



# A Conversation with the Director

*Rob Ashford discussed Il barbiere di Siviglia with Roger Pines, Lyric Opera's dramaturg, during a break in technical rehearsals for the production last summer.*

*This production marks your eagerly awaited operatic debut. Have you been going to opera most of your life, or are you a new convert?*

When I was in college in Pittsburgh, I danced in the *corps de ballet* at Pittsburgh Opera – that was my first taste of it. Then, when I moved to New York, one of my first jobs was dancing at the Met for a year. My first show there was Hal Prince's production of *Faust*. I feel as if my operatic education happened in the Met canteen, sitting with other dancers and seeing everyone in costume – that was where I felt I began to learn. Also, we could see anything we wanted. If I was having a rehearsal and we finished early, I'd go watch a stage rehearsal or a dress rehearsal.

At that time in my life it was less about the particular performances and much more about the scope. That's what blew me away.

*What drew you to Barbiere as a first opera to direct?*

Anthony Freud had many interesting observations about why it would be a good fit. It might have been the fact of comedy being something we do a lot in musicals – understanding comic timing, the simplicity and focus of it. The focus on the stage in key moments was something Anthony felt I knew about from years of doing musicals – the idea of being able to focus on a small moment, inside a big tableau. You don't have a camera, you've got a whole stage that's alive, but you have to see the moment where the boy falls in love with the girl!

*Barbiere is so often played just for laughs. How do you bring humanity to it?*

It's a love story! Working with Scott Pask and Catherine Zuber, the idea was that it should be romantic. The pure passion and the unabashed primary colors of Rosina and the Count's love – or lust – for each other are what causes the comedy. People do silly things when they're in love! I hope to find the humanity in the comic characters, or at least, to take them through that doorway of reality to find their humor.

*Do you prepare for this the same way you prepare to direct a musical (other than the language being different)?*

It's all about the text – that's the way I approach everything. If I'm going to do a play or musical, I focus in on the text, what's on the page, not other productions, and not "We're going to do it differently from what so-and-so did," and try to get to the essence of it.

I just did my first Shakespeare. In a way, that's a different language as well! I'm thrilled, actually, that I did Shakespeare before working with an Italian text. The *meanings* are so particular, that kind of research. I found it liberating to do *Macbeth*. I'm finding the same with this – getting to the essence of what they're saying, what the true translation is. I'm enjoying it, rather than feeling like it's in the way.

*How did Beaumarchais' play help you?*

He got it right! And Rossini based his opera on it, so it makes me trust the writing and not make me want to second-guess it. Because the play is so sound and Rossini's work on top of that is so sound, it gives you an amazing freedom because you trust the material so much that you don't question – you just try to bring it to life.

*How do you expect the humor to emerge onstage?*

From the situation these characters find themselves in.

*How did you and Scott Pask go about conceiving the particular environment of Seville – what were your priorities?*

I've been to Seville, and I know the Moorish influence there. I was keen to highlight the Spanish influence *more*. We have the beautiful tiles, the wrought iron, the grillwork, the gates – it feels traditionally Spanish.

*How do you anticipate using your abilities as a choreographer in this piece?*

When you have an idea for a dance and you make up some steps, you must put them *on* the dancer. And if the steps don't suit the dancer, you need to change the steps. You want to make the dancer shine, so it would be crazy for me to choreograph a dance where the girl kicks only her right leg and her leg doesn't look good kicking! When I direct, I have a basic idea of how everything should be, but I have to put it on *them*. And if it doesn't suit them, I need to alter it, still getting to my point, still delivering my vision, but I've got to put it on *them*.

*What's your goal with this production?*

I'd love it if people who know this piece say, "It was fresh. It wasn't the same 20 gags that are always done" – that would be really exciting for me.



*Costume sketch by Catherine Zuber for Dr. Bartolo*