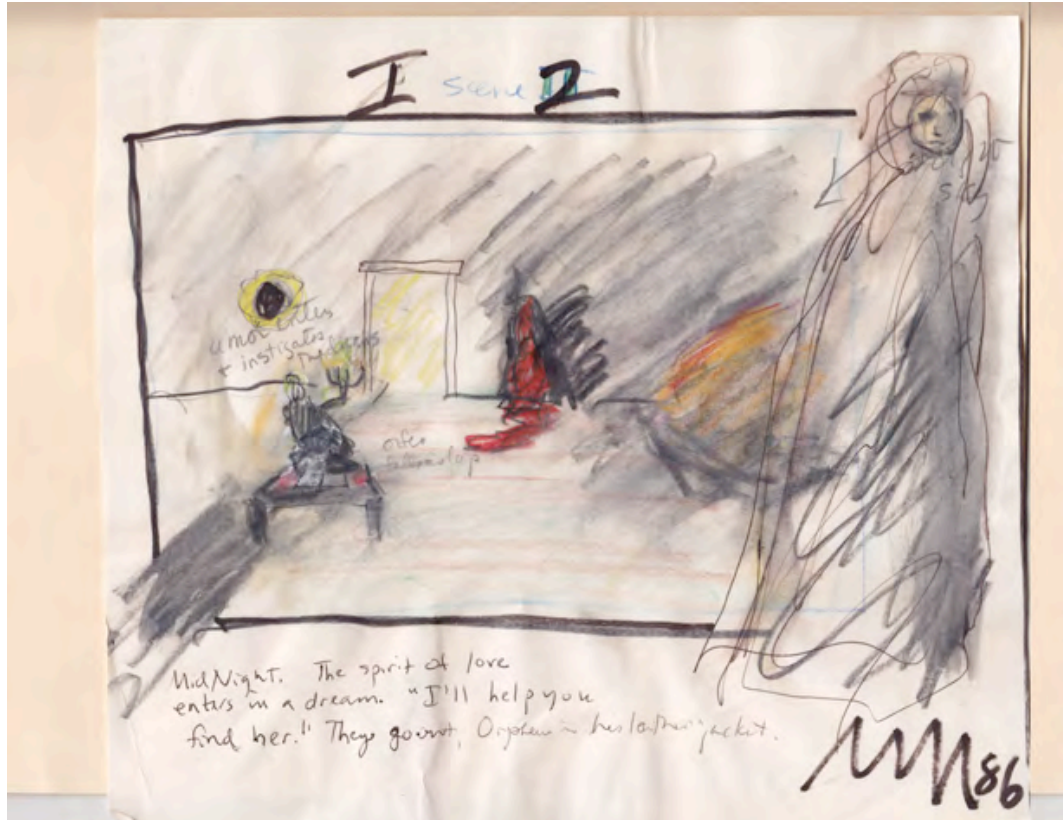
Scene 3. Midnight. Orpheus is at his desk, writing, singing of his grief and love. The room is dark except for a warm glow on Orpheus as though from his desk lamp. He falls asleep. From the dark back doorway comes bright yellow light, and Love, dressed like a 1930s chauffeur in black, enters holding an electric candelabra in the form of a naked nymph. He touches Orpheus on the shoulder, waking him. He helps the Poet out of his suit coat and into a black leather jacket. The light from the back door is now an orange red as the two exit through it, in search of Euridice.

Drawing #3
Amor (the Chauffeur)



Drawing #4
Act I, Scene 2

Midnight. The spirit of love enters in a dream. "I'll help you find her." They go out, Orpheus in leather jacket.



Act II, Scene 1. Dark shadows and flashing red lights as at a punk bar or during a police raid. Images of a Chinatown New Year.

Orpheus enters surrounded by petty thieves and whores, half-naked, drugged, who chase him till his song drowns out their roaring, and they exit through the back door.

Drawing #5

Act II, Scene 1

Orpheus enters Hades. Sings. The monstrous denizens of the place, half-naked, drunk, are pacified and leave (go off to another club).



Act II, Scene 2, Act III.

Lighting becomes purple-blue-green-brown of a summer woods.

Dancers appear, with Euridice.

Orpheus finds, loses, finds her.

Drawing #6

Act III, Scenes 1, 2

Orpheus and half-naked drunken heroes and heroines enter; they reveal Euridice. Gets. Loses. Gets!



Act IV. Orpheus at his desk as in the Overture. Chorus offstage.
Two dancers as O and E in middle of stage, waltzing slowly.

The miracle has happened, again! The stage is totally flooded with emerald-green light. We are now bathed in the grass we become when we die, as even O and E must.

Drawing #7

Act III, Scene 3

The miracle returns. O & E are always there, together, in the light of the grassy meadows. They dance, waltz, as offstage chorus sings.



E appears in the mirror, and sings with O. Amor stands in the doorway. The singing O is at his desk, scribbling. The dancing O and E continue waltzing.

The singing O looks at them, rises; he has a sheaf of pages in his hands, the poems he has been writing during the opera. He moves toward the doorway, passing the dancers in the middle of the room. He looks at them, they look at him. He exits through the back doorway to peddle his poems.

In the green world, O and E continue dancing.

6

The director likes the concept, but I was hired too late to affect his concept. If only we could do two productions, as in the Soviet Union, he says, if we had the money, do one mythological, one experimental... Of course! I keep forgetting. This is America!

7

Rehearsal of first scene is going poorly. All that the choristers are asked to do is act sad; it is all just some stupid tableau of twenty people grieving and a mezzo mooning about his (her) lost love. Excruciating.

In my rags I limp home to my garret.

I think: They need to imagine themselves as individual people, not simply mourners. And so I create characters for each...other poets, neighbors, their landlord, relatives, critics, admirers, lovers, and even the woman who will, some years after the opera ends, instigate Orpheus's first death.

I give the director the biographical sketches, but each chorus member only his or hers.

Much excitement. They have something to work with.

8

The Orffs are preparing for their fifth wedding anniversary. It is the day before the Overture. It is raining.

E: Where were you?

O: Out collecting birdsong. I met a woodnymph, Sylvia.

E: *(Sings)* O traditore! *(Speaking)* What's she like?

O: Too skinny, too boyish, and she can't sing!

E warbles "Guardarmi!" O takes some wine.

E: So early! It's barely noon!

O: O those eyes, bare moons of noon.

They kiss. O begins a poem but starts to nod off.

E: Hey wake up and finish that ode!

Two choristers enter to help plan O's tour of Italy and Poland. O receives a letter from Jason. He's in Corinth, but may visit. It has stopped raining and Euridice steps out for a walk and to pay the rent.

Overture.

9

Opening night goes fairly well and the Elysian Fields scenery is a big hit. But the parachute backdrop change from hell to apotheosis is something of the predicted bomb. I chuckle.

I bring two friends, who pride themselves on being "old-fashioned," to the next performance, and they are entranced by the conservative nature of the production, and have some dire things to say about several of the singers.

The production gets a not-bad review by the ignoramus second-string critic in the city's (and country's) major paper. The inventiveness of the use of the parachute material is praised. I am desolate.

10

These are the last lines Orpheus wrote before he lost his head:

Hell is a castle on fire forever.

I sing all parts, Orphaned.

I want to be