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'The meaner, the better'

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The talented Canadian female lead in Opera Ireland's production of Verdi's 'Macbeth' finds she is revelling in the 'fiendishly difficult' role, writes **ARMINTA WALLACE** NORTH AMERICAN divas come in two flavours, the backstage person at the Gaiety assures me. Some are a total pain in the ass: others are a joy to work with. Michele Capalbo, the Canadian-born singer who is to take the lead female role in the new Opera Ireland production of Verdi's *Macbeth*, is unquestionably in the latter category. Helpful and hard-working, she gets on with everybody. "And what a voice – phew!"

I find Capalbo sitting cross-legged and calm on a couch in her tiny dressing-room, her long dark hair loose on her shoulders, waiting for a call back to rehearsal and looking more like the Buddha incarnate than the famously murderous Lady Macbeth. Open on the table beside her is the book she picked up in Hodges Figgis's bargain basement during one of her lunchtime forays into the streets around the theatre – Henry James's *The Portrait of a Lady*. "A little light reading," she explains with a smile. "Helps take my mind off things when the crazies come calling." A major international career is likely to come calling on Capalbo long before the crazies do. She has attracted a fistful of good reviews for her performances in Verdi operas such as *Tosca* and *Aida*, and already has the fiendishly difficult role of Lady Macbeth under her belt. "I have a pet name for her," she says. "I call her Her Royal Odiousness – and I love her. As Lady Macbeth I get to be everything that I can't be in real life. The badder, the meaner, the better."

The role demands acting of the highest order as the character moves from manipulative control freak to gibbering wreck. Vocally, however, the challenges are even greater. The soprano Renata Scotto, famous for her interpretations of Lady Macbeth, once commented that Verdi's music requires the singer to produce "coloratura, pianissimi with six pppppp's, hissing sounds, whispering sounds, groans and a number of ugly sounds you have to find for yourself. . .". Capalbo agrees with Scotto's assessment – up to a point. "Verdi himself said that Lady Macbeth ought to have an ugly voice, and a lot of people invoke that," she says. "But let's put it in context. Verdi's Lady Macbeth is coming from the *bel cantotradition*. *Bel canto* means beautiful singing – so let's put an ugly voice in the context of beautiful singing. Personally I would not want to go to any opera where the singing was ugly. She definitely has text that's very specific and pointed. Yes, there's hissing and whispering. Yes, you're using your full palate of colour and power – everything from triple *forteto* threads of sound at the very, very, very end of a long night. I would say that in this opera you're spending the voice. You're not singing on interest for this role." Why did she take it on? Isn't it a huge risk for a young singer? "That's an excellent question," she says. "I think I need my head examined. But, you know, I sing a lot of Verdi, and I like to say that Verdi always keeps you honest. You can either sing him, or you don't sing him. It's very difficult for a soprano to fake her way through a

Verdi part.” There was a time when Capalbo would have been astonished to find herself on stage singing Italian opera.

“I was born and bred in Canada and I spent a lot of time in choirs,” she says. She was well into a degree in music in her home country when she found herself attracted to operatic singing. “I went to New York to actually learn how to sing. My goal, really, was not to get another degree or to spend another \$100,000 for another piece of paper – my goal was to learn how to sing. So I found a private teacher and I did that.” Now she sings all over the world, from Chile to Switzerland and Spain. But even as opera critics predict a stellar career for Capalbo, opera itself is going through something of a dark night of the soul. All the big houses are facing major funding cuts: new recordings are pretty much at a standstill.

Capalbo insists there are a few bright spots in the gloom. One has been the way in which companies are working with schools to bring younger audiences to opera. Another has been the unexpected world-wide popularity of high-definition cinema screenings of opera productions from the Metropolitan Opera House in New York, which began as a marketing tool but has turned into something of a phenomenon.

Opera Ireland is affiliated to the programme, which will bring *The Tales of Hoffmann*, *Carmen* and *Der Rosenkavalier* to Irish cinema screens over the coming months. “The colour is marvellous – you can even see the details on the chandeliers,” says Capalbo. “If that’s how you’re getting opera, and that’s how a lot of people are getting opera now, then that’s fantastic.” But as she makes her way to the Gaiety stage and drapes herself over a red velvet chaise-longue on the starkly-lit black-and-white set, it’s hard to avoid the conclusion that even the most vibrant HD screening is no match for the real theatre experience.