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A Gypsy's Way

by Nancy Coons

It's a warm, sticky June night, and Brussels, not unused to soot and damp, is a gritty steam bath. At the modern stage door of the recently renovated Théâtre de la Monnaie, where *Falstaff* just blustered to a matinee crowd, singers slide down the stairs from the dressing rooms with traces of greasepaint streaked under their sweat. Fans beg autographs and snapshots of the passing cast, keeping a special eye out for native son José Van Dam, who has tackled the title role for the first time.

Their heads turn, however, when Livia Budai steps down. Dame Quickly has been transformed. Trading the homespun heartiness of the afternoon's performance for a hint of the exotic role that lies ahead—her Metropolitan Opera debut as Azucena—the Hungarian-born mezzo has donned the street clothes a modern Gypsy might prefer: leather skirt, *sauvage* zebra-striped pumps, metallic-knit sweater with geometrics of Amazonian scale. Masses of wild black hair are barely tamed by a three-inch iridescent barrette above three-inch gold-hoop earrings. Her arms are burdened with gold bangles and an oversize gold charm bracelet, from which dangle a tiny Eiffel Tower and a miniature of Brussels' own Manneken Pis. Over bowed lips,

Livia Budai, the Met's new Azucena in *Il Trovatore*, stays on the move as her international career expands

Photo: Youah

a long, fine nose and enormous brown eyes are drawn two Garboesque brows that arch vampishly as she greets a fan. Ripe for the next role, she's dressed in advance—and she's all Gypsy.

Teetering on high heels across the cobblestones to a seafood restaurant near the fishmarket, Budai reveals limited English skills heavily augmented by French (her strongest second tongue), German and Italian ("I have to understand what I am singing"). Her husband, Julius Batky, a dapper Canadian businessman in tweeds and Liberty tie, is also Hungarian, serving as English go-between when Budai breaks into impassioned Hungarian, which is often.

In the restaurant she is alternately guarded and volatile, swinging recklessly between a sly, childlike sweetness and wild laughter that flares into operatic whoops. Often the laughter grows so shrill, the conversation so lively, that heads turn throughout the dining room. She and Batky, still baby-talking newlyweds after a year, do enjoy a good story—especially the story of Livia Budai. In a hash of mixed tongues and eager interruptions, with an occasional pause for poached turbot (buxom but not plump, Budai nonetheless watches her weight), the tale unfolds. As a girl growing up in Esztergom, she was (by her own admission) "short, shy, clumsy," held back by crossed eyes and heavy corrective lenses. ("Nobody told me when I cry the tears are dropping over my shoulders.") Her parents sent her to ballet school ("They said 'My God, we have to do something!'"), where she studied for seven years the grace if not the art of dance. After an ankle injury, she retreated home, where—lonely and unhappy, with both parents away at work—she became addicted to the radio. That was when she began to sing. The song she loved most—listening, studying, mimicking—was a German record of "Stride la vampa."

"Whenever the apartment was empty, Livia sang," Batky translates. "Most of the time she went in the bathroom and sang what she heard on the radio. One day a neighbor, a teacher, came home early and heard her through the wall. He thought it was the radio, but then he thought 'That must be little Livia.'"

The neighbor asked Budai's mother, "Why are you pushing that girl to ballet dancing when she has a gorgeous voice?" Her mother was incredulous—"My daughter? She never sings!"—but the neighbor coaxed the girl to demonstrate her secret skills. The parents hastened to cancel the ballet studies and lead her instead into singing. The voice teacher who heard her

audition first asked her what she had to try out with. "I said 'Stride la vampa,'" Budai laughs. "She thought I was crazy, but it was what I knew so well." When the teacher heard her, skepticism evaporated.

