

NO PLACE LIKE HOME

Kathleen Smith Belcher on the welcoming spirit of theatre

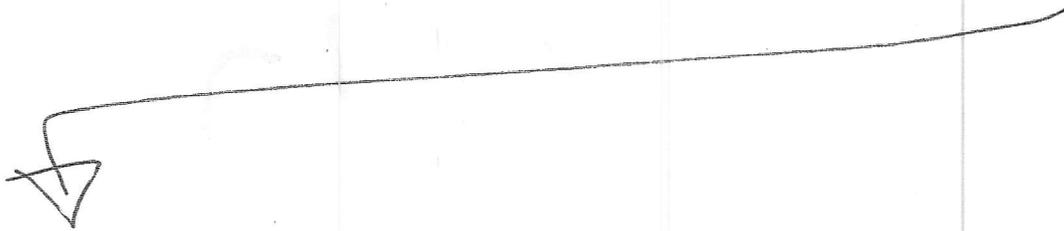
BY GREGORY BOSSLER

THE CITY OF VESTAVIA HILLS sits along a crest of Shades Mountain, one of the southern peaks in the Appalachian system. And it proved to be rocky terrain for Thespian alum Kathleen Smith Belcher when her family moved from Fort Lauderdale, Florida, to the Birmingham, Alabama, suburb during the summer before her sophomore year of high school.

"It was tough that first year," she says. "In Birmingham, high school football is king. That was a culture

name _____

period _____



shock for me, but I was welcomed by the theatre troupe. They didn't care that I dressed differently or had different political, social, or cultural ideas. They were accepting, and I always felt I had a home there." Belcher now makes her home in Liberty, Missouri, near her husband's hometown, but she spends a large part of each year in New York City, where she has been on the directing staff of the Metropolitan Opera since 2001.

From Florida to New York, Belcher

has followed a peripatetic path, but theatre has been her lodestar. "I always knew I would work in theatre in some form. I couldn't see myself doing anything else." One of Belcher's earliest memories is presenting her one-person *Wizard of Oz* for her family. "I would put on the record and make them watch while I acted out all the parts," she says.

During her first year at Vestavia High School, Belcher's Thespian troupe produced *George M!*, the mu-

The opening of Act II, with Parisian street sellers peddling their Christmas treats, in Franco Zeffirelli's production of *La Bohème* at the Metropolitan Opera, for which Kathleen Smith Belcher served as assistant stage director.

sical based on the life of composer George M. Cohan. "I had terrible stage fright," Belcher says, "but I wanted to be part of the show, so I did everything else. I did publicity. I did makeup. I built sets. I played the oboe in the orchestra pit."

She continued doing a little bit of everything at Florida State University. "Some of the projects I took on, I would be much more frightened to do now," Belcher says. "It's the naiveté of youth that makes you think, 'How hard can it be?' And I'm lucky that I took those crazy chances, because I wouldn't be where I am today had I not."

With one of those projects, she found her calling. "I became friends with a grad student in my theatre history class. One day, he asked me, 'Will you stage manage my graduate

production of *The Time of Our Lives*?' I had no idea what I was getting into — but I loved it. From that moment, that was all I wanted to do."

She reminds students with whom she works, "There are so many opportunities in theatre. You don't have to be a performer. Try every job. Find what speaks to you, find what you like and don't like. I never would have known about stage management if somebody hadn't ask me for their graduate directing project."

After earning her bachelor's in theatre from FSU, Belcher went to University of Cincinnati College-Conservatory of Music for graduate study in stage management. However, "they told me I'd never work, that I didn't have the right personality," she says, "that I was too nice to be a stage manager." When she talked with one of the opera professors about her decision to leave the school, he suggested that she apply for a position as a production assistant at Cincinnati Opera. "I did, I got the job, and I've been working professionally in opera ever since."

Cincinnati Opera asked her to continue for a second season — as a stage manager. "They taught me about opera from ground zero," Belcher says. From there, she joined the stage management staff of San Francisco Opera and had a front-row seat to some of the world's leading directors. She most appreciated those who were organic and exploratory in their method.

"I've always liked the way Peter Sellars works," Belcher says. Among the shows she has worked on with Sellars was the world premiere of *Doctor Atomic*, about the Trinity test of the first atomic bomb, with music by John Adams and a libretto by Sellars. "Peter sets up a loving, creative environment, so people aren't afraid to take risks in rehearsal. That's what

I try to do as a director. I can't do everything he does, but I can be as loving and welcoming. It's important for the director to be the spirit who sets the tone in the room."

As she was stage managing, Belcher was studying what every director did. "I got to see different styles of directing. I also saw how to stage a chorus. I learned how important it is to give each individual chorister an individual dramatic idea. Even something as simple as 'Your objective is to get the child to the other side of the stage' can bring the chorus to life and ensure they're not just standing there singing."

After eight years as a stage manager, though, Belcher felt "it wasn't fueling my creative fire anymore, so I asked if I could be an assistant director — and they gave me a shot." During one of those assignments, she met her husband, Daniel, who was making his debut with San Francisco Opera as Harlequin in *Ariadne auf Naxos*. At the meet-and-greet, "he came up to me and said, 'Are you one of the nymphs?' I answered, 'No ... I'm the assistant director!'"

