

Interview: Raymond Aceto – a quietly confident Banquo

by Evan Dickerson - May 26, 2011



Raymond Aceto (photo: Clive Barda)

Raymond Aceto welcomes me warmly into his dressing room at the Royal Opera House. What immediately impresses me about Raymond, aside from his sonorous speaking voice, is the air of calmness that surrounds him. Rehearsals for Verdi's *Macbeth*, in which he sings the role of Banquo, are reaching their final stage before the opening night on 24 May.

Macbeth is the fifth production that the American bass sings for the Royal Opera House: “Fourth opera, fifth production, technically, since I did Sparafucile in *Rigoletto* twice after *Il trovatore* and *Il barbiere di Siviglia*.” He's also quick to add how happy he is to be here again, “It's great to be back in London and this is a wonderful company to work for; they look after you so well.”

In talking about the roles he has previously sung, regarding his Sparafucile, Raymond reflects that many people comment, “Where do you get all that evil meanness from?” He claims not to know, but a wry smile creeps across his face – just enough to get a sense of the character there and then.

Asked whether he feels there is any difference in public appreciation for his singing between the United States and Europe, Raymond is quick to emphasise the number of European companies he has sung for already in his well established career: “I’ve sung with many companies in Europe; in Vienna and Amsterdam, at the Deutsche Oper in Berlin, in Italy I go to sing at Verona again right after this production, in Valencia and Madrid in Spain... so, I feel I’m getting my name out there.”

Raymond might be singing Zaccaria – “a big role” – opposite Ambrogio Maestri's Nabucco in Verona, but how does he feel about the somewhat secondary role of Banquo in *Macbeth*? “It is secondary to Macbeth and Lady Macbeth, but I call Banquo the opera's conscience.” Raymond agrees that Banquo's character has far-reaching consequences for the plot. “They still speak of Banquo after his death, even before he returns as a ghost.” Establishing and maintaining a stage presence so that you are still a tangible force when off-stage is a hard thing to achieve, but “as an actor I think you have to be the opposite of Macbeth and Lady Macbeth. They are so frenetic, but the music and the text help tremendously to keep Banquo grounded, and the beautiful legato lines, no matter what he's singing about, help to give more gravitas and foundation to the role.”

Raymond is eloquent in underlining just how rewarding he finds this music to sing: “Any of these bel canto Verdi roles are very challenging. It's like running a

marathon because you have to have the body and mind working as one every time you open your mouth. And – like running a marathon – it's something you work up to, the training and conditioning is mental and physical. If you're not in the right place it can be rough, but if you are, to sing this wonderful music surrounded by great scenery and colleagues, conductor and orchestra is so worth it.”

Reflecting on working with Simon Keenlyside, singing Macbeth at Covent Garden for the first time, Raymond's view of the rehearsal experience is clear: “It's been wonderful. I've been friends with Simon for at least ten years, but this is the first time we actually creatively work together. We play off of each other really well. He's a very grounded performer and you can definitely trust him; the role sounds wonderful in his voice.” I prompt Raymond further on the contrast between his and Simon Keenlyside's voice: “Our first duet is a very moving piece.”

It's a different situation when it comes to Lady Macbeth, however. “As characters, our relationship is more reactionary than anything else, so even though we are not on stage really interacting together we are still playing off each other.” Liudmyla Monastyrska's voice is “massive and wonderful, yet she is also able to do these subtle things with it, which really is the key, because otherwise people say, “Now what?” Liudmyla's voice is very interesting. In fact, I was thinking the other day that there is so much female music in this show: two big female choruses, obviously everything that Lady Macbeth sings. I can't think of an opera before Verdi that had so much for the female voice.” And regarding Verdi's famous requirement that Lady Macbeth has a dark voice, “for our modern times you couldn't have a Lady Macbeth who wasn't stunning and beautiful.”

Raymond has an established working relationship with Antonio Pappano – “We've done opera, concerts and recorded together... Tony's great, he's patient, and he certainly gets the style of the piece. He's a great realiser of this bel canto style, which is ideal for people like Simon and me, who have been doing this for years. Today, you don't find conductors who take the time to hone it and polish it, which Tony does. But to have Tony here for all the rehearsals, staging rehearsals too, and he says “Look, I need you do something here...”, you go “OK, I know you well enough to trust your reasons, which is not always the case.””

Careful preparation is the key to “building one picture and one concept for the audience that will elevate the whole piece to such a level that even if you are not aware of every detail, you will be aware of something very special, that there has to be an arc of development.” Phyllida Lloyd's production is “not a traditional interpretation of the piece, which doesn't mean it's a circus out there, because it's not. I'm always willing and very excited to do a piece in a 'non-traditional' sense, but where everything Verdi and Shakespeare intended is present. On stage, we've said it in a different way. Maybe in a slightly different period or with a different mentality and attitude, but otherwise it's what Shakespeare and Verdi wanted. I think that Phyllida's done a great job in adding little details and attitudes that certainly apply to the work.” Is he specifically referring to the banquet scene when Banquo returns as a ghost? “Well, I've done it both ways, where I return and where I don't return – it's cool when I do return though because you get to see what Macbeth is freaking out about!”

The most memorable moments for Raymond on stage in this production are the beginning of the Act I finale when he is alone and speaks to Macduff, great Verdi

cantabile lines and make that a prelude to the aria ‘Come dal ciel precipita’ in Act II – “...it's been in my repertoire for twenty years, since I studied it as a student – and to get better with that, subtle things. But to be standing out there, with a fabulous orchestra in front of 2200 of your closest friends, it's a great feeling!” It's obvious that he does not want to sound too confident of how the performances will go, or how the public and critics will receive his individual part in them, but Raymond certainly has a feeling of quiet confidence about him.

Our enjoyable discussion wraps up with a look to the future, beyond the Nabucco in Verona already mentioned. He opens next season in San Francisco in *Turandot*, then to Chicago to sing Varlaam in *Boris Gudonov*. He remains tight-lipped about plans to return to Covent Garden though, since they are not yet public knowledge, but he is contracted to come back in a couple of years. He's clearly happy that he's in London and it will be a continuing relationship. As a parting shot, a hint of further roles to come from Raymond perhaps: Scarpia and Philip in *Don Carlos* – “the ultimate Verdi bass role...”

<http://www.musicomh.com/classical/features/raymond-aceto.htm>