Soon after her studies began, Hungarian television led a talent search, and Budai won. From that she gained entrance to the Liszt Academy in Budapest, won competitions in Barcelona, Paris and again in Hungary. After four years' study, in 1973 she became a resident of the Budapest State Opera. Repertory and reputation growing apace, she made guest performances in Berlin and Munich and finally took asylum in West Germany, accepting a contract with the Gelsenkirchen Music Theater. Offered a chance to perform Azucena in East Berlin, Budai declined, joking, "My jail term would be too long!"

The next year, 1978, she found her big break, stepping in as Azucena at London's Royal Opera (replacing Elena Obraztsova), with Carlo Bergonzi to share the spotlight. She was not versed in the "Ascot Gavotte" restraint of the audience. "When I sang 'Stride la vampa' at my debut, I stopped," she recalls. "In Hungary, women singers freeze for applause after arias. No applause! 'My God,' I thought, 'I've sung my first and last in Covent Garden.'" "When the curtain went down," Batky continues, "she was so scared she just wanted to go quietly from the stage. But Bergonzi said, 'Brava, you were fantastic!' and led her onstage to share the applause." Budai confesses, "I couldn't hold back the tears."

Reviews were good, and word got around Europe. She appeared steadily at the Bavarian State Opera and sang at Vienna State Opera, again in London and for companies throughout the Continent. In 1981 she made her Brussels debut as Eboli in Gérard Mortier's adventuresome *Don Carlo* and has since appeared there as Brangäne, Kundry, Quickly and of course Azucena.

Verdi's Gypsy is the role that suits her best, though she admits Quickly was a relief from dramatic heavies. She has been criticized, in fact, for plunging too young into demanding mezzo roles. "When I did Eboli at twenty-seven, people said, 'Suicide, you finish your voice.'" Since then she has managed Eboli 188 times, and though her voice has developed an Azucena-like edge (apparent even through her comic vocal gymnastics as Quickly), she looks forward to more Wagner, Strauss and modern repertory. (Her Ada in Berio's *La Vera Storia* was well received in Paris and Flor-

ence, and she may repeat the role in Chicago soon.) She also wants to do Carmen, more flattering for a Gypsy type. (Her mother, like all mothers who want to see their daughters look their best, is weary of seeing Livia as a crazed hag.)

Much of a would-be diva's energy must be devoted to competition, to exposure, to mystique—an uneasy balance to maintain early on in a blooming career. But *All About Eve* anxiety, in the right publicist's hands, can enhance the diva lore. "After our engagement party in Berlin, I lost my voice. It was a Sunday, the last performance of *La Gioconda*. My husband called the opera house at 9 A.M. to say I had to go to the doctor. They said, 'Call back by noon or we replace you.'" The doctor assured her she could appear that night, but the opera house telephone was busy. "When we got through, it was too late. They had a replacement." The Batkys went to the performance anyway (with house tickets) and were already seated when someone came running up and said, "The replacement can't perform the role!" Budai played hard to get, insisting "No, you said the terms were noon or not at all," but Batky intervened, as a husband/publicist should: "Forget your pride and be an artist." The performance was delayed fifteen minutes, and in true Hollywood style, "She sang the best she ever has sung."

Budai and Batky keep an apartment in Brussels, as most of her work to date has been in Europe, except for occasional appearances in San Francisco and Miami. Their permanent home, which at interview time she had not seen in five months, is in Montreal, a more convenient base for American bookings. (In addition to Azucena and Federica in *Luisa Miller* at the Met, she also has debuts with both Michigan Opera Theatre in Detroit and New Jersey State Opera in Newark this season, both times in *Il Trovatore*.)

To keep herself occupied as she drifts from city to city, role to role, Budai knits sweaters—one whole sweater per production, each bearing the name of its occasion: "One is 'Walküre' in Turin,' another is 'Aida' in Toronto,'" Batky explains. They run up exorbitant phone bills. But this life style suits the key role through which Budai, in substance, created herself: "A Gypsy's way is to wander aimlessly without a plan. The sky is her roof, her country the world." Of course Azucena had big plans. So does Livia Budai. □

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