



Heavenly Lunacy: *La Bohème* and *Moonstruck*

Many of you will be familiar with the movie *Moonstruck* and its close connection to opera, in particular, *La Bohème*. (If you haven't seen the movie, I recommend it, although it may be one of those movies one either loves or hates.) Having tired of writing about Puccini, I thought I would write about these two wonderful examples of their genres in relation to each other.

Of course, opera has been used a lot in films, and for various purposes. But why *opera* for this film? First of all, the screenwriter, Gary Shanley, said that he conceived of life as an opera. Secondly, he grew up in New York City in a neighborhood with lots of Italian families and wished he were in one of them – he loved their volubility, warmth, and the way arguing and even fighting did not alter their affection and commitment to one another.* Opera fits Italians like a glove - it's their national art form. And why *Bohème*? (aside of course from beautiful music). Well, *Moonstruck* and *Bohème* are both love stories, that connection is obvious. But it is a love story about at least two and possibly three couples (shades of opera buffa) and the drama is completely embedded in – what else? *LA FAMIGLIA*. This is an ensemble movie if ever there were one. And there is nothing more like a family, although a single generation one, than the group of students in *Bohème*, who suffer poverty together, tease and argue, share their resources, and take care of one another in their most dire moment. The only reason it couldn't take place in Italy is that they would all be living at home with their parents.

But *Moonstruck* and opera had some difficulty. Director Norman Jewison relates that he had always thought of the beginning of the movie (New York City shots of Met scenery trucks, etc., while the opening credits roll) as the beginning of *La Bohème*.* At the first screening, however, the audience did not respond to the comedy in the movie for about half an hour. Jewison was mystified until one of his editors pointed out, "It's the opera. It puts people off." People were stymied by the unfortunately common reaction to opera as a high-brow recreation of the rich and snooty, and did not know how to respond. Then Jewison and Dick Hyman, the composer of the score, looked through a whole pile of songs, and when they found "That's Amore" by Dean Martin, they knew they had it. (Whe-e-e-n the moon hits your eye like a big-a pizza pie...). With that as the opening, the audience knew it was a 'tongue-in-cheek' movie – they could relax and laugh.* So

this film also reflects the little-known but long-standing opera tradition of opera making fun of itself.

Opera as a genre also has a meta-significance here (somewhat like “going to Italy” stands for “loosening up” in *Room with a View*, a movie with the same basic plot). Loretta Castorini (Cher), an accountant in her thirties, attempts to overcome the “bad luck” (read ‘mal’occhio’) of her first marriage which ended when her husband was killed by a bus. She superstitiously intends to do everything by the book this time: proposal on the knees, ring, cake, reception; and she’s getting engaged to a nice man, Johnnie (Danny Aiello), whom she likes but doesn’t love (if she loses him, not quite so much a tragedy). She is jolted off this course by her encounter with her fiancé’s brother, Ronnie, who loves the opera and is not constrained by social niceties or, necessarily, rationality. (To Loretta’s opinion that his grudge against his brother is unfair: “I ain’t no freaking monument to justice!”). Ronnie spends the whole movie countering Loretta’s protestations of the wisdom of doing the safe and conventional thing, and taking her to the Met to see *Bohème* is part of it. His message, movingly conveyed in a poetic ‘aria’ after the opera: love may not bring happiness but if you pass it up you might as well be dead. In opera, don’t we remind ourselves that life should be lived passionately?

If *Moonstruck* were literally an opera, it would be, like *Bohème*, verismo. Not as in *Pagliacci*, for example, with jealousy, lust and murder, but in its most fundamental sense: being about the lives, concerns and emotions of ordinary people. And although it’s a comedy it’s still definitely a ‘song of love and death.’ The *first* scene is a funeral parlor where Loretta does the books. (I can’t help pointing out here that the undertaker refers to himself as an artist. That seems to me a poke at the actually quite charming habit of Italians, at least in Italy, of making beautiful the little occasions of life, both in their manners and their material accompaniments.) The fiancé’s mother is dying in Sicily. Loretta’s father, Cosmo, has an obsession with death. In his very over-the-top entrance aria (sorry, monologue!), Ronnie threatens suicide. Death, or the lack of it, is even part of the plot. The fiancé’s mother rises from her deathbed on the news that her son is getting married. “It’s a miracle!” he exclaims. But now he can’t marry Loretta because his mother will die!

In its rootedness in the ordinary lives of the characters, its attention to detail and dialogue, the sets true enough to Brooklyn as it was, the cheerful tunes created by Hyman which stand in perfectly for Neapolitan street music, he and Shanley seem to have channeled Puccini himself in his ability to create ambiance: the sense of the story happening in its own complete world. This was one of Puccini’s specialties: his first creation was the world of the struggling Parisian artists, followed by the world of *Madama Butterfly* and that of *The Girl of the Golden West*. He was frequently inspired by what to him was exotic, and he had the gift of imagining that world so that his audience could also experience it.

Rather than being ubiquitous, as it so often is today, music is used brilliantly in the film. The love music from the end of Act I appears at appropriate moments. The fanfares from the beginning of Act II are used as Ronnie and Loretta traverse Lincoln Center Plaza towards the entrance to the Met. My favorite, however, is the use of *Quando m'en vo*, Musetta's waltz, for the passage of the truly Met-sized moon as it moves across the sky to shine in turn into the bedrooms of the three couples: Ronnie and Loretta, Loretta's parents, Cosmo and Rose (Vincent Gardenia and Olympia Dukakis), and her aunt and uncle, Rita and Raymond (Julie Bovasso and Louis Guss). All give outstanding performances in a work with not a weak link in the cast. Dick Hyman, the composer of the score, said that Puccini should really have gotten an award. Moreover, he continued, Puccini was the best collaborator he ever had – didn't give him any trouble at all.*

*Indirect quotes and the anecdote about the choosing of the opening music are taken from the bonus feature "The Music of Moonstruck" on the DVD *Moonstruck*, Deluxe Edition, released in 1987 by Metro-Golden-Mayer on DVD Video.

- Carol Crocca