Despite the awkward introduction, their relationship grew, and today, the couple juggles their sometimes competing production schedules, commuting from Missouri to New York — and other places around the world. "The schedule organization is complicated," Belcher says. "I used to worry, but our daughter loves traveling. She's the mayor of anywhere she goes." She adds, "Madeline has had the benefit of seeing how hard theatre is, seeing the sacrifices involved, but I think she'll still be a theatre person. She's an officer in her Junior Thespian troupe. She's been bitten by the bug, and we'll support her."

Belcher's relationship with the opera company also grew after *Ariadne*, when "they asked me to direct



Kathlén Smith Belcher

a production of *Madama Butterfly*, which was a success and showed other people that I could successfully direct." That led to directing jobs at other companies. "Luck had a lot to do with it," she says, "but I also did a lot of calling and emailing to say, 'Remember me? I'm directing now. Do you have anything?' Sometimes people would respond, sometimes they wouldn't, but it was important to find people that I existed."

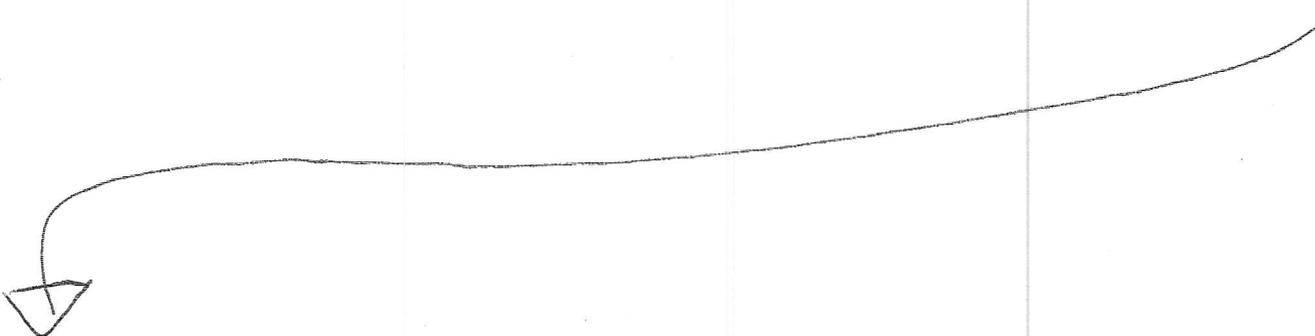
Her self-made luck has led to assignments assisting directors Michael

Mayer, Bartlett Sher, Julie Taymor, and Woody Allen (on a memorable *Gianni Schicchi* starring tenor Placido Domingo). She notes, "Some directors are more collaborative, often asking, 'What do you think? How can we make this better?' My favorites are the collaborative ones, and I strive to be a collaborative director. I have ideas, but I want to add other artists' ideas and make something exciting."

Belcher has also helped to navigate directors like Mayer and Sher through the opera practices that differ from

theatre. "Opera is like a giant theatre production," she says, "but it's a fast and furious schedule, which shocks many people from theatre. When you're doing a new production or a world premiere like *Doctor Atomic*, you usually get six weeks, but for a repertory piece like *Barber of Seville*, you get three weeks from start to finish — if that. Everybody shows up to the first rehearsal knowing all the music of the opera."

Another difference she notes is that "in theatre, directors sometimes



ask to change a word or to add a few bars of music, but in opera, you don't suggest such things. You trust that the composer has given you hints and clues in every phrase of music. Why does the soprano sing that phrase three times with different dynamic readings? The clues are in the score. You just have to pick them out."

For Belcher, getting to the musical core is an opera director's prime goal. "The composer is generally trying to help you out," she says, "so I begin with the music. Next is the text. The voice is last and most specific." She describes *Gianni Schicchi* as a near-perfect opera. "Every act-

ing beat is in that score — and you have to trust it."

Belcher still finds plenty of room for interpretation, though. "Mozart, for example, leaves a lot of wiggle room. In *Così fan tutte*, he doesn't specify who ends up with who, which can be fun for a director to figure out." She appreciates performers, too, who are open to discovery. "Some singers say, 'This is how I do Otello.' Sometimes you can talk them out of it, and sometimes you can't. Other singers are more open to try anything, to look at an opera from a different angle," Belcher says. "I did a *Rosenkavalier* with soprano Renée Flem-

ing — an opera she has done many, many times — but she was willing to listen to different ideas and to admit, 'I'd never thought of that line in that way before.'"

Even though she now regularly works with artists like Fleming, Belcher hasn't become jaded. "One day, I hopped on the elevator at the Met, and [general manager] Peter Gelb was talking with this woman," she remembers. "I blurted out, 'You're Kristin Chenoweth!' 'I am,' she said. I stammered, 'I love you.' When I got off the elevator, I thought, 'I'm such a dork.' I'm still that high school theatre geek." T